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An Excellent Eagle's Nest

BARELY AN HOUR'S FLIGHT NORTH OF ORLANDO – BUT STRICTLY BY INVITATION ONLY – EAGLE'S NEST IS A VERY SPECIAL AIRPARK, AS FRÉDÉRIC LERT DISCOVERED.

General Aviation magazine recently examined the growth of airparks in the USA. At the last count there were about 640 in the continental US, and each year between five to ten new ones open. With great weather and plenty of flat land, Texas and Florida are the most popular locations for airparks. Florida, the Sunshine State, hosts more than 70 and there is little doubt that Eagle's Nest, in Putnam County, is one of the most unusual. With its grass strip and

peanut-shaped lake, and the houses and hangars hidden beneath oak trees, it is a pilot's dream.

John and Julie Fetcko chose to

retire to Eagle's Nest ten years ago, and their enthusiasm hasn't waned one bit. "It is very rare for an airpark to have both a 3,200ft grass runway *and* a licensed seaplane base, or even water access" said Julie. "Consequently, we have flying, seaplane activities, boating, waterskiing, and fishing all at the same location! This has attracted a very diverse group of

Above: Eagle's Nest has both a 3,200ft grass runway and a licensed seaplane base. (All Frédéric Lert)

Below: The biggest aircraft based at Eagle's Nest is the Grumman Albatross owned by John and Julie Fetcko.





pilots and unique aircraft."

The Fetckos own two very impressive aircraft - they have a North American T-28 in the hangar, and a Grumman Albatross on the apron. The Albatross is by far the biggest aircraft on the field, which also hosts a CJ6 Nanchang, a Waco YMF, a rare Tiger Moth on floats and a shiny Stinson 'Flying Station Wagon'.

A strong international flavour can be found at Eagle's Nest, with a German couple flying a Jungmeister, and four British couples. Europeans living in Florida on a part-time basis enjoy the warm, dry winters, and a great sense of freedom when flying their private aeroplanes.

The airpark currently has 15 houses and the maximum will be reached in

"EAGLE'S NEST IS A DREAM COME TRUE"

a few years' time with 24 houses on 30 different plots. "People buy one or two plots and build their house when they retire and move here" explained Julie. "The size of Eagle's Nest is important, in that it keeps the community close knit and involved in everyday operations."

A DREAM COME TRUE

Jim Goolsby, a retired airline pilot and one of the current pilots of the 'Collins Foundation' B-24, was also among the first to build a house at Eagle's Nest. That was 15 years ago. In his hangar, a superb CJ-6 Nanchang in Chinese air force colours is always ready to take to the air. "People choose to live on an airpark because they can fly whenever they want," said Jim. "You don't have to drive to the



JOHN AND JULIE FETCKO'S GRUMMAN ALBATROSS

The Albatross was designed in 1944 to replace the Grumman Goose. It first flew in 1947 and of the 464 built, around 30 or so are still in use around the world, mainly in the US. The Fetcko aircraft first flew with the USAF, logging several Combat SAR missions during the Korean War. It was then turned into an anti submarine aircraft with a search radar in the nose, a retractable Magnetic Anomaly Detector (MAD) under the tail and bomb racks under the wings. The Fetckos bought it from an Idaho plane dealer in the early 1990s. It took five years and 15,000 working hours to turn the military HU-16B ASW into an incredible flying motorhome with a bathroom, a kitchen, a bedroom and a living room. The Fetckos use the Albatross to tour the US during summer. Called 'Albatross Lady' (actually Julie's nickname, as she must be the only woman currently flying this type of aircraft) the aircraft is a familiar sight at American air shows.

airport, there is no time limit, and no curfew. You just pull your aircraft out of the hangar and go flying."

Another reason for the growth in airparks is that private owners often have a hard time trying to find a hangar at a regular airport. "You stay ▶



Florida is a great place to fly floatplanes.



WILLIE GERDES' TIGER MOTH

Former airline pilot Willie Gerdes was born in South Africa and now lives in the UK, but spends half the year at Eagle's Nest where his Tiger Moth on floats is based. According to Willie, there are only two of this type flying in North America. The aircraft was manufactured in 1941 and shipped to South Africa where it was used to train pilots with the British Empire Training Scheme. Willie bought it in 1959 with the ambition of putting it on floats, finally achieving this in 1997. In the meantime he and his family moved to the UK, where flying a floatplane is a rather more complex affair. Consequently the Moth was then shipped to Florida, where it is now based.

on a waiting list for years and years, then you pay \$500 to \$1000 per month when you finally find a place," added Jim. "In the long term, it's definitely cheaper to live here. You can work on your aircraft whenever it suits you. Some airports have very strict rules which prevent you from working on your aircraft in the hangars."

Doug Vayda, one of the few non-retired residents at the airpark, agrees. Sales director for Southeast Aero (an American distributor of Extra aircraft), he is also an enthusiastic pilot, qualified mechanic and inspector.

"Eagle's Nest is a dream come true for me. To live and fly at the same place was my ideal and I visited quite a few airparks in Florida before falling in love with this one. Somebody told me there was a house for sale - I came and said 'OK, I'll take it!'"

Doug's hangar houses a superb Waco YMF with a 275hp Jacobs

engine, belonging to his father, a former pilot with the USAF Thunderbirds display team. Doug hates driving to work. Most of the time, he flies there in the Scout or the Waco - a 15-minute flip as opposed to an hour's drive.

On the south side of the field, Ray is one of the airpark's most active pilots. Every morning, he pushes his high wing Searay onto the grass

strip and fires up the 120-hp Jabiru engine before going for a short flight in the early light,

immensely enjoying his amphibious ultralight in this state of a thousand lakes. Most of the time his friend Bob, another happy Searay owner, joins him and they fly together.

The field is not open to general traffic. Access is by invitation only, though every member of the community can invite friends to fly in. There is no curfew on the runway, which remains open 24 hours a day. The runway lighting is activated by radio control on 122.85.

"YOU DON'T HAVE TO DRIVE TO THE AIRPORT"

Willie Gerdes' Tiger Moth is one of only two float-equipped DH.82s in North America.





Above: The Florida summer is very hot and humid, and the 3,200ft grass runway and taxiways must be mowed three times a month.



JIM AND SHIRLEY BENNETT'S STINSON 'FLYING STATION WAGON'

A former airline pilot, Jim Bennett came to Eagle's Nest with his wife when he retired, in the late 1980s. They first owned a Piper Arrow and a B55 Baron; the latter being replaced by a B58 pressurized Baron. A few years ago, the Baron was sold and Jim bought a 1948 Stinson with a 165hp Franklin engine. "One of the most beautiful high wing taildraggers from the immediate post war period, it is a very comfortable aircraft for private and business flying, with excellent flying characteristics," claims Jim. "However, it would be a bit optimistic to take off at the maximum weight of 2,400lbs in the summertime." Jim logs around 60 hours each year with his aircraft just flying locally. "I stopped flying cross country when I sold the Baron," he added. "Now we fly with the commercial airlines, like everybody else."

THE RULES RULE

Managing the airpark is the responsibility of a five-member board elected by members of the airpark association. Buying a plot means you automatically become a member. Then come the dues...

"The main expenses are related to the runway and the insurance," explained Julie. "We run the airpark with an annual budget of US \$25,000. Almost half of this sum goes towards the maintenance of the grass runway and the taxiways. In summertime, when the weather is very hot and humid, the grass must be mowed three times a month, at a cost of US\$400 each time, while insurance costs the community US \$5,000 per year." Eagle's Nest's 24 plot owners each make an annual contribution of just over \$1,000.

If the budget is the first hot topic on the board's agenda, the second concerns housing.

"In each community you need to have rules, strict or lax," said Jim. "Some airparks have very restrictive rules and they look very nice. Others are too relaxed and they look like a dump with trailers, wrecks and tin-roof hangars. I think we are well balanced here, with common-sense rules."

The minimum size of houses at Eagle's Nest is 1,500sq ft (150m²). The hangar must be full-size and no

tin hangars are allowed. And it is also forbidden to live in a mobile home or in a trailer; you need to have a house and a housing committee has



JIM GOOLSBY'S CJ-6 NANCHANG

The Yak 18 was a tandem two-seat taildragger, which first flew at the end of World War Two. In 1955, Yak proposed a modernized version with tricycle landing gear, which was built under licence in China by the Nanchang Company from 1955 to 1958 and called the CJ-5. In 1962, China switched to a more powerful version called CJ-6. More than 1,800 Nanchang CJ-6s were built in less than three years and hundreds were exported. Like many other Westerners, Jim describes the CJ-6 as an inexpensive warbird, easy to maintain and to fly.



DOUG VAYDA'S WACO

In Doug Vayda's hangar, there is a superb Waco, as well as his Bellanca Scout. "The Waco belongs to my Dad," explained Doug. "It's the second one we have owned in the family. With the first we did some aerial work, but with this one, we only fly above beaches, with the family restaurant's name painted under the wings." With its 275hp Jacobs engine, the Waco cruises at 90kts and burns 60lit/hr. A 190lit tank gives it a 300-mile range. It used to have a wooden propeller, but is now fitted with a new metal Hamilton Standard constant speed propeller. "It gives the aircraft more thrust, which means a faster take off - and it sounds nicer," said Doug.

to approve every project. If an owner violates the rules, the board can impose a fine, and if the fine is not paid, the community can put a lien on the house. If things really turn ugly and the lien isn't paid, the quarrel can end up in court and the member forced to pay up or sell their house to repay the community.

GRASS OR CONCRETE?

Another hot topic at any airpark is the runway. Some individuals want a grass runway; some want a hard surface because they think it will increase the value of their property.

However, a hard runway would cost at least US\$150,000. At Eagle's Nest, the majority still favours the grass runway, although that could change in the future. A decision was made by the board a couple of years ago to install sprinklers, to wet the runway during the dry winter season. The soil is sandy and drains quickly when it rains hard in the summer.

"Fifteen minutes after a big rain, the

runway is perfectly usable," said Jim. "On the other hand, the sprinklers make the grass more robust. Without the sprinklers, the grass could become dry in wintertime and easily torn up when you apply brakes on landing."

One last word about the neighbourhood. The closest town is Crescent City, six miles to the east. Eagle's Nest is rather remote and the most numerous population in the neighbourhood must be the alligators, with several thousand of them residing in Putnam County's lakes. However, this remoteness means there are very few complaints about noise from the neighbours.

"I can remember two complaints in 15 years," said Jim. "And they were triggered by visiting aircraft during a fly-in we had on the field. We invited the complaining neighbours over for a visit and we took them for a flip above the County. Since then we have never had any further problem."

"THE MAIN EXPENSES ARE THE RUNWAY AND INSURANCE"

This beautiful Waco YMF-F5C is flown by Doug Vayda and owned by his father.

