

July 20-23, 2008 - Memphis, TN

One of the positives that I will take away from this trip is the opportunity to have met some really interesting people along the way. These past few days while traveling in and around Memphis Tennessee is a good example. I arrived at the Wolf River air strip a little past noon on Saturday. This is a smooth, well manicured grass runway of over 3,000 feet in length that is just to the East, and outside of the Class "B" airspace that encompasses most of the metropolitan Memphis area. After landing, I approached the airport owner and on site manager **Woody Degan** and filled him in on the details of my trip, asking if I could base there for a few days. He readily agreed, and even helped me off load the airplane and watched as I unfolded its wings. He was the first of several interesting people that I met on what was really the first multi day stop along my proposed 8,000 mile route.



I am about to begin the downwind leg for my landing to the south at Wolf River airport. It is hard to believe that this rural setting is just a few miles from the big city of Memphis TN.



Here Woody Degan sits behind his audio recording, mixing and cutting console at his airstrip studio. This soundproof air conditioned building has the latest state of the art computer hardware and software equipment.

The Wolf River airport has been family owned for over 35 years, and Woody, his brother and mother currently operate this friendly and laid back facility. However Woody has another business which takes up as much, if not more of his time. [Memphis Sound.com](http://www.MemphisSound.com) is a company...actually a series of companies...that produce concerts, music venues and various public and private events within a couple of hundred miles of the Memphis area. He provides the sound equipment, lighting and other logistical support for local and national political gatherings, (including visits by the past 3 Presidents) as well as for the Redbird baseball stadium and other sporting activities. He also operates his own production studio right there at an airport out building. I enjoyed having the opportunity to spend a half hour or so in his music studio...especially since it was fully air conditioned when outside temperatures well exceeded 100 degrees.

Before I had even left the airfield, one of the based pilots came over for a visit. **Jim Cunningham** is another interesting person who I enjoyed talking with. In fact, at Jim's invitation, we made a short, 10 mile flight to an adjacent airstrip where a group of pilots get together to hanger fly on Saturday afternoons. While there I decided to do an oil change on the Highlander, and Jim offered his tools and even drove me the 2 miles to the "big" airport of Olive Branch, MS to pick up some oil. On the way over I learned that Jim is one of the country's renowned paleontologists <http://pterosaur.stanford.edu/team.html> specializing in the study of Pterosaurs, or flying "dinosaurs", some of which had wingspans in excess of 36 feet, (the size of my second airplane, a Cessna Skyhawk). Actually these animals were more flying reptiles, which needed to run a bit on their 4 legs, before deploying their front members, which had articulating light weight wing like membranes. Once airborne, they would utilize thermal lift to soar while scouting along the water's edge for their food source...mostly fish and marine life. Jim said that they lived during the Cretaceous period, and were made extinct when a large meteor struck in Mexico, some 65 million years ago, sending up a cloud of dust that circumvented the entire globe for several years. The dust interfered with the solar activity that help heat the earth, eliminating the rising heat thermals



With helmet in place I am ready to head out on my day's travel adventure after arriving from my RV at the motor home park in Germantown, TN

that were needed by those large flying mammals. They starved after only a few months...thus wiping out an entire species, as well as most of the rest of Earth's animal life. It appears that really large meteors hit the earth every 10 thousand years or so, but with nowhere near the disastrous result of this one event. Jim has presented papers on this subject, consulted to many universities and museums, built working models of these animals, and even assisted the Discovery Channel on a documentary on the subject. Another very interesting person met at the local airport.

Peter Smith is a NJ grammar school friend who recently retired from the Memphis based International Paper Company. I have seen Peter and his high school girlfriend-- now wife--Lee, on and off over the last half dozen years when I have worked in Tennessee. Pete is another very interesting Memphis personality, having had the opportunity to visit every continent on Earth, except for Antarctica in his position as a Risk Manager for I-P. Ever since he was a kid, Peter was interested in trains. As teenagers we would commute, by train, to the high school some 3 towns away. During our freshman year, we rode steam locomotive trains back and forth to school, while in the remaining years, they were pulled by diesel engines.



Me, with the Smiths having dinner at the Texas de Brazil restaurant in downtown Memphis. Truly a gourmet treat.



Pete has set up a model train landscape in a large room in his house, which rivals anything that you would find in a railroader's museum. He takes great pride in knowing that it is completely authentic and detailed in every way, having been taken from various locations that he has personally visited. Pete has walked many Western US locations with a GPS receiver to get accurate readings from actual I-P saw mill rail sites that existed during the early portion of the last century. He has some wild stories of his job related travels and it is always enjoyable to get together with the Smiths.

Photos can not do justice to the size or scope of Pete's train layout

On Monday morning I made a 50 minute flight over to the [Tunica, MS](#) airport to scout out the Casinos that have made this area such a well visited tourist area. I counted at least a half dozen of these grandiose gambling complexes that lie just off of the Mississippi River. In order to get the actual casino to pass the state gaming requirement that it be "water borne", canals were first dug off of the river, and then large barges that were to become the casino were floated in. The canals were filled with piping and then covered over. Water was pumped from the Mississippi into the "motes" on which the barges were brought and the gaming rooms were built atop these floating foundations.



The Tunica Municipal airport is also “interesting”. Its single paved runway is 8,500 feet long, and 100 feet wide, and can accommodate all large commercial airliners. In fact while I was there 3 MD-80’s were loading up with gambling junket players to return them to their home airport locations around the US. Two were Allegiant Air planes, which is the same airline I had used to fly to Florida the previous weekend. Up to that point I had never even heard of this small carrier, and now I find that they are more widespread than I had imagined. While at Tunica, I met their Deputy Airport Director, **Eric Konupka**, who filled me in on the recent history of this long runway located in the middle of cotton fields, built to help support the gambling industry that has taken over much of this sleepy farm community. I also had the opportunity to visit with the local crop-duster and learn, in detail, of his last crash when the aircraft’s engine stopped while he was spraying at an altitude of 50 feet. I even got to see that damaged plane, which went down in a corn field, and is soon to be rebuilt. As I said at the beginning of this article, meeting interesting people along the way is much of what this trip is all about.



On the ramp at Tunica Airport



When in Memphis, there are several “must do” things, including a trip to the old downtown area. When there, take the “on and off” trolley



Beale Street is where all of the clubs are located, and where the music happens. Try to see it at night, but be cautious.



The historic Peabody Hotel is the place to go early afternoon to have a drink in the lobby and wait for the Parade of the Ducks to begin



The Ducks, who live on the Hotel’s roof, swim in the main fountain all day, and return to their Penthouse coups each evening.



When in Memphis, one has to take a tour of the Graceland home of Elvis Presley. It is the most visited facility in Memphis, and probably only second to the White House nationwide.



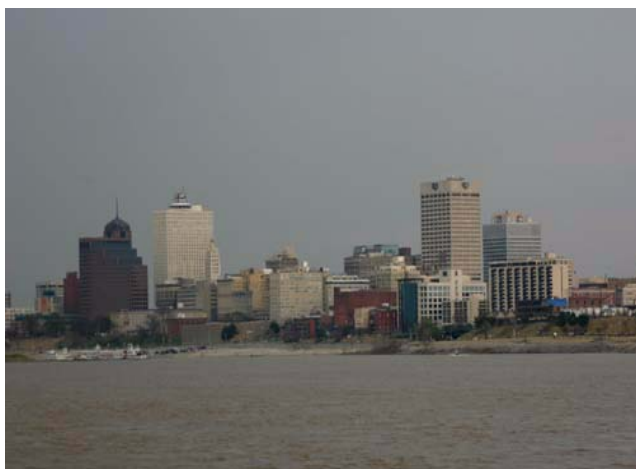
While the house tour is both interesting and informative, the walk through the family gravesites are both somber and reverent. I have taken this tour 3 times and always find it worthwhile since I grew up on Elvis' music.



Peabody Place is an indoor shopping and entertainment mall. Since temperatures during my stay in Memphis topped 100 degrees each day I was there, I appreciated the air conditioning.



I enjoyed having the opportunity to spend some quiet time at one of the Peabody Pl. fountains. The entire downtown area in this city is very walkable and provides many restaurants & bars



Because of the very high temperatures, a cruise by riverboat on the Mississippi gave me another opportunity to cool off and see the city from still another level, (other than by air, which was prohibited due to the restricted Class "B" airspace)



Here are the various flags which have flown over Memphis, including the Stars & Bars.