

June 6-12, 2014 - Pure Michigan

The one thing that proceeded my interest in airplanes and flying, but by only a few weeks (if you don't count girls), was my interest in automobiles and driving. My first car, when I was 16 years old, was a brand new '57 VW Beetle which I purchased upon graduating high school. It was while on one of my weekend drives with that car that I came across a small grass airstrip, just over the NJ border in nearby NY State. This chance encounter resulted in my first flight experience with a general aviation airplane... something that forever changed my life. It was also in that same year, 1957, that I joined the Volkswagen Club of America and went to their 3rd annual convention at the Motel on the Mountain, in Suffern N.Y., which was a two hour's drive from my North Jersey parent's home. I have made two dozen conventions since then, and even helped to run a couple.

This year was the club's 59th convention, being held in the small Michigan town of Hudson, another two hour drive... but this time from the Detroit airport. A \$240 round trip ticket on Spirit Airlines would take me there and back, and another \$240 would get me a rental car for the week. It was good visiting with old (and I mean that in both of the meanings for that noun) friends, many whom I have known for over a half a century, and some who I only get to see at this annual affair. This year a few of the newer members brought their VW bugs, pickups, vans and campers, so as to be able to camp out in the city park. There must have been 20 vehicles set up along the wooded park boundary and there was the smell of wood smoke and barbecuing meat, hanging in the air, the night that I went over to "shoot the breeze" and talk Volkswagens.

I am now on my tenth VW, a 2013 Passat sedan, but my ride over to the festivities was in an airport rented red VW Jetta. When I returned to my motel I immediately picked up a "hitch hiker". A seagull lighted atop my roof and actually "posed" for a photo taken by a fellow convention goer. We had several automotive events scheduled for the weekend, and on the afternoon of our formal banquet dinner we went to visit a nearby Buffalo ranch. There we took a horse drawn wagon ride out into the range to hand feed ears of corn to these large animals. It was quite a hoot and the Bison seemed to enjoy it as well.

Although the convention was only for the weekend, I decided to make this a mini-vacation by taking a driving tour around that state's peninsula, hugging its Lake Michigan and Lake Huron shorelines. Michigan is an old state and many of its towns have turn of the last century Victorian style homes and I enjoyed wandering around simply viewing these marvelous mansions. I especially wanted to go up to the straits separating the upper from the lower peninsula and ride the ferry over to Mackinac Island. It had been almost 20 years since my last trip to that historic and very interesting place. I had been to Mackinac four times previously, via 3 of my private aircraft. The Island does not allow motor vehicles of any sort. Except for the small general aviation airport, all transportation is by foot, bicycle, horseback or carriage. Only the local ambulance, fire, and police departments use motor vehicles and they are kept out of sight except during emergencies. The police patrol by bicycle.

Getting the Bird



My ride- rental VW Jetta... feathered friend optional



Just a few of the convention VW's, camping out



VW Conventioneers feeding Buffalo ears of corn



A typical historic Victorian mansion home

I also wanted to try to do some flying while on this trip and arranged for a rental aircraft over in nearby Traverse City. I opted for a Aeronca 7DC Champ. When I first learned to fly, way back in 1957, it was in an Aeronca 7AC tail dragger. Since I had logged 220 hours of tail wheel time before converting my Highlander to nose gear, I thought that it would be fun to fly a tail wheel airplane again. Since the Champ qualifies as a "light sport aircraft", it is one that I am licensed to fly solo. This plane would also allow me to slide the side window open for pictures. My hour and a half flight took me up one of the several peninsulas jutting into Lake Michigan on the north side of Traverse City. The area is known for growing grapes for its many wineries, as well as for apples and cherries. In fact Michigan is the second most prolific state with regard to cherry production, following Washington State. At the northern terminus of the peninsula are located the 400 foot high sand dune cliffs which border Lake Michigan. The day was delightful, the flying was enjoyable, and I had plenty of opportunities for photographs along the way.

It is a 3 hour drive from Traverse City to Mackinaw City, on the Mackinac Straits, via the coastline route. I arrived with plenty of daylight left since the sun doesn't set until 9:30 PM this far west in the eastern time zone. The following day my 20 minute boat trip over to Mackinac Island was by "fast ferry" and the highlight of that day was a buffet lunch at the Grand Hotel. This is a 5 star hotel with a front porch better than twice the length of a football field. They are open for business for only half the year, but despite their typical \$600-\$800 per couple per night cost for an American Plan room, they always seem to be full. My first visit to the Island, back in the late '60's when I flew my Cessna Skyhawk over from New Jersey with another couple, had us paying \$30 per night for a very Spartan room, sans any meals. Prices have apparently changed during the past four decades, but the Grand Hotel and its grounds are still spectacular. Following my after lunch walk through the Island's downtown area I returned to the Grand where payment of a \$10 "access fee" allowed me to spend the remainder of my day touring their spacious grounds and public rooms and enjoying its fabulous porch rocking chairs and listening to harp music during their 3 o'clock "High Tea".

This hotel was the site of the 1979 cult classic film "Somewhere in Time", starring Christopher Reeves and Jane Seymour. It is a favorite movie of mine and it was special being able to visit the actual spots where several of the outdoor scenes were shot. After a day of walking all over the downtown area of the Island, it finally was time to head back to the mainland to continue my journey, this time on the Lake Huron side of the state. My next overnight stop was the small German style town of Frankenmuth. While there I just had to sample both the Bavarian Inn's and Zennder's Restaurant meal offerings along with local craft beers. This meant dinner one evening and lunch the next day. I also got a chance to visit the world famous Bronner's "CHRISTMAS Wonderland" store as well as take an hour long sightseeing "cruise" on an original steam driven stern wheeled riverboat.

After lunch it was time for my return drive to the Detroit Metro Airport and my flight back to Florida. Having traveled over 1,300 miles on this week long journey around "Pure Michigan" made me realize just how beautiful this state is and a place that I would certainly enjoy visiting again.



The Aeronca Champ that I rented in Traverse City



This was my view along the peninsula's shoreline



The north end sand dunes were 400 feet high



This is the same Mission Point Lighthouse, on the north end of the Peninsula, that I flew over earlier



The 5 mile long Mackinac Straits bridge



The Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island



The 660 foot long Grand Porch at the Grand Hotel



The Grand Hotel's lobby is, itself, truly grand



Awaiting the 3 PM High Tea and its harp music



A downtown Mackinac Island street scene



Frankenmuth's Bavarian Inn and Restaurant



My German dinner inside the Bavarian Inn