

AVSIM Commercial Scenery Review

The RAF Collection



Product Information

Publishers: [Scotflight](#)

Description: Add-on scenery: RAF Lossiemouth, RAF Leuchars & RAF Kinloss.

Download Size:
32.1 MB

Format:
Download

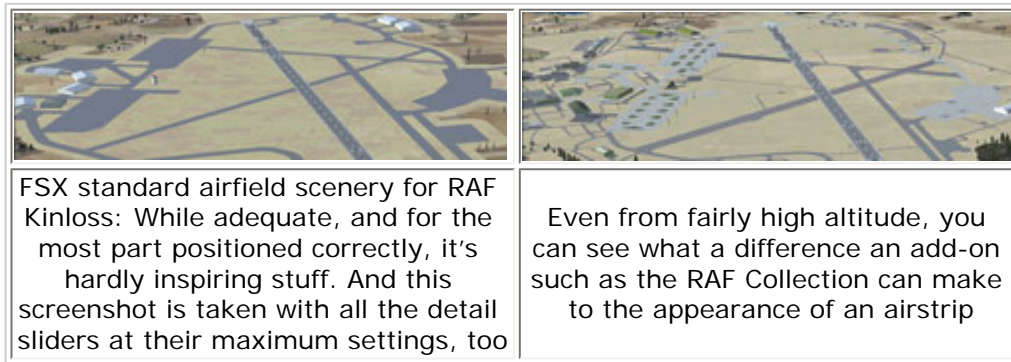
Simulation Type:
FS9 and FSX

Reviewed by: [Alan Bradbury](#) AVSIM Staff Reviewer - February 16, 2009

All your bases belong to us?

One of the nicest things about Microsoft's Flight Simulator, is the fact that you can pretty much fly whatever you want, to wherever you want. Even so, to pick on Microsoft's famous marketing slogan 'Where do you want to go today?' if where you want to go today happens to be a military airbase; you're in for a bit of a scenic disappointment when you get there in FS.

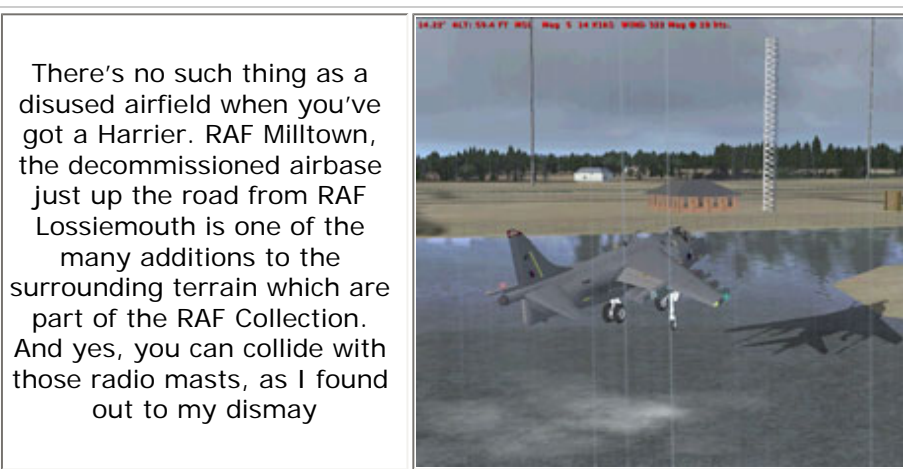
While it's true that most military airbases are present in Flight Simulator, in spite of their size and importance, they are far less likely to feature anything other than generic hangars and runways, as opposed to the rich detail their large civilian counterparts often enjoy.



This is not really a failing on Microsoft's part, after all, Flight Simulator is not a military simulator and it has always been something of a sandbox to which you can add the things that matter to you personally as far as scenery and aircraft go. But it has to be said that there are far more civilian additions available than there are military ones. So if flying fast jets and large military transport aircraft is your thing, it's tempting to feel a little hard done by on the scenery front. This is where companies such as Scotflight come to the rescue with additions such as their RAF Collection.

As its name suggests, developer Scotflight concentrates on scenery for Scotland, which is good news if you are looking for UK military airbases to use in FS, because Scotland is home to some of the most famous and busiest ones to be found in the UK, and this is exactly what you get in the RAF Collection.

Specifically, the three real-world Royal Air Force stations replicated in the RAF Collection are: RAF Kinloss, RAF Leuchars and RAF Lossiemouth (actually there is a fourth disused airbase in this add-on too - RAF Milltown, which was a decoy 'Q' airfield used to keep the Germans away from Lossiemouth - but it is portrayed in its current disused state in this scenery, so doesn't really count.) Although if you are feeling adventurous, you could try to land there, I know I did.



A tricky proposition...

What Scotflight have done here is not to be underestimated. We all know that with one of the many scenery design utilities available to create scenery for FS, and a quick scan of Google Earth, even the most ham fisted non-programming types among us could probably have a bash at making some scenery. However, the difficulty comes not only in the time and effort required to do so, but also in finding the necessary ground-level photographic references required to add all the convincing detail that you don't see on Google Earth's top down views.

This is more of a problem than it might at first appear, because when it comes to getting decent pictorial reference of this nature, you can't exactly wander freely around most military establishments, snapping away with your camera. Well, not unless you want a free flight to Guantanamo Bay, which is what you may get if you are spotted doing so.

You might also have noticed that Google Earth is often subject to censorship of the Photoshop variety when it comes to showing where all the aircraft and equipment is parked on military bases, for somewhat understandable, if not frustrating reasons as far as scenery design goes.

Notwithstanding the potential difficulties of modeling military locations courtesy of these security stumbling blocks, Scotflight have come up with something which I suspect fans of RAF operations in FS are going to be particularly pleased with, as we shall see.

When viewing the same location in Google Earth, it's really quite hard to spot any significant differences on Scotflight's scenery (try it for yourself). This alone must have taken quite a while to do and is impressive enough, but making accurate scenery in this way can present more problems than a simple comparison like that would seem to suggest



First a bit about the real thing...

Kinloss, Leuchars and Lossiemouth have a rich history in UK aviation and are amongst the busiest stations the RAF operates. With a rich variety of terrain nearby, they are ideal places to train combat aircrews, especially in challenging low-level fast jet operations and equally challenging precision navigation over water. Needless to say, that also means they're a great choice if you want to simulate such things in FS too.

RAF Kinloss has been in existence since 1938, when it was a hastily-constructed training station for aircrews preparing for service in WW2. Initially, it was thought that placing an airbase in the far north of Scotland would keep it away from visits by prying German aircraft, which were already flying reconnaissance flights over the UK even before WW2 began. But of course when the Luftwaffe based aircraft in Norway, Kinloss was easily in range of German bombers and reconnaissance aircraft via a straight flight across the North Sea.

These prying Luftwaffe missions are echoed in the role of RAF Kinloss today, in that it provides a base for the RAF's airborne surveillance Nimrods of 120, 42 and 201 Squadrons, which conduct both AWACs and ASW operations. Kinloss is also home to the UK's Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre, and as a result, is home to the RAF's yellow-painted Sea King Search and Rescue helicopters and the RAF's Mountain Rescue Service too.

Kinloss - like a lot of other RAF stations - is also seeing more and more of the RAF's shiny new Typhoon jet fighters, which are gradually replacing older types and now frequently show up for operational tests and exercises. This means that there's a wealth of mission opportunities you could simulate in FS from Kinloss.

RAF Leuchars is one of the oldest military airfields in the world, officially it's been there since 1916, but there was a Royal Engineers balloon squadron based at the site as early as 1911. Up until 1920, it was actually a Royal Naval Air

Squadron training base until the RAF took it on charge in that year. Like many airbases in the UK, war was the catalyst for its construction, and it was the location at which many WW1 aircrews learned their trade.

In 1938 it became home to operational, rather than training squadrons, and Leuchars has the distinction of being the place from which the first British aircraft to engage in combat during WW2 departed, when a Lockheed Hudson from 224 Squadron attacked a Luftwaffe Dornier 18 over the North Sea on the second day of the war.

The tradition of being at the leading edge of the technology and training required for war has been maintained to the present day at Leuchars. Post-WW2, the base saw early jets such as the Meteor, Vampire, Javelin and Hunter stationed there. Later, as the Cold War simmered away with its ever present nuclear threat during the 60s and 70s, daily sorties to intercept Soviet bombers on probing missions to test the UK's defenses were regularly flown from Leuchars, first with BAC Lightning fighters, and later with F4 Phantoms.

If you've ever seen a grainy photograph of a Soviet Tu-95 Bomber taken during the Cold War, there's a good chance it was taken from an aircraft based at Leuchars. This is a scenario which the RAF has recently reprised too, following the resurgence of the Russian Air Force and the resumption of sorties over the North Sea.

Currently, 111 and 43 squadrons are based at Leuchars, both flying Tornado fighter variants, with which they are tasked to defend Britain's shores by being kept at ten-minute readiness, so again, a number of potential FS mission scenarios which Leuchars scenery might provide the springboard for come to mind.

RAF Lossiemouth is another airbase born in preparation for war, having also been constructed in 1938. A huge variety of aircraft and military units have been stationed at Lossiemouth over the years, largely as a result of the good weather it frequently enjoys. Most notably, 617 Squadron's Avro Lancasters (a.k.a. The Dambusters), found a home there during WW2 and indeed conducted raids on German battleships from the base prior to their famous dam-busting raid. Lossiemouth has also seen use by the Fleet Air Arm too, which conducted a good deal of its carrier pilot training from this station's runways.

These days Lossiemouth is still as busy as ever, with a total of five squadrons having aircraft based there, these being XV (R), 12, 14, and 617 Squadrons, all equipped with the GR4 Tornado variant. Additionally, the RAF also bases 202 Squadron's Sea King SAR helicopters at Lossiemouth.

Interestingly for FS users, XV(R) Squadron is an operational conversion unit, and more importantly, the largest fast jet squadron in the RAF, which is also responsible for the RAF's Tornado display team. So if you are looking for somewhere to place a nice busy AFCAD AI traffic file in FS, or fancy employing some of the ATC features to be found in FSX, you don't need to look any further.

If this little history lesson has piqued your interest, the PR friendly, web-savvy Royal Air Force of modern times has a website for each of its stations, so you can find out more about any particular one by visiting the Ministry of Defence's main link to the [RAF](#) and by using the search box that you'll find at the top right of that page. Useful if you want to simulate missions accurately.

It's no small feat to try and model three major RAF bases for FS, but certainly a worthy subject considering the wealth of simulation opportunities it affords. So, let's look at Scotflight's efforts to emulate all this stuff in our favorite simulator...

The FS versions...

Scotflight's RAF Collection arrives as a 32.1 Mb zipped download from their [website](#) where it can be purchased either with Paypal or a Credit/Debit card, this is accompanied by a serial number to allow installation. Decompressing the download takes it up to 48.5 Mb in size, which gives you an early indication of quite some detail in store, although clearly not excessively so.

At a modest 14.99 (UK Sterling), which at the time of writing equates to 20.68 US Dollars, it won't exactly break the bank, but initial value aside, it's pleasing to note that you get both the FSX and FS2004 versions included. These differ only very slightly in content. So, if like a lot of people, you run both versions of FS, you'll get a little bit more value out of this package and they are both genuinely tailored versions, each with their own installation exe file.

There are plenty of reasons why people whose interests lie outside the realms of the RAF might want this scenery too; a quick search of the 'net will find you pictures of a bewildering number of visiting foreign military aircraft at the RAF stations featured in this scenery set. They're frequently the locations for quite large air shows too, so it's not unusual to find anything from Mil-24 Hind attack helicopters to B-52s and F-15s on the ramp at these places. Which means you can feel free to get artistic when adding your own traffic embellishments.

There's more to RAF airbases than RAF aircraft. This B-52H which you'll find on the ramp at Lossiemouth in Scotflight's scenery is certainly not out of place. Incidentally, if you look closely, you can see one of the few visible concessions to faster frame rates on this USAF 917th Bomb Wing aircraft, in that the 'BD' unit lettering for this texture does double duty for both sides of the aircraft and is therefore reversed on this side of the tail.



Both versions of the RAF Collection contain scenery for the three aforementioned RAF stations and both include configurable static aircraft scenery too, which does actually include one or two of the more exotic visitors these places see from time to time. This static aircraft scenery can be completely removed if you so wish, allowing you to replace it with your own moving traffic via an AFCAD file (check out the Avsim file library for a few of these if you don't want to create your own), or you could even do it with something like FS Traffic if you fancy getting creative in the circuit. Even so, it's probably worth bearing in mind that Lossiemouth in particular is a very busy place, so beware of bogging your favorite sim down with too much activity if your system is modestly endowed with processing power. Although, this is actually one area where this scenery scores highly as it runs very smoothly despite the notable complexity of these places, especially Lossiemouth.

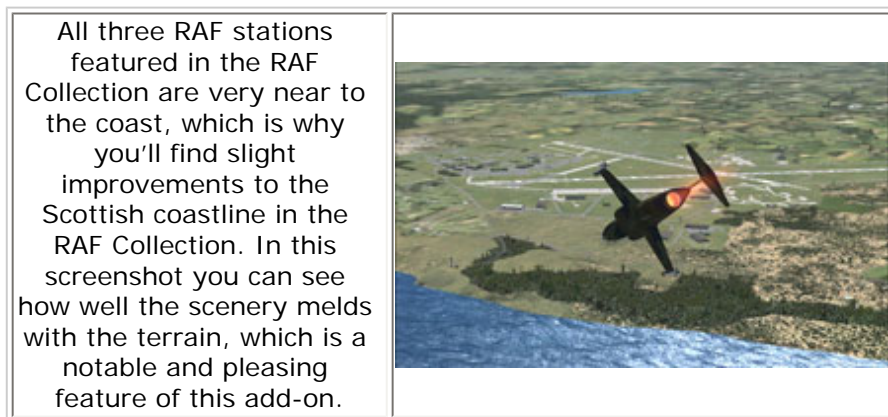
The scenery for the three bases in the package is accompanied by several useful navigational landmarks in the surrounding terrain too. You'll find quite a few showing up. Among them are Skerries Lighthouse near Lossiemouth, St. Andrews golf course, the wind turbine farms near Moray - which are animated - as well as nearby forests and prominent buildings, and of course, that disused airbase near Lossiemouth.

For fans of fast jet operations, such scenic additions are more than mere eye candy. They are a major plus point since they are often used as navigational turn points for fighter and bomber pilots when training low level time-over-target routes from these bases. Doing this, incidentally, is something that is great fun in FS, with your aircraft's stopwatch taking on a whole new level of challenging use. Scenic tweaks such as these also present hazards to low level flights too

by the way, so watch out.

The same, but different...

Where the FSX and FS2004 versions in this package differ, is in an enhancement to the Scottish coastline. You'll find coastal enhancements in both versions for the most part, however a tweak to the coast near Leuchars is only in the FSX incarnation; this means that apart from a miniscule difference in terrain tweaking, the scenery for the former version of FS is certainly not a poor relation to its FSX sibling.



The existence of two dedicated versions is probably a reflection of the fact that the scenery has been available for quite some time, and that's a good thing, because both versions continue to evolve and improve as things change in order to accurately reflect their real-world counterparts. It's good to see that Scotflight is happy to listen to suggestions for improvements and updates to things on the scenery too, should the real bases change in any way.

You can make your views and suggestions known regarding this via the forum on Scotflight's website, and the ability to do so is always an encouraging sign from any developer. The good news continues because purchasers of this scenery can upgrade to the latest versions at no cost, so you don't have to live in the past where these places are concerned if you've had this scenery a while.

Installation...

Installing the RAF Collection looks like a deceptively easy affair, although - a note of caution here - it's perhaps not always quite as simple as it might appear. The scenery does come with an installer exe for each sim version, but it can potentially fail to find FSX on your hard drive under certain circumstances, even when FSX is in the default location on a C Drive. Ordinarily, it's a simple double-click on the installer and away you go, but bear in mind that is not always the case.

On occasions where the installer does not detect FSX, it instead installs the scenery to a Scotflight folder which it creates in the Programs folder on your C Drive, if you don't manually redirect it to the correct location. Fear not however, if and when the installer does this, and you miss the fact that it has done so, it simply means you'll have to manually drag the files into your FSX add-on scenery folder and enable them.

While this isn't a particularly complex operation and there is a 'read me' file which offers assistance on how to do this, if

you weren't paying attention during the install and missed the fact that it didn't automatically find the correct FSX folder, this will necessitate a slightly puzzled search as to where the files have located themselves following your install. Having read this review though, you'll not be puzzled at all and will ensure you pick the right install path!

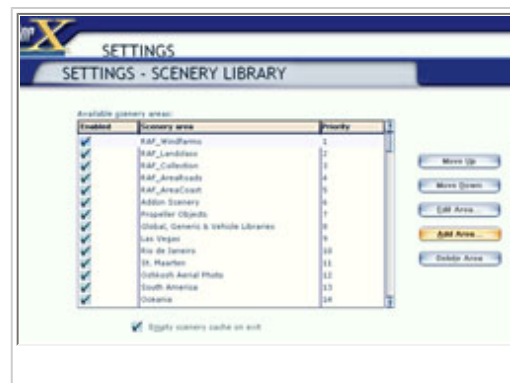
Appearances can be deceptive: This is the screen which follows installation of the RAF Collection. All appears well, but in this case the add-on still had to be manually dragged from a location on the C drive where it installed. Note that the 'Show Readme' option you can see ticked in this picture does not open the more useful read me file you'll find in that folder on your C drive, but the one which resides in the install folder - which doesn't mention this issue - so pay attention during the installation process and make sure you choose the correct install path to FS, or you'll have to drag the files into the correct folder yourself.



In fairness, I don't think responsibility for this minor tribulation can be laid at Scotflight's door, rather, I suspect it has something to do with the wacky file structure and installation issues that FSX occasionally suffers following changes from the latest patch and the FSX Acceleration add-on have imbued. A situation of which many people who've had occasion to reinstall FSX recently, might be painfully aware.

Despite this not really being Scotflight's fault, I think it would be helpful if they modified the zip download file for this scenery so that it places the helpful post-install read me file in the initial folder you get when you unzip the download, and I hope they'll consider doing this for the benefit of less computer-savvy FS users.

I should point out that I did not experience this problem when installing the scenery into FS2004 by the way, the install exe found the earlier version of FS straight away – I guess that's progress for you! So, minor glitches aside, installation is reasonably painless and easily remedied should you experience this small hiccup in the FSX install process which I've pointed out here.



Updating the FSX scenery library after having dragged the files from the newly created Scotflight folder C drive, into the FSX scenery folder

What you see is what you get...

Needless to say, where scenery add-ons are concerned, what most people are interested in is how much they differ from the default stuff that they've already got. And the answer is, a lot.

Being such sprawling bases, I thought it was a good opportunity to fire up a chopper and have a low level scout around, so that's what I did. Naturally, being military bases, I thought it would be uncouth to fly around them in a civilian helicopter, so it was out with my British Army Gazelle for the inspection tour of duty.

I should point out that the Gazelle you see in some of the screenshots is a payware add-on from First Class Simulations and not part of this package. But if you feel the need to fly one yourself, there's an equally serviceable freeware Gazelle to be found in the Avsim file library at no cost whatsoever, where incidentally, you can also find the RAF Harrier you see in some of the other screenshots.

You'll also see Alphasim's payware F-104 Starfighter cropping up in some screenshots too, which, while hardly appropriate for an RAF base, was certainly appropriate as a means of testing how fast the textures loaded in FS by the simple expedient of thundering across the bases at 750 knots to see if I could get the textures to glitch on loading, or make the frame rates struggle. They didn't, and I was impressed.

Here we are buzzing the gatehouse, and you can see that details such as the Tornado gate guardian, visible just inside the perimeter, have not been forgotten. Beyond the gate, you can make out the sports fields in front of the trees, which are illuminated at night, and look most convincing when they are.



On the subject of add-on aircraft suitable for operating from these bases, Scotflight's scenery does feature a good many well thought out low-poly static aircraft which you can see in the screenshots. But you're going to want some suitable aircraft you can drive for yourself too, because flyable add-on aircraft are not part of this package. The developers helpfully point out some links on their website where flyable add-on RAF aircraft for FS2004 and FSX can be found, but of course you don't need those links do you? You already know the best website for freebie FS aircraft, because you're on it right now.

Anyway, it's time to let some pictures do the talking so you can judge for yourself whether Scotflight's add-on meets with your approval. First up, let's check out those static aircraft and some of the building details...



There's no shortage of parked aircraft to be found at these three RAF stations, all of which can be removed should you wish to add your own.

Here a line up of Tornado interceptors sit on the ramp accompanied by miscellaneous support equipment. Behind them you can see the characteristic grim colors of typical M.O.D. buildings - with one or two minor exceptions that you'd really need to be obsessed to spot, these buildings are pretty much exactly as they appear at the real places.



More esoteric static aircraft can be found, including this UH-60, which, like a lot of aircraft from the inventories of foreign military forces, are certainly no strangers to these bases.



Being based in large numbers at RAF Kinloss, the familiar shape of the Nimrod is much in evidence around Scotflight's rendition of their home base. Like all the other static aircraft to be found in this add-on, they are a good compromise between accuracy and low polygon modeling, keeping the visuals sweet and the frame rates similarly so. Buildings are likewise intelligently executed in their construction and detailing too.



Grob Tutors adorn the scenery at Leuchars, where they are used by the RAF's University Air Squadrons and the Air Experience Flight for ab-initio training, as well as for giving Air Cadets a taste of flying. The real things are unusual in that they are actually privately owned by VT Aerospace, which the RAF contracts out to, yet they wear RAF markings – a quirky fact for trivia fans there.

Spot the difference...

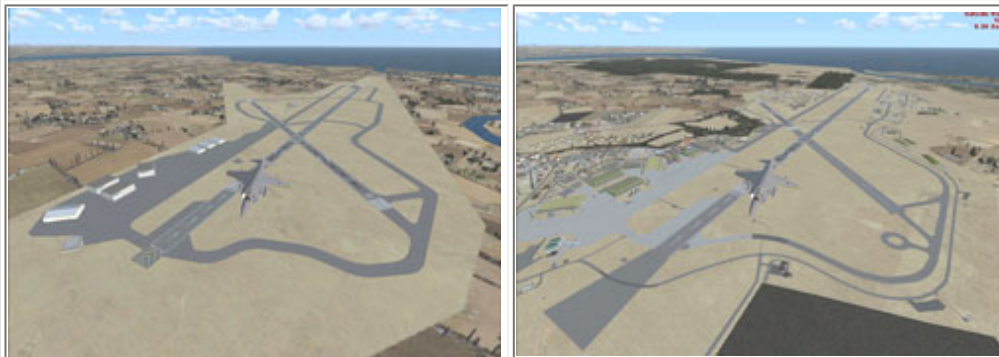
Next up, a comparison between the default scenery with the detail levels turned all the way up, and the same locations with Scotflight's RAF Collection installed. You'll probably spot one improvement straight away from these screenshots;

this being the subtle way the scenery blends into the default surroundings. This is sometimes overlooked in scenic additions for FS, but that's not the case here.

There's nothing worse than scenic embellishments with the jarring appearance of having been unsympathetically dropped into the terrain, leaving obvious and unrealistic edge lines where the default scenery tiles continue. A seemingly simple thing like the thoughtful way in which Scotflight's scenery blends in with the default surroundings is really a hallmark of how this add-on has been created, and I think you'll agree looking at these screenshots, that an excellent job has been made of getting things to fit in unobtrusively.



Above you can see Scotflight's RAF Kinloss in winter, with the FSX default RAF Kinloss below it for comparison. Even at the distance these screenshots were taken, it's apparent how much more realistically Scotflight's efforts blend into the surrounding default terrain, and how much more detail is present following the installation of this enhancement



RAF Leuchars courtesy of Scotflight pictured above, also in wintertime, with the standard FSX fare pictured below it. The difference in detail even at this distance is apparent, with stuff like the tapered flare path, additional taxiways and sprawling ancillary buildings quite visible. The way Scotflight's scenery blends into the terrain more convincingly than the standard FSX rendition is again very apparent



RAF Lossiemouth from Scotflight's RAF Collection above, again in winter, with the standard FSX incarnation pictured below it. The comparison shows not only the level of detail on offer, but, once more, the far more convincing way it sits in the default terrain. Even from the distance at which this screenshot is taken, it's apparent that the ramp is busy in the Scotflight scenery, whereas the FSX default rendition does little to convey the fact that this is the RAF's busiest fast jet base

Intelligent decisions on how best to portray such busy places without compromising either frame rates or a sense of realism abound in this scenery. After all, nobody wants FS to stand for Flight Slideshow, especially when at low level in a fast jet. It's very easy to overlook such points in favor of more obvious 'wow factor' features when it comes to FS addons. But like most things of quality, this scenery lets you simply enjoy it without feeling the need to shout about things with unnecessary detail which would merely slow things down. Here's some more evidence of that ethos with a few more screenshots...



What is not immediately obvious about the above shot, is that this F-104 is traveling at 755 knots across the airfield, and the scenery is not proving of any detriment to the frame rates, despite the fact that you can see quite a lot of scenic detail whizzing by in the background

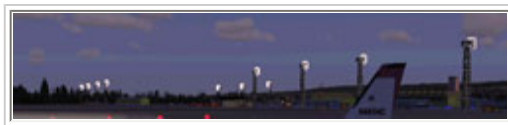


Items like this rotating radar installation are animated, but eye candy such as that is kept to a minimum in favor of performance



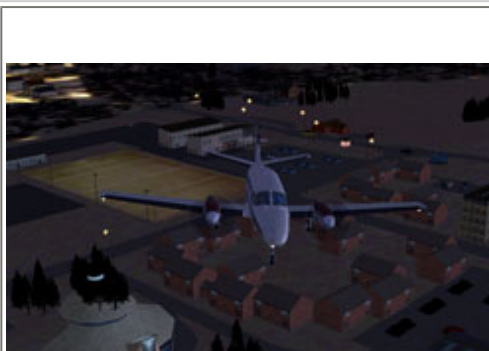
Another distance shot, this time in summer, showing that regardless of the seasonal textures in use, the RAF Collection blends effortlessly into the surrounding terrain. I'll take this level of smooth scenery integration over unnecessary polygon detail any day of the week

Throwing some light on a minor issue...



Of course no scenery is complete without night lighting, and the RAF Collection is no exception. However, this is perhaps the one area where I think things could be improved a bit. For me, the night texturing is a little on the dim side, even bearing in mind the fact that these are military bases. And while there are plenty of custom lighting gantries and towers dotted about the place, they appear to be making very little impression on the surroundings.

Full night lighting is a feature of all the bases in this scenery, although don't expect it to rival the glowing scenes you find at civilian airports. Notwithstanding the secretive military status of these places, frankly, it needs to be improved a bit



I've stayed on several major RAF airbases overnight, and in my experience they are not the dimly-lit affairs the RAF Collection would have you believe. In fact, when you get into the residential quarters of most RAF bases, were it not for the fact that you often find an antique Bofors gun or something of that nature on the street corners, you'd think you were on a normal British residential street. Not so on the RAF Collection's incarnation. Given that these bases have to operate 24 hours a day in most cases, it seems a stretch to think RAF personnel would be fumbling about with torches on the flight lines when readying aircraft that are a vital part of the nation's defenses.

Unfortunately, I couldn't get permission from the Ministry of Defence to reproduce a picture of RAF Kinloss at night, which would have illustrated what I mean about the night lighting, but I will include this [link](#) to that picture, which you can check out to see what I am driving at. Compare it to the dimly-lit screenshot above.

I certainly don't think this issue with the night textures is a deal-breaker, given the considerable number of plus points this scenery has in its favor, but it could really do with some attention in my opinion to better reflect reality. The good news is that given Scotflight's willingness to tweak things based on feedback, it will probably get such a tweak if they read this review.

The smart approach...

It should be obvious from these screenshots and my comments that what we have from Scotflight is not mere "wow factor" eye candy, but something much more pragmatic and ultimately, far more useful. That is not to say it doesn't look good, because you can see from the screenshots that it does, but this is scenery designed with the intention of being

practical while looking only as good as it needs to be. Eschewing frivolous concessions to screenshot eye candy that you'd never see when using the thing for real.

Unnecessary detail is, of course, great for still screenshots on a box, but when it comes to having FS run smoothly, this is the kind of scenery I like. If you want to get some hours in at some of the RAF's busiest bases, I suspect you will like it too.

Conclusion

To briefly summarize: The trademark hardened aircraft shelters and hangars look like their real-world counterparts; the quirky landmarks you find on these stations are all present and correct, as are all the quarters and myriad service buildings; the taxiways and hard standings are all bang in the correct positions; the runways appear just as they do on the real thing, even down to the colors of the tarmac; the gate guardian aircraft are all there; the seasonal colors are all well chosen; the night lighting is there, and in some instances quite good, with things like the football fields on the bases being illuminated, but it could do with a tweak to the brightness.

The radio frequencies for the navigation aids and ATC are all spot on; the animations of certain scenery elements such as the radar arrays and nearby wind turbines are there, but are kept to a sensible minimum; the static scenery aircraft are present in abundance, but don't really slow the frame rates down and can be removed if you so choose.

This is a solid enhancement for FSX and FS2004; it does exactly what it says on the tin and with considerable élan too. There may be prettier sceneries with more polygons – and correspondingly slower frame rates - but if you are looking for something to enhance where you fly fast jets in FS, or indeed slower aircraft such as the cargo and AWACs workhorses in the RAF's inventory, you really can't go wrong here.

Be sure to check out Avsim's file library in relation to this scenery too. For in addition to plenty of add-on aircraft for FSX and FS2004 which would suit this nicely, there are a number of AFCAD traffic files available which have been created specifically for this add-on, and they'll do a lot to liven things up.

Test System
PC Pentium 4 PC 2Gb of DDR3 RAM ATI PCI-X graphics card Windows XP
Laptop Pentium dual core processor 2Gb of RAM built-in Intel graphics card Windows Vista (32 bit)
FSX FS9

What I Like About The RAF Collection

- Fills a noticeable gap on the FS flying scene - a treat for fans of RAF operations.
- Modeling is an excellent compromise between visually pleasing detail and economic use of textures/polygons, allowing both high frame rates and pretty screenshots.
- Gels well with Scotflight's other scenic offerings to fill out an oft-neglected corner of the FS globe

What I Don't Like About The RAF Collection

- Installation can glitch slightly on a patched version of FSX (not really Scotflight's fault to be fair and very easily rectified by the user).
- The night textures could do with brightening up a little in my opinion.
- Would have liked to see perhaps a couple of missions starting from these bases bundled in with the FSX version, to take advantage of the later sim's expanded capabilities and make use of the many local landmarks which are included.

Printing

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[RAF Collection](#)

(adobe acrobat required)

Comments?

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