Dec. 7, 2012 - Punta Gorda, FL. Airport, the Skyview Cafe, and breakfast with the TSA

Flying south Florida in the winter can, sometimes be a mixed bag. While weather is generally clear and cool, there are some days when the winds can be exceptionally brisk. Occasionally morning fog will take until noon to burn off. And while the terrain is perfectly flat, there are some areas in the Everglades that are downright inhospitable.

Today's flight over to the west coast's Charlotte County airport was none of the above. Today's temperature's were going to reach 80 degrees and the wind was dead calm. My route of flight took me over some lush woodland punctuated with open fields of grazing cattle. The hour and 10 minute, 100 mile long flight brought me to the Skyview Cafe, which is noted for its "Crunchy French Toast" breakfast specialty.

Today's flight took me over lush green forestlands

When I taxied to the general aviation ramp I noticed a very large single engine bi-plane parked there. One of my I-phone apps allows me to put an aircraft's registration number in and find out the make and model of the aircraft, along with its current owner and address. I found out that this was a Russian Antonov AN-2, the largest bi-plane manufactured back in the 1940's with one engine, and that it could accommodate up to twelve passengers (although it was mainly used for agricultural work and carrying parachutists). This particular plane was built in 1986 and is currently owned by an Alaskan corporation. It was certainly a long way from home. A sneak peek inside showed it outfitted more like a motorhome with a working/eating table in the rear, and bedrolls and sleeping bags littering the messy floor area.

Russian Antonov AN-2 Bi-plane and me on ramp

I had breakfast (that crunchy french toast mentioned earlier) with Gary Zullo, a TSA (Transportation Safety Administration) officer, whom I had met on a previous visit. Gary has an unusual work schedule, which is geared around the coming and goings of the airports only scheduled commercial carrier, Allegiant Airways. This low cost regional airline flies directly from point to point, without a formal "hub" system. There are 11 destinations serviced from Punta Gorda, and they include such cities as Plattsburgh NY, Knoxville TN. Peoria IL, & Toledo OH, to name but a few of these major "tourist" spots?? Apparently they have found a niche in a very limited market of out of the way destinations. Anyway Gary is one of the "touchy-feely" TSA agents that provide for passenger safety on the two or 3 flights a day that leave out of Punta Gorda (in the Fort Myers area of Florida). On some days his schedule has him at the airport at 4 AM for a 6 AM departure. Today he started at 7 o'clock, but after the 9 AM flight to Greenville, SC (which departed just as I arrived), he has 3 hours "off the clock" time before he goes back on shift for the afternoon's arrival. Some days he will finish work at 10 or 11 PM.
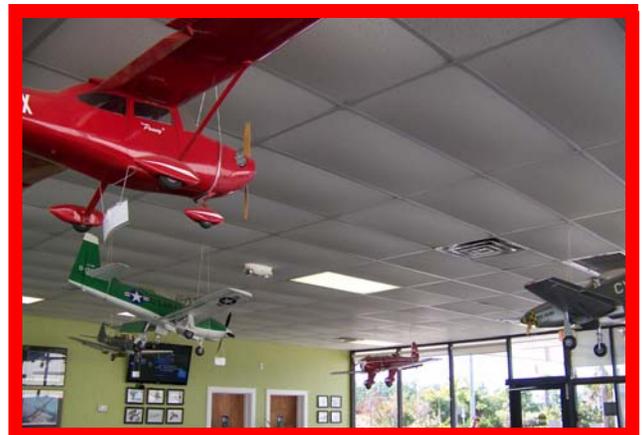

Ceiling airplane artwork at the Skyview Cafe

Flying is not just about traveling from one place to another. It is not only about the nearby airports with on site restaurants that I am able to visit, and it is not only about having the opportunity of seeing some beautiful scenery from a vantage point that the ground based traveler will never be able to experience. It is also about the people that I get to meet along the way. On almost every trip I get to meet someone interesting and am able to have a conversation in which I learn something new.

Today's breakfast with TSA Agent Zullo