

March 6-9, 2020 - River Ranch and its Saturday night Rodeo

I believe that the first time that I had visited the **River Ranch** was in the very late 1960's when my wife, at the time, and I were on a lengthy road trip from our New Jersey home to Florida. As I recall, we stayed a night or two in one of its western style motel rooms and we went to its Saturday night rodeo. I don't recall much else since that trip was taken over a half century ago. Since then I have made a dozen or so flying visits to what has developed into a very upscale dude ranch, after it was taken over by the Orlando based Westgate Properties group who invested millions of dollars in upgrades to the resort. All of these **today** fly-ins are to avail myself of a weekend brunch or a late lunch taken at the marina restaurant. However, one of those trips, about two decades ago, was for day visit with Miriam and my Twin Comanche, to experience the weekend rodeo. The most memorable part of that trip was our nighttime return to Palm Beach International Airport on an instrument filed flight plan. Lift off from the 5,000 foot long River Ranch runway was into an abyss of complete blackness until I reached a 300 foot altitude and some of the resorts lights began to filter into view. The 100 mile journey back to PBI was over very desolate cattle grazing land with few lights and when we reached Florida's east coast we were over a very thick cloud bank with only the faint glow of the metropolitan area occasionally bleeding through. However, as I descended through that under-cast deck and broke out at about 2,000 feet to the remarkable carpet of illuminated urbanization, it was like coming out of the darkness of surgery into the overwhelming brilliance of a recovery room. I will always remember the feeling of awe and magnificence that this "going toward the light" experience had upon me. It was a part of what makes my total of 375 hours of logged nighttime flying so very memorable.



However this weekend's trip to River Ranch was going to be somewhat different. We had been to its very upscale and expensive (now \$100 per night) resident owned campground about a dozen or so years ago in what would become one of the last trips taken with my 36' Foretravel motorhome. It is only a 65 mile road trip from my RV resort property lot in Okeechobee and we brought along our two Yorkie dogs on a weekend adventure to this beautiful River Ranch owner operated campground. It also was a memorable trip even though it did not involve an airplane and the Saturday night rodeo was again on our schedule of things to do while there. This time I was going to try to combine the pleasures of RV camping with the enjoyment of flying my airplane in one long weekend outing. The **straight line** distance between my hometown airport and River Ranch is about the same 65 miles as was the road drive over with the new Sprinter motor home. My Mini Cooper tow car could be available but was not needed at the dude ranch, so I decided to instead use it for the drive back to my airport to retrieve the Highlander for its return flight to River Ranch. A bit convoluted, I will admit, but I just wanted to see if it could be done. It could be, and it was.



That is a single engine Piper Comanche, just like my third airplane, immediately behind.



We arrived at River Ranch early on Friday and set up our much smaller 25 footer Mercedes on our assigned site. After hooking up and putting out the bedroom slide I took the Cooper back to the Indiantown airport, where it is usually kept in my hanger when not being used, and exchanged it for the Highlander. It was a beautiful early springtime day in south Florida with a recently passed through cold front leaving morning temperatures in the very low 50's. Despite the brisk headwind it took only 50 minutes to return



to the resort's airstrip where I took the above "selfie" validation photo prior to starting on the 25 minute walk over to the campground. The rest of the day was spent simply enjoying the resort's amenities with our "new" Silky Terrier dogs in tow. An early dinner at the scenic marina **Smokehouse** dining room was followed by an "dusk" walk around the entire campground and an evening campfire ([see last page](#)), which completed our first day with a 10 PM "lights out".

The big attraction on our second day was the Saturday evening rodeo, billed as the longest running weekly rodeo in the United States. Since I had originally been to one sometime in the late 60's I well believe the claim. However this particular property's history goes back well before that...some 4 centuries, at least. In the mid 1500's Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon brought 25 horses and 50 head of cattle to the Southwest coast of Florida, which one hundred years later had grown to thousands.

Cattle was once "king" in Florida and cattle drives having 1 to 2 thousand head in a single drive were not uncommon. In fact in 1647 there was an account of a clash between the Florida Indians attacking the Spanish ranchers resulting in a scattering of herds all across the state. The Spanish "cowboys" of the day were known as "Crackers" due to sound of the 10 foot long bullwhips that they used to motivate the cattle to move along. Today it is a sometimes derogatory term applied to native born Floridians. Florida actually was a chief supplier of cattle to the Confederacy during the Civil War from 1861 to 1865.

River Ranch itself was built in the 1960's as a proposed residential development and grew in increments as various companies purchased and continued to add amenities and today it is one of a dozen and a half Westgate resorts located all around the United States and it is the largest dude ranch east of the Mississippi.

Meanwhile, with regard to our specific evening rodeo, the opening ceremony was patriotic and inspiring and started off with a parade of horsewomen proudly displaying the colors of the United States and each of its service branches. Some of these same women would later entertain us with their trick riding and exciting barrel racing expertise, and they were more than willing to pose with members of the audience for a photo op with their mounts. There were also trick lassoing and bullwhip demonstrations interspersed with various other activities. But what everyone really comes to see is the bull riding (more like bull throwing... **of the riders**) which brings cowboys from all across the state to compete for prize money.





Note that in the above photo all of the bull's legs are two feet off the ground as it tries to buck off its rider.



The rider is supposed to stay aboard the bucking bull for 8 seconds with one arm in the air and not touching any part of the animal. He is judged for technique, perseverance and form and, if he succeeds, will then go onto the final round. Very few lasted the full 8 seconds and once they hit the ground they are subject to the flying hooves from the 1800 - 2000 pound really pissed off bull who is mere feet from their body. I never did find out just what the prize money consisted of but you could never convince a non cowboy type that it would be worth the risk unless it was accompanied by an awful lot of zeros. I surmise that much like hockey or basketball one has to acquire an appreciation for all of the nuances' and movements that go into setting a spectacular performance apart from a mediocre one. To the untrained eye it is just blur of activity at a very fast pace and I was unable to determine just how the score given to each contestant was arrived at. However it was certainly good entertainment and I was well pleased that I had attended the 6th rodeo event in my 80 years, now certainly qualifying me as an expert. **LOL!**

Sunday was a "day of rest" with us simply enjoying the resorts grounds and our departure on Monday was a repeat, but in reverse, of the exercise that got us there, involving the plane, the tow car and the motorhome. We were back at my Okeechobee RV resort before 2 PM and home at Tradition by 3, after a marvelous and relaxing weekend. **Note: it was because of incorporating the use of my Highlander into this trip that I feel that this article would qualify for insertion into my "places that I have been with my airplane" blog. Hope that you enjoyed it!**



Upper Left: Me walking the dogs around the very scenic and beautiful Live Oak trees and their well manicured grounds

Upper Right: Miriam in front of the Texas Longhorns

Middle Left: Me in the Dakota Bison grazing grounds

Middle Right: Miriam at our campsite doing her favorite thing... scrapbooking (mostly coloring, cutting and pasting)

Lower Left: Our late evening activity for 2 of our nights was to build a campfire and experience its snap, crackle and pop. Evening temperatures only in the 50's made it especially enjoyable.