

# Spotlight – Tavares, Florida

## FLYING & FUN IN AMERICA'S SEAPLANE CITY

by Matt Elia

Flying a seaplane is the ultimate experience for many pilots. The adventure of "flying with floats" offers a unique twist on a passion-driven vocation or hobby. When four college engineering students from an upstate New York school were considering fun things to do over their winter break, flying a seaplane topped their list.

At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York, Alessandro, Kirk, Brian and Patrick are quickly approaching graduation. After graduation Alessandro will be off to work at Boeing, Kirk will be on his way to work for Textron Aviation (Cessna) and Brian and Patrick will undoubtedly be working in the aviation industry as well.

As members of the school's flying club and the competitive flight team, the four relax from their aeronautical and computer engineering studies by spending time flying around the skies of upstate New York. After school it will be off to full time aviation-related jobs and flying will continue to be a hobby for the four RPI Flying Club members. For these four, aviation is more than a hobby or vocation though, it really is a passion.

The group knew they wanted to do something fun over winter break and flying was the natural answer. Alessandro led the research, remember they are experts in the field, and they narrowed down their search to a couple places where they could spend some time learning to fly seaplanes and enjoy some warm Florida weather.

As the Aviation Manager for America's Seaplane City, Tavares, Florida, I lobbied to get the group to visit Tavares when Alessandro reached out to me with some questions. I had previously gotten to know the group through the National Intercollegiate Flying Association (NIFA). The RPI flight team is a member of NIFA Region VII where I have served as a competition judge since being a competitor while I



*RPI college students traveled to Tavares to do their seaplane training  
Left to Right: Kirk, Alessandro, Patrick and Brian*

was in college years ago. As it turns out, I didn't have to do much convincing once the group realized everything Tavares and Jones Brothers (our resident seaplane operator) had to offer. I was delighted to hear from Alessandro that the group decided to come and visit Tavares to do their seaplane training.

A city of about 15,000, Tavares sits on the western side of Lake Dora. Tavares is known as America's Seaplane City following a rebranding effort which has seen the city through growth and development over recent years. Downtown Tavares is a lively place, highlighted by a variety of eateries. Tavares serves as the county seat for Lake County, a fitting place for seaplanes... In addition to the county campus, shops and restaurants, Tavares offers visitors the opportunity to ride the final remaining wood-fired steam locomotive in the country, the Orange Blossom Cannonball!

The heart of the city is Wooton Park, an inviting, family and pet friendly park which sits between Lake Dora and Ruby Street. The park includes a wonderful

playground, an aviation-themed splash park for kids, a variety of gazebos and pavilions available for rental, event pad space, the cleanest public restrooms you'll find in a park anywhere, a variety of piers and docks for fishing, boating and enjoy enjoying the sun, an 85-slip boat marina and of course, a seaplane base!

Tavares is known locally for the large scale events which takeover Wooton Park and in some cases the downtown, with an aim towards community involvement. Regardless of the nature of the event, seaplanes always play a role. During the large community Christmas event, Santa arrives by seaplane, during the SEA-PLANE-A-PALOOZA Weekend pilots partake in a watermelon drop competition and during the various boat regattas, races and shows, you'll find seaplanes coming and going from the base.

There are a lot of airports out there, not to mention quite a few places to safely operate a seaplane. But the Tavares Seaplane Base (FA1) has all the amenities of an airport and offers visiting pilots the

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ability to splash into Lake Dora, taxi up our seaplane ramp, park on our apron and suddenly be smack-dab in the middle of a bustling downtown. Obviously, FAI holds a big advantage versus landing at an airport and having to take a shuttle bus or taxi into the downtown... At FAI pilots can quickly transition from flying to sitting in an upscale restaurant enjoying specular food very quickly.

The community truly takes pride in the moniker, America's Seaplane City, a redesign of the city flag was completed last year. The sharp, new-look city flags are bright blue and feature a seaplane splashing in for a landing. Last fall, Tavares raised the first new city flag in front of the Prop Shop at the seaplane base. The city and community take pride in the seaplane theme and it really shows when visitors stop by...

On a Saturday in mid January, the group arrived at the Orlando International Airport. Each of the group members arrived on a separate flight from their own hometown. The group had dinner then made the forty-five minute drive up to Tavares together. Upon pulling into town they were immediately surprised by the bustling city.

The waterfront entertainment district was in full swing that evening and the group was excited to join in the lively



*A Piper Cub taking off during a seaplane fly-in in Tavares, Florida  
America's Seaplane City*

atmosphere of Tavares. Krik Bittner, who earned his seaplane pilot license while in Tavares summarized the thoughts of the group, "I was very surprised how much is here in Tavares. Typically you think of big cities and the coasts (of Florida), when we pulled into town I was very surprised!"

During the next four days the group was able to accomplish everything without ever having to drive their rental car. Jones Brothers, based at the Tavares

Seaplane Base, offers prospective seaplane pilots a package deal for \$2,495 which includes five hours of flight time, ground training, the required seaplane pilot "check ride" with a flight examiner, two night stay in the close-by Key West Resort and breakfast at Buster Tubbs restaurant.

The unwritten value of this particular package deal is that all of these pieces are located within one block of each other. Patrick captured this thought well, "It was really nice to wake up with the sun rising over the lake, then be able to walk across the street and the airplane is right there." The group could sleep, fly and eat all without having to travel

anywhere! What more could any aviation enthusiast ask for?

The atmosphere and layout help to add an immeasurable value to the package that Jones Brothers offers, in addition to their dynamic flight training. Alessandro described it best, "The entire community is very welcoming. Our trip was definitely worth it. Rob (the owner of Jones Brothers) is a great guy and we certainly got more from him than a seaplane rating."

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During their visit the group of RPI Flying Club members visited a variety of restaurants, learned to fly seaplanes and had an incredible experience, all without every having to leave downtown Tavares. Krik and Alessandro both earned their seaplane pilot rating, while Patrick and Brian, who are both student pilots, were able to take a flight lesson in the seaplane with Rob while they were in town.

One of the main drivers that helped the group to pick the training package from Jones Brothers is that Rob and his crew offer flight training in a Cessna 185, a four seat aircraft. Many other seaplane flight school operators operate two seat aircraft, which do not “back seaters” who can watch their friends’ (or family members’) flight lessons. Both Patrick and Brian were able to ride in the backseat during their friends’ lessons to enjoy more time in the air; this was a big benefit for

the quartet from RPI. Brian, still early in his flight training made his first landing on the flight controls (of any airplane) in a seaplane under Rob’s tutelage, “I really enjoyed flying a seaplane,” Brian explained, mentioning that the experience will help motivate him to continue to pursue his pilot license.

After spending Saturday through Wednesday in Tavares, the RPI Flying Club members were off to travel north and return to RPI in time for the start of their final semester of college the following Monday. The group greatly enjoyed their visit and serve as an excellent example of the economic benefit for Tavares derived from the city’s brand as America’s Seaplane City.

Prior to their departing, I caught up with the group to get a picture and get some feedback, two things were clear. First, the group would never have come to

Tavares if not for us being America’s Seaplane City and second, the entire group was extremely glad they did come, they all enjoyed their time in Tavares and look forward to splashing back in on Lake Dora sometime in the future.

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*Matthew Elia is the Aviation Manager for Tavares, Florida. A seaplane pilot and flight instructor himself, Matt enjoys flying and shares his passion on [www.ReviewBeforeFlight.com](http://www.ReviewBeforeFlight.com). Prior to joining the Tavares team last fall, Matt worked in airport management in Massachusetts and taught aviation management courses at two New England colleges.*




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