

Nov. 22, 2012 - Smithsonian Air-Space Museum

I can think of, at least, a half dozen things that a private pilot or aviation aficionado might want to do, at least once, before they die. These include such things as going to the EAA Oshkosh Airventure, attending the Reno Air Races, getting to see the Blue Angels, or Thunderbirds perform, making an overwater flight to an exotic island, making a landing on a high terrain or mountain airstrip and touring an interesting aviation museum.

On Thanksgiving day I had the opportunity to go through the Air and Space museum at Dullas Airport near Washington, DC. I had visited the original Museum when it was located at the old Smithsonian castle at D.C.'s mall. However that was almost a half century ago and the exhibits were very limited back then. Today's version is spectacular with almost every type of aircraft displayed and era covered. With planes from the early 1900's through the actual Space Shuttle Discovery, in this enormous indoor venue you could easily spend an entire day. And this is something that I had a chance to do. I had to be at our Turkey Day dinner meal at 4 PM, which left me from 10 AM 'til 3 to walk in and around all of the airplanes and exhibits that were open for close up inspection. Being a holiday there were only a couple of hundred people venturing through the museum and there were absolutely no lines anywhere. I even got to see a couple of I-Max films when it came time to take a rest from all of that walking.

Although located right next to Dullas Airport, I didn't fly in for this visit. Way back in the '60's I was able to fly, first my Cessna Skyhawk and later my single Comanche, into Dullas. Those were the days when it had not yet become the busy international airport it is today, and when Washington DC itself was pretty much open to general aviation overflights and landings at our nation's capital aerodromes. Not so today, and even the most casual of mistakes will cost the offending pilot dearly in fines, license suspensions, restrictions, recurrent training, and even the possibility of being escorted by armed fighter jets. So, on this trip, my arrival was by private automobile and not by private aircraft.

It would be impossible to list all of the aircraft currently on exhibit. There are literally hundreds. But to name just a few, there is one of the Concorde 100 passenger SST jets, a Boeing 707 military fueller, the B-29 Stratofortres "Enola Gay", the plane which dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan, a S-70 Blackhawk which flew at 80,000 feet over Russia, as well as dozens of WW 1, WW 2, Korean and Vietnam war era fighting machines. There are planes from the early 1900's thru present day as well as a compilation of space vehicles from the 1950's thru to the recently decommissioned space shuttle Discovery. General aviation is well represented as well and includes everything from its very early days thru present, and even ultra-lights and LSA's. I was especially gratified in seeing the very first Lear Jet built, the Model 23, which was originally certified for single pilot operation. Back in the mid-eighties, I could have purchased a high time Model 23 for about \$350,000 and was actually considering it as a "divorce present" to myself. However after I discovered how much the maintenance and operating costs would have set me back, I decided on a Piper PA-39 Twin Comanche instead. This was a decision that I would never regret.



At the entrance to the Air Space Museum



An overview of just a small portion of the exhibits



The first Lear Jet, a Model 23, Serial #2



The Discovery Space Shuttle up close & personal