



Sun-n-Fun 2022: Cold, Soggy, but Fun

By Mike Jones

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I have mixed reactions about the 2022 Sun-n-Fun event; some elements were brilliant and wonderful while some portions were weird and more than slightly unpleasant.

In terms of visitors and traffic, the show was splendid. The campgrounds were packed, the restaurants busy, and the exhibit halls were filled both with both vendors and shoppers. The flight line displays were vast and varied; I was pleased that the Air Force stepped up with an impressive array of jumbo-sized hardware. The impossibly-shiny B-29 “Doc” made an appearance; a few lucky souls were rewarded with rides in that 80-year old beast. Two twilight airshows, one on Wednesday and a grand finale on Saturday, were both thrilling and beautiful. And a drum-roll, please: on Friday evening, a unique event occurred, a true “first” in all the decades Sun-n-Fun has percolating under the Florida sun. More on that in a minute.



Photo 1: The Air Force made us all proud with a large display of impressive military aircraft, including this C-17, a KC-135 tanker and it's enormous and brand-new replacement the KC-46, and a B-1 Lancer.

The afternoon airshows were heart-stopping. The Thunderbirds deservedly headlined the daily shows; the speed, precision, dexterity, and noise simply dazzles, every time. Dozens of other performers held their heads high as well. Several of my favorites were on hand, including Kyle Fowler's bright yellow two-seat Velocity — a rear-wing, pusher-prop canard design — which delivered an exuberant and graceful demonstration.



Photo 2: Representing the “greatest generation” was this shiny B-29, named “Doc.” Notice the captain is taxiing the airplane with the two outboard engines shutdown. Fun fact: developing the B-29 was more expensive than the development of the atomic bomb.

To my eyes, the airshow prize winner must be Jeff Boerboon's “double Yak” (see cover photo). In a moment of brilliant engineering (or complete lunacy (I'm not quite sure which) Boerboon bolted two Russian Yak 55 aerobatic planes together. For extra fun he stuck a jet engine between those

airframes. The result is a stunningly noisy aerobatic flyer vaguely reminiscent of the P-38 from World War II. With a huge power-to-weight ratio, he makes that plane twist and turn in ways Wilbur and Orville never intended.

Vintage Camping

This year I camped under the wing of my Cessna in the Vintage aircraft section. I can report Vintage Camping is a significant upgrade from the torments inflicted on the general aviation campers flying more modern airplanes. Those wayward flyers are abandoned at the departure end of Runway 28, practically in Tampa. Their campground is a long walk to anything interesting, like toilets. Plus they get to enjoy the nocturnal rumblings of

Amazon's fleet of Boeing freighters as they depart overhead in the dead of night.

In contrast, Vintage Camping is smack in the middle of the show. It offers convenient access to the flight line, the exhibit halls and Paradise City. It features a multitude of dining choices and quiet nights. It's all much better, to be sure.



Photo 3: The Thunderbirds during their performance on Friday at Sun-n-Fun. Astoundingly precise flying. Photo: Carolyn Hutchins.

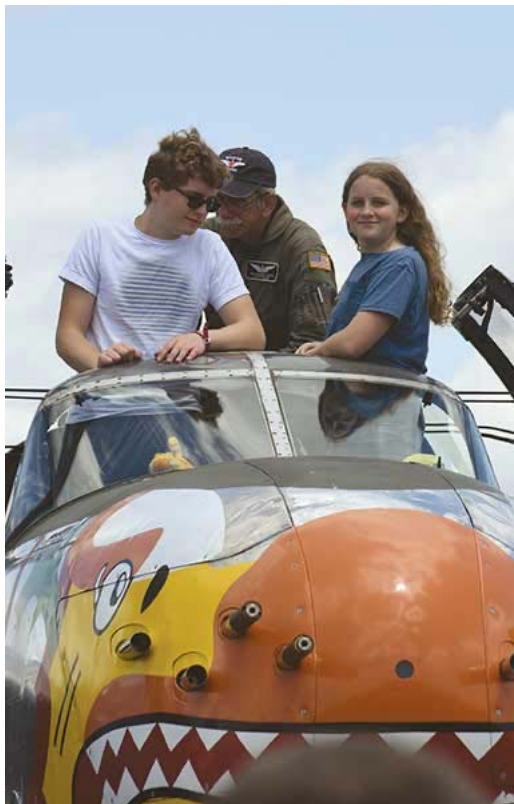


Photo 4: Two teens check out the machine-gun filled cockpit of a B-25.

The weather did not favor Sun-n-Fun this year, but that's just part of the adventure. It rained on Tuesday, which was inconvenient, but Thursday was a genuine gully-washer. For three hours a deluge pounded the show into nearly zero visibility, the air silver with pelting rain. Thousands of visitors huddled in the exhibit hangars or restaurants. Forlorn exhibitors pulled their tent sides down to protect their displays. Heavy planes parked on turf settled axle-deep in the mud. Many camp sites were semi-flooded.

After the storm, cold Canadian air settled in: much, much colder than one would expect for Florida in April. My sleeping bag was not up to the challenge. Each morning many of us shared tales of frigid, sleepless nights curled in the fetal position.

Adding insult to injury, those Canadian winds pushed the wind chill down precipitously and punctuated the days with sharp-edged gusts which made G.A. flying treacherous. Most afternoons, all flying at Paradise City — the grass runway for home-built and light-sport flyers — was suspended, which was a shame because those folks are artists with their perky, lightly-loaded planes.

Next to Vintage Camping is the handsome and rustic Vintage Hospitality Center, a service organized by Chapter 1 of the Florida Sport Aviation Antique & Classic Association. This happy gang is dedicated to aviation and share a special affection for older airplanes. They offer two dinners during Sun-n-Fun and serve breakfast and coffee every morning. These events are well-attended, very tasty and a great value. Foodies, take note: Their “breakfast in a cup” is the best warm-up meal I’ve ever had.



Photo 5: The forums at Sun-n-Fun are educational, informative and entertaining, CFII Gary Reeves opened a lot of eyes about silly mistakes we should not be making.

Like a spider lurking in his web, I perched myself next to the coffee pot at the Hospitality Center, watching planes and chatting with flyers of all ages and interests. I recruited dozens of people to speak into my microphone and share their flying tales. It’s amazing: even shy folks bubble up at the chance to talk about their planes. Here are a few of their stories.

Low and Slow from New York

In line for Wednesday evening’s pasta dinner, I chatted with Doug Turnbull and his wife Wendy. They had flown to Lakeland from Bloomfield, NY. Turnbull has the lean and wiry look of a bush-flyer. He started flying in the 1980s in his

Dad's Cessna 185 amphibian. Today he flies a highly modified 1946 Piper PA-12 taildragger with 180 horses, extended landing gear, ginormous bush wheels and extra baggage spaces.



Photo 7: The Vintage Aircraft Hospitality Center is the best spot in town for affordable dinners at Sun-n-Fun. These wonderful folks also offer delicious breakfasts every day of the show.



Photo 6: Doug Turnbull and his totally pimped-out 1947 Piper PA-12, which he has flown to Alaska and back. With his wife, Wendy, they arrived at Sun-n-Fun after making a precautionary landing on a beach in Georgia when the Piper developed a bit of carb ice.

The Turnbull team flew low and slow to Lakeland, chugging along between 2,000 and 5,500 AGL. Even starting their journey was an adventure: when they left Rochester (NY) it was 17° F on the ramp. They made two fuel two stops en-route to an overnight stop with friends in Charlotte, NC. The next day they picked up some carb ice along the Atlantic Ocean and made a precautionary landing on a beach. They decided, since they were there, to have some lunch. “Stuff you can only do in a tail-dragger!” he announced proudly.

After 34 years of marriage, this was

Wendy's first time camping in the airplane. She reported she was enjoying it, especially the slowly-morphing view from the backseat. “It can be a little tedious, but I get to see everything,” she said with a sparkling laugh.

But Turnbull truly was born for adventure: in 2016, he took the plane solo to Alaska. “It took me fifty hours and seventeen stops. I flew the ‘trench’ across Canada,” he recalls. The Rocky Mountain Trench is a 1,000-mile valley on the western side of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, pointed towards Alaska. It’s a tight, VFR-only route: the steep mountain walls are only two to ten miles apart. Airports are rare and avgas even more scarce in the Trench. Winds, clouds and ice are constant worries. But Turnbull made the trip successfully, flew around Alaska for another fifty hours and came in third in a STOL competition. (His wife, Wendy, later explained there were only five pilots in the competition.) Then it was another fifty hours back home, flying the coastal route.



Photo 8 & 9: Spring rains hit the show hard, making campgrounds a muddy mess and sinking heavier airplanes into the muck. but it took three days for the last of the puddles to dry out.

Free Beer

Next to Vintage Hospitality is an informal club at the heart of the Sun-n-Fun show. Coconut Flyers is run by Tim and Paige Kirby, from Ocala, FL. Tim is a senior B-777 captain at American Airlines while Paige works for a large company in their corporate accounting offices. Together they own a Stearman, a French trainer and a Cessna 120 that Tim and his father bought in 1977. “It’s part of my family. I don’t fly it as much anymore, but I just love it,” he said.

Tim's been coming to Sun-n-Fun since 1974 while Paige enjoyed her first Sun-n-Fun in 2005. "We'd always park in Vintage, and we'd camp, but after the airshow finished the place just died. There was nothing to do when the sun went down."

Responding to market demand, they set up a tent and gave away beer. Initially, they operated for just two nights at each show. That quickly stretched to four nights and now they are open every evening.



Photo 9: The Coconut Flyers beer tent in Vintage Camping is a long-running tradition at SNF. (L-R) Kevin Bachand, a Gulfstream captain, Robyn his wife, and Paige and Tim Kirby, who own the Flyers. Notice everybody is bundled up against the Florida cold.

"We started small, with a couple of tents, the Stearman, a keg of beer and a garbage can," Tim explained. "These days we have a great party, but we flash the lights at 10:15. We don't want to be those people who are bad neighbors

[to the other campers]. Everybody pretty much goes home and people don't abuse it."

They also expanded their product offering to include light dinners, mostly cooked in crock pots right on site. "I've got a lot of crockpots and extension cords," Paige said with a laugh.

About twelve years ago, Sun-n-Fun CEO John "Lites" Leenhouts called Tim. Lites wanted to give Coconut Flyers a prime location in Vintage Camping to do more of what they had been doing unofficially for years. "I asked him, how far

can I go with this? He said, you can push the envelope but don't get me arrested," Tim recalled, laughing.

Coconut Flyers merely asks for donations to cover expenses. "When we added more tents the donations grew, too. Suddenly we were making a profit, which wasn't really the point," Paige explained. "Now, all the profits are donated to the Aviation Center for Excellence [the public high school that Sun-n-Fun built at the Lakeland Airport] right here at the Airshow." After ten years of Coconut Flyers, their cumulative donations to ACE will exceed \$25,000.

"Our friends and family have supported us through this whole thing," Paige explained. "It's basically all friends and family. Like Georgi who runs the bar, she's my hairdresser. Her husband drives the crew trailer down here."

All the musicians are volunteers, including Brian Miller who has a day job as a United captain. Delta pilots come and cook. Cory is a Polk County sheriff deputy. The local beer distributor is Bernie Little; they gave Coconut Flyers 24 kegs of local Florida craft beer. "Michael Briant from Duneden Craft Brewers gave us kegs, and several others as well," Tim said. "It's just a way to give back. The whole aviation community has been very generous."

It's inspiring to be among people who are passionate about what they do, and Tim, Paige, Georgi and the others personify that attitude. They want Sun-n-Fun to be more than just an event: more of an attitude, a community, a lifestyle which lasts twelve months not just seven days. The warm smiles and cold beer at Coconut Flyers is an existential aspect of that gestalt.

The JetMobile

Standing on a taxiway near Coconut Flyers, I met the imposing Paul Holmes, a retired Delta pilot who lives near Daytona Beach. He drives the lofty JetMobile, which is a Boeing 747 engine nacelle mounted on a golf cart.



Photo 10: Paul Holmes, in the black hat, built the one-and-only JetMobile. He uses it to attract attention to worthy causes. As it trundles around Sun-n-Fun, the monster machine spews soap bubbles instead of jet exhaust.

“I built the Jetmobile eight years ago to use at charity events like this, just to bring attention to those events so they can be better and more successful,” Holmes told me. “I never take money for my appearances.”

Holmes explained the 747 nacelle came from a Singapore Airlines jet being disassembled for scrap. Visitors enter the JetMobile on a spiral staircase repurposed from that jet. The seats are plush survivors from the first-class cabin while the accelerator and brakes are the captain’s rudder pedals. In fact, Holmes even purloined the captain’s seat itself, which is where he sits and drives the blue beast.

The best part of the tale: as the JetMobile trundles down the Sun-n-Fun taxiways, it spurts clouds of soap bubbles behind it, delighting kids and parents alike.

Comanche Crazy

Scott Sanders and Leah Potts flew their 1961 Comanche 250 to Lakeland from Roanoke, VA. Scott is a sales-rep in the scuba diving industry who uses the plane to visit retailers up and down the east coast. Leah works at Virginia Tech developing programs to integrate drones into the National Airspace. “My

traditional training was as an agricultural engineer,” she said, “but I got the Chief of Operations job because I was a pilot.”

They bought the plane in 2019 while both were student pilots. “We went on Trade-a-Plane and the very first plane we looked at was our Piper Comanche, down in Lumberton, NC,” Leah explained. “Once we saw it, we discovered it was actually a better deal than the advertisement indicated, and we bought it on the spot.”

Happily, they had a flight instructor friend with some Comanche experience who retrieved the plane. Now they both have earned all their ratings in it, including both earning their instrument tickets on the same day. The plane is pretty basic: a standard six-pack, a Garmin 430, and no autopilot. “We just swap who gets the left seat, whoever is feeling good that day,” Scott adds with a smile.



Photo 11: Scott Sanders and Leah Potts pose with their daughters Hadleigh and Ryan in front of their black-and-yellow Piper PA-24 Comanche. This flying family has put more than 600 hours on the plane in just three years.

“The day I passed my private-pilot flight test we flew to Florida,” Scott reported. Leah laughed at the memory. “You guys were filling out the paperwork and signing forms, while I was on the ramp jamming stuff into the airplane. We launched at lunchtime and flew all the way to Key West. Super-cool!”

Since then, they’ve flown over 600 hours: to the Keys, to Oshkosh, to Arizona and the Grand Canyon, to all 65 airports in Virginia, and Niagara Falls. They flew to the Bahamas during COVID without any reservations or schedules. Leah relived the story for me. “We landed at the Abaco Islands in the northern

Bahamas, 180 miles off the South Florida coast. We got on the WIFI, found a hotel, talked to the locals, and they told us the good places to go.” Which is how they ended up swimming with the pigs at Exuma.

A Birthday Promise

I’m interested in Centurions, and Paul and Julie Parks were an irresistible attraction, “glamping” under the wings of their 1960 Cessna Centurion. She shanghaied Paul into camping at Sun-n-Fun this year by claiming it as her birthday present.



Photo 12: Pilots Julie and Paul Parks joined me for a delightful dinner away from the airshow. They fly a semi-rare 1960 Cessna 210 filled with a huge tent and a carpet for their campsite. Centurions rock!

“Every year we ALMOST do it, and then don’t. But we did it this year!” she cheered. “Next is Oshkosh and then Triple-Tree.”

I asked them about their venerable bird. Their Cessna carries the model designation “C210.” Only 192 “plain” C210s remain on the FAA’s registration

books and it’s unlikely many of those are still flying. The Parks’ bird is both an original and a survivor.

Paul has enjoyed a wild aviation career. “I started bush flying in Bethel, a small town in Western Alaska, flying Twin Otters. It was like a scheduled service, jumping out to a bunch of villages every day,” he recalls. “I carried diapers, potato chips and soda; and of course, passengers. If we had room we’d put some cargo on.” Today he serves as a first-officer with Southwest.

Julie was a kindergarten teacher who gave up her career to allow Paul to move with the airline. Her path into aviation was circuitous. Both grandfathers

were pilots, and one of them took her for a discovery flight when she was 19. Unhappily, her parents said “no” to flight training so she devoted her energies to teaching before she met Paul.

“Well, one day Paul started talking to my nephew about flying,” she laughs. “I told him, you better help me get MY license before you help anybody else, and that was the start.” Today she carries both her private and instrument tickets and is working on her commercial.

Now based out of both Baltimore and Titusville, FL, they use their Cessna to commute up and down the East Coast. “Our normal flying is for Julie’s training,” Paul said. “I was planning on selling it when her training was done, but she loves the plane so much I’m sure we’re gonna keep it.” To which a delighted Julie said, “I’m so glad to hear that!”

Older Centurions can be prone to maintenance issues, especially if the previous owner deferred maintenance. “It’s got hydraulic flaps, hydraulic landing gear, and hydraulic gear doors, which sometimes can have problems with microswitches gone bad,” Paul explained. “The sequencing was a mess, and it took them months to figure it out.”

“Not many mechanics today are familiar with these antique airplanes,” Julie agreed. “You gotta find the older guys who worked on them years ago.” They’re both optimistic all the bugs now are worked out and they can just enjoy flying the plane.

The Week in Review

All in all, despite the winds, the damp and the cold, Sun-n-Fun was an awesome experience which demonstrated the air show industry is enjoying a robust rebound from the COVID years. But there was another memorable occasion which made 2022 an even more exciting: a very romantic wedding. The details of that event will be in next month’s Cessna Pilots Magazine.

About the Author



Jonesy is a 3,000-hour commercial-rated pilot who flies a Cessna T210 with most of the seats removed. This allows him to carry tents, sleeping bags, a desk, a cot, two computers, golf clubs, and even a generator without noticing the load. He's already looking forward to flying the Cessna-to-Oshkosh mass arrival in July at the giant AirVenture expo. You can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.



Carolyn Hutchins is Sun-n-Fun staff photographer from Kissimmee, FL who has kindly shared her photos for this article. The cover photo of the flight line and vintage camping was captured from the cab of the Lakeland control tower. Her day-job is running back-office operations at

the local zoo. "I have a fish tank with baby alligators behind my desk, but that's about as far as I go with the animals," she told me. My thanks for sharing.