

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Oshkosh



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By Mike Jones

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Among the many adventures in general aviation, among the most memorable are our annual peregrinations to Oshkosh. More than 10,000 aircraft arrive at Wittman Regional during the ten days around AirVenture. Being at Oshkosh is fun, but flying the FISK arrival into Oshkosh is a thrill — an eye-popping, heart-stopping, sweaty-palms thrill. Catch this factoid: during AirVenture, Oshkosh averages 113 arrivals per hour — a third busier than JFK International.

Of course, aviators don't just arrive magically at FISK, beamed-in like a Star Trek character. We arrive in our winged steeds, sometimes from long distances. For those flying to Oshkosh from the eastern portions of the U.S., this is the tale of one highly recommended stop.

Plan the Flight, Fly the Plan

For 2024, three flyers you have met before on these pages — Alex Mello, Karen Ewart, and myself — needed to arrive at Dodge County Airport in Juneau, Wisconsin to join the Cessnas-to-Oshkosh mass arrival. Mello and I would fly my Cessna 210, fresh out of maintenance with a brand-new Continental. Ewart would fly solo in her happy yellow Cessna 182. Since we leave from different

airports, every year we pick a convenient spot to join up prior to the final swoosh into Dodge County.

So many choices! In 2023 we overnighted in Ohio and visited the wonderful Air Force Museum in Dayton. On earlier trips I had visited the Lincoln Museum in Springfield, IL, and popped in on friends at their vacation home on the shores of Lake Michigan. We pondered the alternatives.

Ewart recalled a magazine article about South Bass Island in the middle of Lake Erie that had a small airport. The diminutive island is navigated in golf carts, as hospitable as a Disney resort, and a sufficiency of bistros to serensify even the most thirsty of tourists. During the bleak winters the island is home to only 200 people, plus or minus, but up to 4,000 party-seekers on summer weekends. It sounded like an unsinkable party boat. Put-in Bay — here we come!

“Other than our motel, Put-In Bay could not be more welcoming.”

Dr. Mike Jones

If the island was a clock, the town (and the bars) would be at 12 noon on the north end of the island, while the airport would be at about 4 o'clock. Our destination was Ted Erskine Field (3W2). The tidy runway is 2,800 feet long. There's no fuel, no approaches, no runway

lighting, and no night operations. It didn't take too many brain cells to understand why: “RMN CLEAR OF MONUMENT 352 FT AGL 1.3 NM NORTHEAST OF ARPT.” What crazy person puts a 352 foot tower at the end of their runway?

Mello showed up in my guest bedroom full of good cheer, a ton of camping gear, and an enormous bag of fresh-picked North Carolina peaches. If those things stain my plane's new carpeting...

Synchronizing our departures, Ewart left Fayetteville, NC and set a northwest course to Lake Erie after circumnavigating the enormous restricted

airspace over Fort Liberty. Mello had the controls as we departed from Pinehurst, NC steering vaguely north-by-northwest (with Mello, any guidance from Mr. Garmin is merely a suggestion). The new engine ticked along calmly and coolly. We tracked Ewart's progress on Foreflight. Over southern Ohio she finally checked-in with the same controllers who were chuckling at our wayward progress.

A Peachy Arrival

The skies were bright and the winds were kind. The two and a half hour flight passed entertainingly. We crossed Sandusky Bay, danced over a small peninsula hosting Erie-Ottawa International (KPCW), and went “feet wet” over as we passed Moore Point. This does not qualify as Lindbergh-quality heroics. The over-water leg was all of three miles.



Mike Jones (left) and Alex Mello flew Jones' Cessna T210 to Put-In Bay, Ohio in under three hours. Subsequently, a swarm of shell-shocked air traffic controllers immediately filed for medical retirement.

We settled into a gentle, low-power descent towards the island. Adding a skosh of flaps, Mello loped the plane around the west side of the island at pattern altitude while I hung the Nikon out the passenger window. We admired the flotilla in the harbor, white wakes trolling behind dozens of party boats. Swinging smoothly but prudently around the obelisk, Mello joined the downwind. He invited Ewart to land first before he floated over the numbers — the stall warning chirping absentmindedly — and touched down like a butterfly with sore feet. In my plane. Sometimes I really hate him.

About that tower: this is not a cellphone tower on steroids. Nor is it your typical television latticework spire. No siree, it is an enormous and incongruous

granite erection looming ominously over a petite green island. It easily could be the fortress of Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings*, and certainly could snag any unwary aviator. No night ops: got it.

We parked next to Ewart and were warmly greeted by two young pilots interested in our planes and our stories. Johnathan Ekleberry was from Tiffin, Ohio. He captains sight-seeing flights over the island in a six-seat Piper. When he accumulates enough experience Ekleberry wants to “go corporate or the airlines.” Working the line with him that day was Emily Hamman from Medina, Ohio, who was working on her private ticket. Hamman’s ambition is to get into the rotary-wing world as a medical rescue pilot. Both were hugely impressed with the juicy North Carolina peaches, and we all thoughtfully deposited our peach pits in a trash bin. No FOD from these visitors.



The Boardwalk Restaurant looms over the harbor on an impressive pier. It offers a marvelous lobster bisque along with other casual-dining choices. Featured in the lobby is a crustacean they claim weighed more than 40 pounds. Not explained: how a restaurant catches lobsters in fresh-water Lake Erie.

Being a diminutive island, automobiles are over-kill. The airport rents visitors gasoline-powered golf carts. We signed some paperwork and wandered into the village of Put-In Bay. The brakes were weak and the steering wobbly. The reek of unburned hydrocarbons suggested that global warming wasn’t a big issue in Ohio. We named our chariot “Olde Smokey.” Message to drivers: From a

golf cart, being passed by a roaring pick-up truck is wicked scary. Toss us a bone, please.



For the summer visitors, innumerable golf carts are the preferred transportation mode on the island. Their tiny gasoline engines are noisy and smokey, but sufficiently slow that even the most inebriated party-goers can't hurt themselves. Aliens and flowered decorations enliven the scene.

Hotel Forgettable

First impressions? This place is tiny, just over two square miles. We were “downtown” in minutes, and that’s in an asthmatic golf cart. The village follows the shoreline, and they curve to form a bay like nested parentheses. There’s one grocery store, one hardware store, one gas station, one bank, and one school. Imagining the winter storms blowing off Lake Erie, those 200 people who “winter-over” must be mountain-man tough.



Lining the harbor is this handsome park with enormous oak trees, comfy benches, ice cream shops, and playgrounds for kids. A great spot to rest your liver before returning the party.

The town also is marvelously Victorian. South Bass Island was “developed” after the Civil War as a vacation getaway for city-dwellers, so there is an abundance of colorful steep-peaked homes, deep porches, and spreading lawns. Outside of the village there’s also a swarm of chintzy modern housing, but that’s just life today.

Finding accommodations on the island is like playing “Hotel Jeopardy” — Mello and I chose ‘Barely Hygienic for \$170 a Night.’ This facility is not worth naming. The staff spoke English with an indecipherable European accent and were barely interested in our business. The manager’s main enthusiasm was renting golf carts. Their entire parking lot was filled, from stem to stern, with buggies for hire. The staff remained surly even when placated with Mello’s bottomless duffle of peaches. Eventually the morose manager issued us beds and bathrooms, so the minimums were met, sort of. Ewart motored to her semi-posh hotel slightly outside of town, trailing a perky cloud of black exhaust.

Other than our motel, Put-In Bay could not be more welcoming. There were dozens of bars and restaurants and an equal number of less-charming stores selling “must have” mementoes. Hundreds of golf carts — that is not an exaggeration — loaded with sun-poached tourists dawdled up and down

Bayview Avenue. We lunched at the Boardwalk Restaurant on the harbor and enjoyed a marvelous lobster bisque as watercraft of all sizes and configurations zipped around the bay. Running along the waterfront was a well-maintained park offering cooling shade and comfy benches. There was even a mini-ferry to Gibraltar Island, a rocky dimple a couple hundred yards away and home to an environmental lab run by Ohio State.

After lunch, Olde Smokey brought us to the Heineman Winery. It was established in 1888 and remains Ohio's oldest family-owned winery. Apparently the soil and climate of the island is conducive to viticulture, because in years past there were seventeen wineries on the island. While their products are tasty, the Heineman Winery out-last-ed their competitors with a secret weapon: the semi-famous Crystal Cave.

There are a number of caves on the island, but the Crystal Cave is unique. It is a limestone vug (go ahead, I dare you to Google that) about forty feet below the surface. It was discovered by the Heineman clan while digging a well in 1897.

Technically, they punched a hole in the top of the world's largest geode.



Heineman's Winery is a family-owned business on the island that's survived a turbulent century and a half. Here Ewart is being served a sample of the local viniculture before we descended into the Crystal Cave. Both the wine and the cave were surprisingly good.

Geodes are hollow, roughly spherical structures formed inside sedimentary formations. It turns out that limestone (calcium sulfate) and celestine (strontium sulfate) are abundant on the island. Surrounded by the dampness of Lake Erie, the limestone gradually dissolves leaving a rough, empty chamber. The insoluble strontium sulfate remains behind. Having nothing else to do with

its time, it crystalizes on the cool, damp inner walls of the cavity. Some of the crystals approach three feet in size. They shimmer with an unearthly, delicate blue-white glow. Never missing a revenue opportunity, the Heinemans' put in a walking path and have been over-charging visitors for the past century. Caching!

Peace Memorial

Our next stop, courtesy of Olde Smokey, was the imposing granite monument. It's bigger than big; it's completely out of proportion with the rest of the island. It's the International Peace Memorial which, in a weird juxtaposition, commemorates a battle.

The 352-foot monument is the world's tallest Doric column. It is beautiful, stern, even stirring. It honors those who fought in the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812 and celebrates the subsequent centuries of peace among Britain, Canada and the U.S. The six officers slain during the battle — three British and three Americans — are interred under its rotunda. Inscribed in stone inside the rotunda are the names of soldiers and sailors who were killed in the battle. There's a handsome museum which explains the battle as well as the backstories behind those events.

We paid our entrance fees and rode the wheezing antique elevator to the observation deck, 317 feet above the hillside. The vista was astounding. We could see skyscrapers in Detroit, 57 miles across the lake.

Park Ranger Isabella Bufalini was stationed on the observation deck when we visited. She was (and presumably remains) petite, very pretty, very well-informed, and very articulate. She answered our questions about the history of the monument, the battle, and the surrounding area. Originally from Pittsburgh, she enjoys her work with the Park Service. Her plan is to stay a season at a park and then move on as the weather changes, enjoying the variety of people and

cultures across this interesting country. Her goal is to never work at the same park twice. She's a footloose soul.



The International Peace Monument at Put-in Bay towers over the harbor, the village and even the airport. This obstacle to safe aero-navigation is the world's tallest Doric column and offers marvelous views as far as Detroit and even Canada, fifty miles across the lake.

As the sun settled lower, we migrated to the local pubs to sample their hospitality. In general, their beer was cold, their prices reasonable, and their service brisk. The Roundhouse Bar has been serving visitors since 1873. The rectangular building features a domed roof, creating the impression that a giant mushroom just landed on Delaware Avenue. The Last Resort Ladder Company is a pub built on the spine of a giant fire engine. The Sand Bar is an outdoor, tiki-style party with a thatched roof and swings for seating.

Both Mello and I were

somewhat shocked by the demeanor of the other patrons. Does your Mom know you're wearing THAT? Did you even look in a mirror?

Eventually, Ewart motored us to the “Goat Biergarten and Chocolate Museum” (you can’t make this stuff up; see photo, below). This is a calmer, slightly more dignified venue with white linen tablecloths and a mostly European staff. Our dinners were delightful and we returned to our motels ready for a restful night.

Which didn’t happen.

Miles to Fly

Remember all those bars along Delaware Avenue? Like bears knowing winter was approaching, those entrepreneurs use the long summer nights to fatten their wallets. The tourists were exuberant but inebriated. The were bands unskilled but enthusiastic. Sirens screamed through the night. Both Mello and I, in our separate rooms, pondered murderous thoughts while piling pillows over our ears. Finally, sometime after 2am, the cacophony abated. A few hours of rest became possible. Meanwhile Ewart, in her posh digs outside of town, slept the sleep of the just.



The hospitality at Put-In Bay offers endless variety, and throngs of visitors clog the m all during the summer season. From the top: The Roundhouse Bar is actually rectangular; the bar at Ladder Company No. 4 is great fun, and the Beach Bar features a huge tikki-style hut with live music. Below: The Goat Biergarten delivered a lovely dinner with a professional, well-trained staff. The eponymous goat looms in the background along with many other dusty critters who would have preferred remaining in their natural habitat.



We still had miles to fly. Olde Smokey puffed to our doors at 6am, with Ewart rested and ready as Mello and I staggered from our rooms. It was the

worst possible combination: suffering the pangs of a hangover without the pleasure of the party the night before.

But we were game to finish our race to Juneau. We putt-putted to the airport, preflighted carefully, and were wheels-up as the sun rose over the lake. After a fuel stop on the mainland, we turned west and bee-lined west to Gary, Indiana. There we jumped on the VFR corridor, fitting over Lake Michigan in front of a shimmering Chicago. Eventually our merry threesome arrived in Juneau exactly on-time for the mass arrival mission briefing.

All in all, two fine days of flying and adventuring, and another notch in our Oshkosh belt. For those of you flying to Oshkosh from the eastern portion of the U.S., Put-in Bay is a highly recommended stop.

Sidebar: The Battle of Lake Erie

The International Peace Monument commemorates two centuries of tranquility between the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. But it didn't start that way. The last time the countries battled was during the War of 1812.

At that time, the British controlled Canada and, über-nautical folks that they are, pretty much owned the Great Lakes. Since travel by land was difficult, their control of those lakes crushed the ability of the Americans to deliver supplies to their army in the area. Which was, of course, exactly the British point.

Enter Commodore Oliver Perry. Born in 1785, Perry was a native of Rhode Island and joined the Navy at the age of thirteen. He flourished there and participated in the war against the Barbary pirates. He received his first

command in 1809, a 14-gun schooner called Revenge. Despite losing that ship on a reef in 1811, he was seen as a rising star and was quickly assigned command of U.S. naval forces on Lake Erie in 1813. Nobody mentioned the one tiny little problem up there: there were no naval forces to command.

In an effort that can only be described as herculean, by late summer Perry had built, armed, and trained a small naval fleet near Erie, PA. They immediately went hunting for the British fleet. The nine American ships met six British warships off the shores of Put-In Bay.

The British attacked first. It was a vicious battle because the British guns had longer range. Perry tried to maneuver his flagship, the 20-gun USS Lawrence, into a shooting position, but he lacked favorable winds. The Lawrence took a terrible

“We have met the enemy and they are ours.”

Com. Oliver Perry

beating. Within an hour, 80% of Perry’s crew were killed or wounded. To compound a bad situation, Perry’s second ship, the USS Niagara, failed to come to his assistance.

A lesser captain would have surrendered, but Perry had different plan. While still under enemy fire, Perry rowed his surviving crew and his battle flag the half-mile to the Niagara. He took command of that ship and rejoined the battle, something the British never expected.

Now, the British ship also had suffered grievously, including losing most of its officers. With inexperienced officers facing a fresh enemy sailing an undamaged ship, the British sailors floundered. The two biggest British ships actually collided. By mid-afternoon they surrendered, giving the American’s unfettered access to the Great Lakes.

Perry needed to report the events of the day to his commander, Gen. William Harrison. He scribbled on the back of an old envelope a brief report, famously concluding, “We have met the enemy and they are ours.”

While the ships were small and the battle brief, the repercussions were enormous. The victory permitted the re-supplied American army to pursue the British and defeat them in battle on October 5, 1813 at the Battle of the Thames River in southern Ontario. Although the war continued for another fifteen months, these two victories, one on the lake and one on land, began to cement America’s position in the world and ensured that the Ohio and Michigan remained in the United States.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is an aviation enthusiast and amateur historian who consults on the management of G.A. airports. He’s been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He’s always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.