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CLEAR THE RUNWAY 40 planes from a Minn. pilot training company make tour stop in Iowa Great Lakes

Wednesday, August 22, 2012

by Brandon Hurley -- Staff Writer



PHOTO BY BRANDON HURLEY Inflight Pilot Training employs six professional instructors and is stationed in Eden Prairie, Minn. The mission of Inflight Pilot Training "is to open the exciting world of aviation to those who have or would have never had the opportunity to enjoy flight, while improving the safety and proficiency of every airman we have the good fortune to educate." Founder and owner Ben McQuillan has been flying since 2000 as a senior in high school and has been a flight instructor since 2001. "It's one of the most rewarding things to see somebody learning something you taught them," he said about being an instructor. "Especially a complex skill like learning to fly. We go through a few months of training and when they go out and do it by themselves on a solo trip they come back with an ear to ear grin for about a week." [\[Order this photo\]](#)

Forty small airplanes emerged from overcast skies to land on the modest Spirit Lake Airport as part of the Flying Cloud Air Tour.

Ben McQuillan, his colleagues and students made the flight from Eden Prairie to Fairbault, Minn. to the Iowa Great Lakes on Saturday as part of their annual tour. It was the ninth year of the trip.

"I came up with the idea because, at the time I was a flight instructor," McQuillan said. "One of the things we see in this business, on the recreational side, pilots get their license and don't really do anything with it. It's kind of like spending \$10,000 on a boat and just letting it sit in the garage. They've got this new skill, new freedom and don't do anything. I was trying to show them neat places they can go and how accessible they can be within an hour of their home base."

The first Flying Cloud Air Tour, in 2004, saw witness to only eight planes and pilots, but in 2012, the tour has blossomed to welcome 40 pilots and planes. They have flown to locations such as Madeline Island in northern Wisconsin on Lake Superior, and Cable Union Airport in Wisconsin, East Gull Lake, Minn., Duluth International in Minn., Voyager Village Golf Course in Wisconsin, and the Warbird Museum at Granite Falls, Minn.



PHOTO BY BRANDON HURLEY

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"The whole idea was to get the pilots out there and get them using their privileges," McQuillan said. "I have a list of airports that I have visited over the years that I think would be a neat destination."

A lot of planning goes into the effort to land 40 planes to land on a smaller airport like the one in Spirit Lake. The 40 pilots were accompanied by nearly 30 additional passengers who came along for the ride.

"I started planning about six months ago, I slowly started to chip away," McQuillan said.

Detailed planning goes into each tour.

"The main challenge for us is safety -- it's our primary goal," he said. "We have some experienced pilots -- we have a retired B-52 Bomber pilot, 747 captains -- the bulk have had their license for 4 or 5 years, but some are new. With the route we fly, we have structured altitudes and staggered departure times."

McQuillan said some of the planes can only go 80 miles an hour while others can reach 220, which makes it important to have staggered departure times to keep separation in the air. The group of pilots met at 8 a.m. Saturday in Eden Prairie to review checkpoints and refueling procedures.

The Flying Cloud Air Tour organizer also coordinates with the local air traffic controllers so pilots can focus on the trip.

"It's stuff they all do on a daily basis, but when it's on a large scale like this you have to prepare more," he said. "It's kind of like preparing for a wedding with all the people. We make sure everybody is on the same page. It's very, very similar."

The pilots and their passengers departed Eden Prairie at 9 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 18 and made their way south. A majority of the trips in prior years went north from Minneapolis and into Wisconsin. McQuillan said this was finally a year where it worked out to head south.

Their first stop was Fairbault, Minn., for a tour of Rare Aircraft -- a premier aircraft restoration facility. They made their way to the Spirit Lake Airport for lunch at The Inn at Okoboji.

The planes arrived in the Iowa Great Lakes in increments from 11 a.m. -- 12:30 p.m. on Saturday. After landing on the runway, they were transported to The Inn at Okoboji for a hearty lunch and views of West Lake Okoboji. McQuillan said the Iowa Great Lakes had been on his list of destinations for at least 5-6 years.

"I've visited the Spirit Lake Airport many times, I knew it was a hot spot for vacations," he said. "We try to tie in our stops with other locations. It's not necessarily an airport that has to be significant per say, there can be a few nice things nearby as well."

While the tour is free of charge, with the exception of money for fuel, plane rental if needed and money for the meal at The Inn, McQuillan said the lack of a budget makes it hard to plan out any other events during the stops.

"One tough part is transportation. While we'd like to experience more, we don't really have a budget for a bus to get us around," he said. "We just had lunch and it is an

opportunity for the other pilots to get to know each other."

After lunch and some mingling, the pilots got back into their planes and made the early afternoon return flight to Eden Prairie.

In all, it's a fun atmosphere for the pilots to be a part of each year.

"The most entertaining thing for me is seeing that big group of pilots and planes all in the same place," McQuillan said. "Also, the places we've been. The Duluth area -- from the air its incredibly gorgeous, it's just fantastic. When we went to Breezy Point we had a flower bag drop. We painted a target on the ground. It's a lot of fun."

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