



Sun-n-Fun 2021

The First Post-COVID Airshow

Sun-n-Fun 2021: The First Post-COVID Airshow

By Mike Jones

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Spoiler Alert: My almost-sainted wife has announced that my incessant rantings about all-things-with-wings is boring. Contrary to the sage advice of matrimonial experts, my answer was not to spend more time picking out draperies with the Missus. Instead, I decamped with the Centurion to the land of bright sun and warm debates about lean-of-peak. After sixteen months of COVID and two jabs in my left shoulder, your humble correspondent was ready for the first big post-COVID airshow, Sun-n-Fun 2021.

Getting to Lakeland is the “Fun” part of SNF. The NOTAM is twenty-plus pages, with pictures and arrows and inscrutable directions. The airport itself is a massive facility, with O’Hare-sized runways and a spiderweb of crossing taxiways. This airport is busy, too: since the last Sun-n-Fun in 2019, Amazon has established a hub at the airport flying overnight deliveries on handsome blue Boeings. The NOTAM should be sub-titled, “Bring Your A-Game.”

Flying solo southward from North Carolina in bright blue skies, I let Mechanical Mike manage the plane while I fussed with the Garmin and picked up the ATIS. Temporary Runway 27R was the active which, in normal times, is a taxiway bigger than the runway at my home ’drome. I figured with luck I could squeeze ’er in.



My campsite at the General Aviation Camping field at the end of Runway 27. If the tent looks a little lop-sided that's my fault; I set up too close to the wing of the plane. I'll do better next time.

Like a baseball player rounding the bases, I tagged the power plant at the north end of Lake Parker and raced westward to Interstate 4. Once there I turned southwest and made a bee-lined for an odd “V-shaped” building. I gently merged into the parade of planes; a stately line of diamonds on my GPS, following the rules at 1200 feet and 100 knots.

If you haven't flown to a busy airport since ADSB became mandatory, ADSB is an amazing safety improvement. Both my iPad and my Garmin warned of converging targets long before my Mark 1 eyeballs could pick them out of the skies. On the ground, Sun-n-Fun ATC got the tail number of each ADSB-equipped plane, so ATC was issuing instructions by radio even though none of us had “checked-in.” I nailed my landing on an enormous green pancake painted on the taxiway.

I quickly was shunted off to General Aviation Camping, marshalled to a stop and shut down the plane. Its work done, the big Continental contentedly clicked and cooled in the early morning sun. Mission accomplished!

Professional Flying

At this point, I refer you to “Exhibit A”— my simplified map of Sun-n-Fun. I offer this humble graphic because the official SNF map is unusable, indecipherable, and almost irrelevant. Here’s what you need to know:

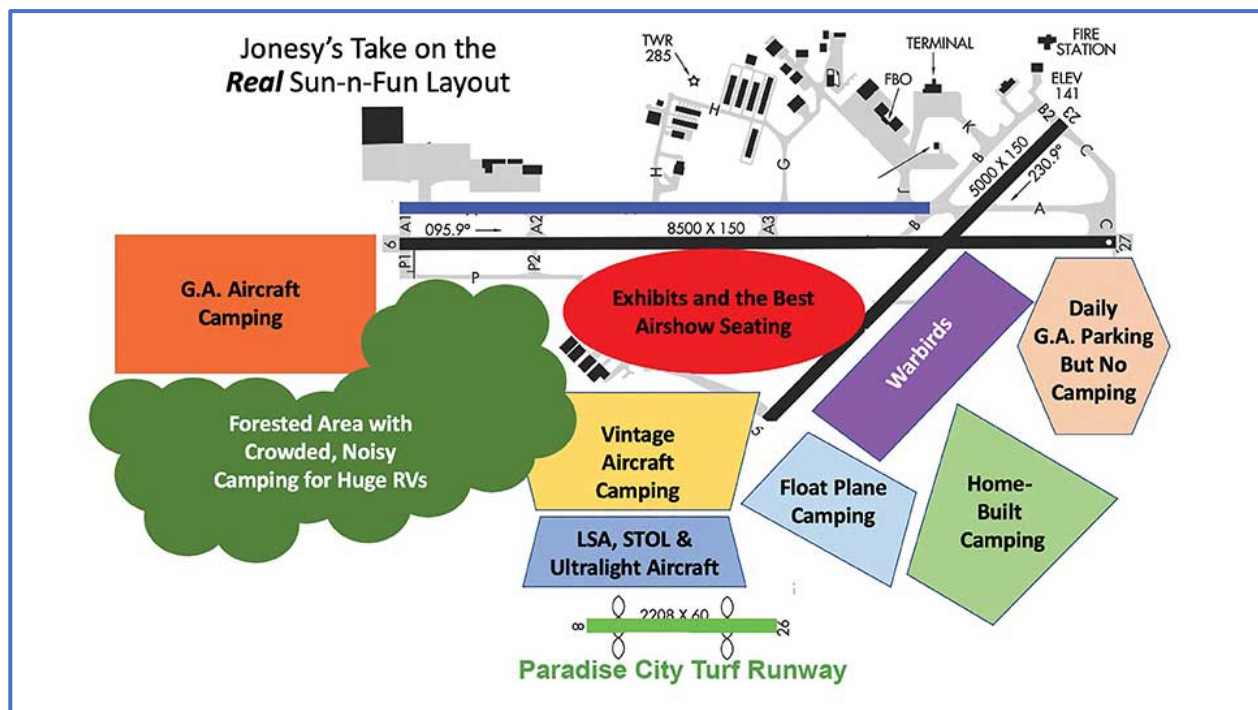
The airport is neatly bifurcated east-west by an enormous runway. During the show, the north side of the airport is *verboden* to folks not burning Jet-A; that be the nesting ground of the Amazon jets and corporate raiders.

The entire SNF show is tucked south of the main runway and north of the “Paradise City” turf strip. Centrally located are the exhibit spaces, a few restaurants, and the best viewing spots for the daily airshows, designated by



the big red oval in the map. To the east are the burly warbirds, snugly parked on a repurposed runway. Farther south are the vintage airplanes and even further south are the LSA/ultralight areas, tiny planes STOL-dancing on their grass strip.

The main reason to go to Sun-n-Fun is to watch the airshow and tour the static displays. Try not to drool on the warbirds, please. The Blue Angels introduced the newest versions of the bigger and badder F/A-18 while the Air Force contributed an impressive demo from the F-22. The civilian aerobatics were exciting and the precision better than I remembered. The aerobatics were eye-watering.



This is a simplified map of the SNF layout. The blue runway is the taxiway used by most arrivals and the green runway is the turf strip for smaller planes. This chart shows the degree to which General Aviation Camping is far removed from both the airshow, the displays and the other camp sites. Not to mention being adjacent to the new Amazon aviation depot, with big Boeings coming and going all night long.

To my mind, the single best demo of them all was the C-17 Globemaster. It did a sunset “practice show” on Monday evening and daily performances for the growing crowds. It was awe-inspiring to see and hear such an enormous flying machine. How can something so huge stay airborne at such slow speeds?

Or crank over on its wing like Bill Finnegan in his Pitts? The skill with which that aircrew flew made me proud. On the other side of the equation, the turf strip at Paradise City was the scene of numerous short-field battles; our Cessna brethren held their heads high with take-offs I can only imagine in my Centurion.



Ben and Jeff Thomas from Amarillo, TX camped under the wing of their Cessna and prepared elaborate meals for each other. They camp with their Cessna three or four times a year, and one of their favorite events is a 500-plane fly-in to Reklaw, Texas right before Halloween.



This red-and-white charmer is the new twin-engine Velocity. Retaining the same large cabin and canard design, the company claims exceptional performance numbers for this dazzling design. Here, Dick Harpster of Pinehurst, NC chats with Ingrid Meier, Velocity demo pilot, about the new plane.

I struggled to find the seminars I planned to attend; they really are the best part of these events and I would have attended more had not the inscrutable SNF map left me high and dry. I particularly enjoyed Bill Ross' presentation on leaning modern aircraft engines, and he skillfully dispelled some of the notions the audience (and myself) had accumulated over the years.

Despite pre-show hype, the event was not as busy as pre-COVID days. The visitor count was strong but subdued. There were dozens of minor reminders of COVID. The seminars, restaurants and bathhouses required masks. The alcohol-rich scent of hand-sanitizer wafted through the exhibit hangars like the perfume counter at Nordstrom's. People did not jam on to the trams; there always would be a less-crowded cart lumbering along in a minute.

The overall effect was to create a sense of spaciousness. That may be a manifestation of our society's newly-developed sense of social distancing, but the attendees were happy and chatty, the exhibitors buoyant, and everybody felt liberated in the Florida sunshine.

Amateur Economics

Industrious reporter that I am (and terrorized by our fearsome editor, who makes Jabba the Hutt seem like a Welcome Wagon hostess) I wandered into almost every booth and hangar, asking not about airplanes but the economic conditions in which these companies found themselves. Almost universally, they were optimistic and sanguine about the years ahead.

The Velocity Aircraft booth is always bustling; their space-age designs make them a must-see for both homebuilders and traditional buyers. Scott Swing owns the company and he and his sales staff



Alissa and Jan Eggenfellner are proud of the Victory engines their company produces for the home-builder market.

were surrounded by people eager to learn about the new Velocity Twin. It is a true four-person, 210-knots, “load 'er up” heavy hauler. Clever aerodynamics minimize the weight-and-balance problems that plague other light twins. Even from a distance, one can see this plane has ramp appeal. Ingrid Meier is their demo pilot and she reports most pilots transition to the Velocity with just five hours of training. COVID barely dented their business and their factory is busy. About 700 Velocities of different models and vintages are flying today.

At the Viking booth I found the striking Alissa Eggenfeilner, long of leg, blonde of hair, and garbed as a Viking warrior princess; clearly not your typical Walmart shopper. Far more erudite and educated than her costume suggested,



To my mind, you can never know everything you should know about flying, and attending the seminars at SNF is one great way to fill in the gaps your instructor forgot. Here, Bill Ross of Superior Engines explains the risks of over-leaning.

“Our constant speed prop really closes the gap; you no longer have to choose between STOL performance and long-haul cross-country cruising,” she said. Both she and her husband Jan reported business was very strong and the traffic through their stand was excellent. They are optimistic that SNF was going to be a great show for them in 2021 and the rest of the year would be equally rewarding.

Over at Paradise City, the LSA, home-built and ultra-light worlds were in fine shape. I visited friends at the Bushcat booth. (Full disclosure: I own a Bushcat taildragger.) They were busy giving fifteen-minute demo rides using their nose-wheel bird with its striking

she advised me that business was super-strong. Viking engines are a popular choice for many homebuilders because they are light-weight, affordable, and fuel-efficient engines. Viking offers a power options not available from other engine makers and pilot-friendly features which eliminate both carb heat and mixture controls.



The McChord Air Force Base C-17 Demo Team brought their massive airlifter across the country to entertain and amaze. Weighing almost a half-million pounds, it can turn on a dime, carry more than 100 paratroopers and land on a dirt strip you'd be nervous taking your Cessna. I love to see my tax dollars at work.

zebra-like design, which harkens back to the Bushcat's origins as an anti-poaching patrol plane in Africa.

Between demo flights, I chatted with Bushcat's Chief Flight Instructor Brian Karlow, who reported 2020 had been a fine year for the company. "Lots of people were stuck at home or working from home," he said. "Many who had been interested in building a plane just decided this was the time to do it." Jeremy Knoll, the owner, agreed with the optimistic perspective. "COVID



When it comes to STOL contests, highly modified Cessnas often come in first place. Lightly loaded and over-powered, this Cessna climbed out of Paradise City after a miniscule take-off roll.

actually helped us. Our hangar is filled with planes under construction right now," he reported.

Tecnam featured the Tecnam Traveller, a handsome, twin-engine, fixed-gear commuter optimized for short, frequent flights. Over thirty have been delivered and hundreds are on order. The full-FADEC controls simplify single-pilot workload while

the roomy cabin pleases passengers. My prediction is you're going to see Travellers in the skies for decades to come.

Moving to the smaller booths in the exhibit hangars, the damage wrought by the COVID crisis became more apparent. About one-third of the stands were empty. Dozens of companies selling avionics, accessories and pilot-delighting gadgets simply did not show this year. The normally crowded hangars were quiet as everyone mumbled behind their masks.

Room for Improvement

As good as SNF is, there is room to do better.

First, the designated camping location for a pilot flying a relatively modern plane is the field called “GAC” or general aviation camping, marked in orange on my map. It is at the farthest western regions of the airport, right at the end of Runway 27. The GAC area is a long walk to anywhere, even the bathhouses. The first day at the show I tallied more than 20,000 steps, plus numerous tram rides. Even RV campers — their noisy generators spewing global-warming exhaust into the Spanish moss — are closer to the action than pilots and their planes. My recommendation for 2022 is to skip GA camping and claim a much more convenient spot in the vintage plane section. Nobody checks your data plate and you’ll be much closer to the center of the action.

Deep in to the 21st Century, having fully-charged batteries is more essential than a tight-fitting face mask. Unhappily, recharging stations at SNF are more elusive than cheap avgas. SNF needs to invest in plentiful and convenient recharging facilities. At Oshkosh all the shower houses are equipped with recharging stations. SNF needs to do better.

Lastly, the food borders on awful. I know a good airshow has a carnival-like ambience with snow-cones and Philly cheese steaks, but after a few days one realizes there are very few tasty options and almost no healthy ones. Low carb? Low grease? Fresh veggies? It brings me back to my days on the New Jersey Turnpike. You can’t blame people for bringing their own grub.

That said, 2021 Sun-n-Fun must be tagged as an excellent event; they even arranged for almost perfect weather. 2022 definitely will be even better and I’m looking forward to spending the entire week, drinking in the sunshine and Jet-A fumes.

The Dogs of Sun-n-Fun

The dogs at SNF were among the best parts of the show. Here's a quick gallery of some of my new friends.

Paancho, right, lives with Eric Hinshaw, a long-time United captain. Pancho is named in honor of Florence Lowe "Pancho" Barnes who was a pioneer aviator. She broke Amelia Earhart's air speed record, raced in the Women's Air Derby and ran Chuck Yeager's favorite bar at Edwards Air Force Base.



Meet Loosey, who's owners found her "on the loose" in the street.



This is Lillie. At SNF, I also Ben who's "been a fighter pilot"; Piper, because "Velocity is too hard to say"; and Jerry, who was rescued along with his brother Ben.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 3,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has owned his Cessna T210 for twenty years. Immediately after SNF, the Centurion went in for its annual inspection, so Jonesy is grounded for the next few weeks. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

