

Southern Seaplane Airport

The Little Airport that Could By Sallie Caddell

On the west bank of the Mississippi River lays Belle Chasse, Louisiana, a small town situated approximately 10 miles from the Greater New Orleans Metropolitan area. Like the newly revitalized city, a lesser-known airport—Southern Seaplane Airport (65LA)—is also recovering from the storm, promising to emerge as a competitor in the South's aviation community with its close proximity to the Big Easy.

"Many people in the aviation community are unaware of our private facility on the south side of the city. They know of the city's two airports—the International airport (Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport) that handles commercial traffic and Lakefront Airport that handles light jets and corporate traffic—but they don't know of our facility here on the west bank that we've built ourselves," explains owner Lyle Panepinto, who only recently purchased the family-owned company from his brother and father.

65LA is the third civilian airport in the city, offering a 3,200-foot by 40-foot wide asphalt strip and waterway capable of handling local traffic. Though 65LA is private, the airport is open to the public and is perfect for those individuals who want to avoid the big airports in the city. Also available at 65LA are hangars, a concrete apron and Avgas fuel. "We are still recovering from Katrina and do not have a terminal building open. Our major T-hangar had two and a half feet of water through it after the storm and we've only recently put it back together!" explains Panepinto.



At home at 65LA is Southern Seaplane, Inc., the largest full-scale seaplane operation in the entire gulf south, offering executive charters, guided fishing trips to the Louisiana barrier islands, a wide variety of air tours, transportation to oil facilities and aerial photography.

In the air charter tourist business since 1954, Southern Seaplane operates a large fleet of aircraft that will comfortably accommodate small and large groups. "Sixty percent of our customers are oil field related; we take the other 40 percent to the barrier islands for fishing excursions or we take customers to their houseboats or yachts during the summer. We are also helping in New Orleans's tourism industry, but Katrina definitely put a damper on that. The tourists are coming back, though; just last Friday we had a 40-passenger group," says Panepinto.

In addition to their efforts in the charter business, another one of Southern Seaplane's specialties in the seaplane industry is that they rebuild Cessna 180s and 185s. Southern Seaplane has an experienced staff of licensed mechanics available to handle all maintenance needs. From maintenance on single-engine Cessnas to the light twin engine aircraft, Southern Seaplane offers a wide variety of services such as annual inspections, structural repairs and engine or prop conversions. They specialize in float maintenance and repairs, and the parts department continues to service the aviation industry worldwide. "Not only will we train you in your airplane, but we'll maintain it for you as well," adds Panepinto.

"As for the future, our recovery efforts are well underway and we're looking to enhance the property for people flying in and out of Southern Seaplane Airport. But basically we want pilots and the General Aviation community to know we have a great facility in a great location!" says Panepinto ■

For more information, visit www.southernseaplane.com or call 504-394-5633.