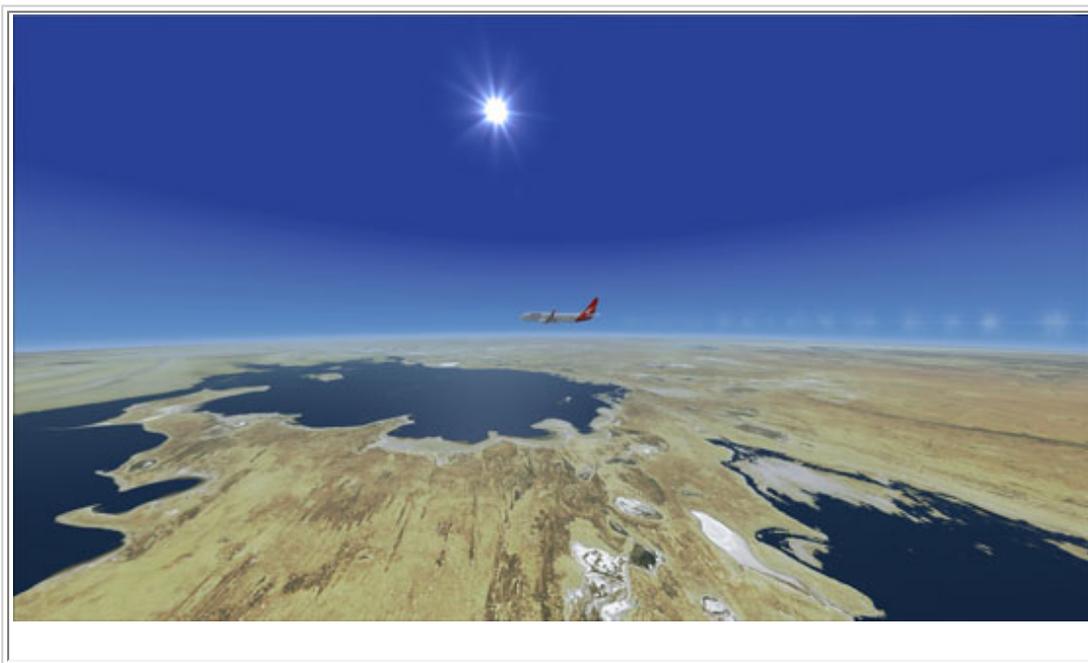


AVSIM Commercial Multiple Sceneries Review

Australia & Western USA



Product Information

Publishers: [France VFR / FS Altitude](#)

Description: Photorealistic Scenery.

Download Size:
N/A

Format:
3 DVDs each

Simulation Type:
FSX

Reviewed by: [Tim Capps](#) AVSIM Staff Reviewer - August 29, 2009

Introduction

I have never visited Australia much in FSX, perhaps because the standard scenery is so dismal. But when someone gives you a realistic treatment of the whole continent, with New Zealand thrown in, suddenly you've got eight million square kilometers of some of the world's most interesting terrain to explore. That's what FS Altitude Australia from VFR France

provides. It is an ambitious attempt to solve the scenery problem in FSX.

FSX scenery is actually a complicated meld of elevations, surface skins and autogen items. It works well, and on a good machine with high settings, coming in over wooded hills can be breathtaking. But let's face it: FSX is best as a general aviation platform.

When you gain some altitude, you notice that your realistic world is made up of a limited number of repeating terrain illustrations. Everything is where it is supposed to be, in a general sense, but there isn't a lot of variation. Worse, fly over Illinois and you discover that the entire Midwest seems to have been planted in corn and soybeans according to some far-seeing pattern visible only to the gods, like Nazca Lines. It isn't a landscape; it's a monotonous quilt of stitched-together tiles.

You can buy programs that do more accurate placement, such as Flight 1's Ultimate Terrain X (UTX), You can also buy better-looking tiles, such as the same company's GEX. (Add in nice clouds and you can fly like I do: REXed, GEXed and UTXed. Sounds like hash brown options at Waffle House.) While this is an improvement, better generic scenery is still generic.

You could replace it all with satellite photos, but even if you had a high resolution, the space to keep it and the computer to run it, it would still look 2D down low. Slathering it with autogen would make Tammy Faye Baker's makeup look tasteful by comparison. So flight simmers are caught in a scenery dilemma: what looks good down low reveals its limitations up high, and photorealistic scenery that would look great from on high suffers at low altitude.

VFR France's brilliant idea is to give you your FSX scenery (whether stock or gussied-up) in your immediate vicinity, but -- here's the trick -- replace it farther away with photorealistic scenery. There will always be a "footprint" (their word is "cone") of native scenery directly beneath your airplane. This will occupy more or less of your field of vision depending on your altitude, and will usually be tucked discretely out of sight until you need it for take-off and landing. (You may have been left with the impression elsewhere that it does not kick in until a certain altitude is reached. This is not so. The higher you go, the less noticeable your footprint becomes.)

Installation

Either FS Altitude Australia or FS Altitude Western USA comes on three DVDs. No downloading this monster, so you'll have to wait for the mailman to bring it, just like in olden days. Installation is simple, if not quick, and the result is nothing more than a new scenery addition to your library. Should you ever wish to fly without it, simply uncheck the scenery in your library? Support is available by email in French and English.

Flying to The Alice

To test the concept, I studied Australia in Google Earth and tried to discover a flight that would take me over as much varied terrain as possible. From Google-orbit, much of Australia looks like another planet. There are vast salt pans that qualify as "lakes" if anyone can remember being once unable to walk across them without getting his feet wet. So that was definitely something I wanted to fly over. Some hills, woods, deserts... I had my route: Melbourne to Alice Springs. Qantas Flight 796. A Boeing 737-800 leaves at 8:40 a.m. local and arrives in the middle of nowhere at 11.05. (I apologize if one of the 27,000 residents of Alice Springs reads this and is offended. It looks like an intriguing place to visit and may be a great place to live, but if it doesn't qualify as the middle of nowhere, the phrase should be excised from our language as meaningless. Take comfort in the tourist boom this review will create.)

This review also covers the same company's Western USA, which we will get to after we've visited The Alice. ("Australia's

Oasis, the capital of the Outback, and the most romantic country town in the world... If you think The Alice is hot, flat and dusty, then you had better think again, because there are stunning ranges, spectacular gum trees, refreshing water holes, beautiful palm trees, awesome colors, more water holes, amazing wildlife, a lush green golf course, and did we mention the water holes?" www.tourism.thealice.com.au) Australia goes first because I do not have any scenery additions for it, and wanted to see how FS Altitude worked before making it play with others. (As I learned later, my concerns were baseless.)

As you can see below, taxiing toward the active in Melbourne in a Qantas 737-800 we are on familiar FSX territory. Unless there are heights in the distance, FS Altitude is not a factor until after you take off. At altitude, however, you can see that you are flying over the real deal. With some realistic cloud cover and visibility limits, it is darn near as real as it gets. For comparison, look at the third picture in this series, which is the same territory without FS Altitude. Can you pick out the repeating pattern of tiles? It is all too easy. If FS Altitude is looking good to you so far, get your drool towel out and read on.



Australia has some beautifully desolate landscape. With FS Altitude, you will see it, not some repeating generic desert tiles. It is hard to overstate the difference between flying over you've-seen-it-all-before-land and picking out an odd feature in the distance and watching it resolve into a wonder beneath you. The following shots are like nothing you've ever seen in stock flight simulator scenery before.

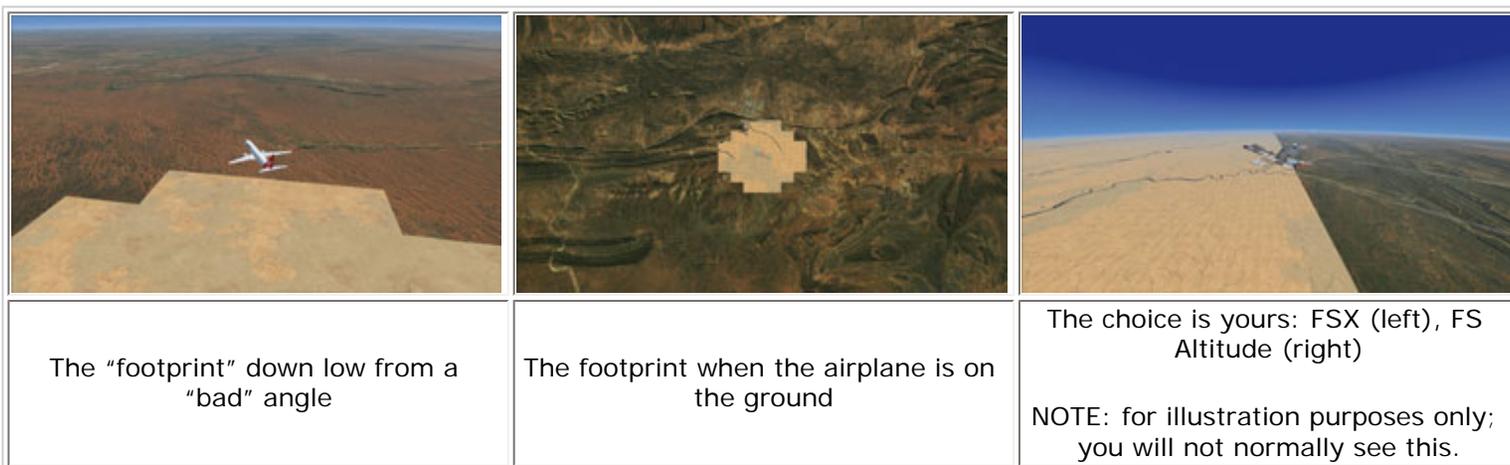


In the unlikely event you get bored with Australia, you still have Tasmania and New Zealand to fly over. The first picture below is not a bad view of mountains from your corner office, but we've seen good mountains before. You really appreciate this amazing product when you see the idiosyncratic flatlands. Remember the generic farmland tiles we

looked at before? Would you like to forget them? It will be awhile before I forget whatever it is they're doing in New Zealand in shot three below. If you happen to be intimately familiar with the area, you could probably look at that screen shot and tell me the names of some of the people who might be looking up and wondering what airplane is making the contrails far above.

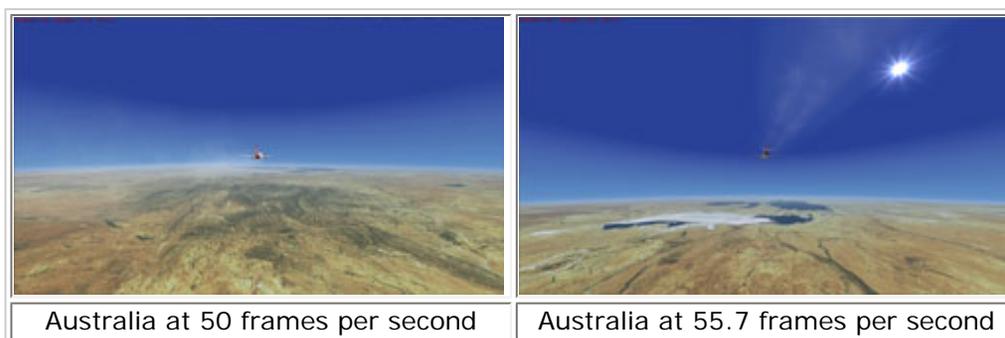


I have to admit to a certain artifice in all these screen shots. With the slightly regretful feeling of a magician who must reveal the trick behind his staged wonders, I admit I was careful with the zoom factors and angles. But this is no more than using the product according to the instructions. How often you are going to face the not-so-seamless joining of FSX and FS Altitude is largely up to you. Remember, there is always a footprint of FSX au natural beneath you. This is not a flaw, but the way it has to work, and extremely clever. Nonetheless, when you're looking for that perfect view in spot you might catch the mismatch. The first shot is what you might see at lower altitude from spot. Shot two is a far zoom-out from my eventual parking place at Alice Springs showing the extent of the footprint, and also the richness of the real terrain compared to generic. The last photo in the series was an anomaly resulting from a bad initial install, but nonetheless provides a dramatic contrast between the generic desert you're used to flying over and the real terrain, which is quite different.



The way this works in practice is that if you stay in your airplane or keep your spot angles fairly flat and zoomed out, you can adjust your view to enjoy your FS Altitude scenery without a speck of stock FSX.

I thought you might be interested in knowing what kinds of frame rates are possible. Shot two is 50 FPS, and three is 55.7. (Ariane's 737 slides through FSX on oiled ball bearings, but this scenery didn't cause a hiccup for Captain Sim's 767, either, which chomps airport frame rates like a peloton of Langoliers.) I did not find frame rates to be an issue.



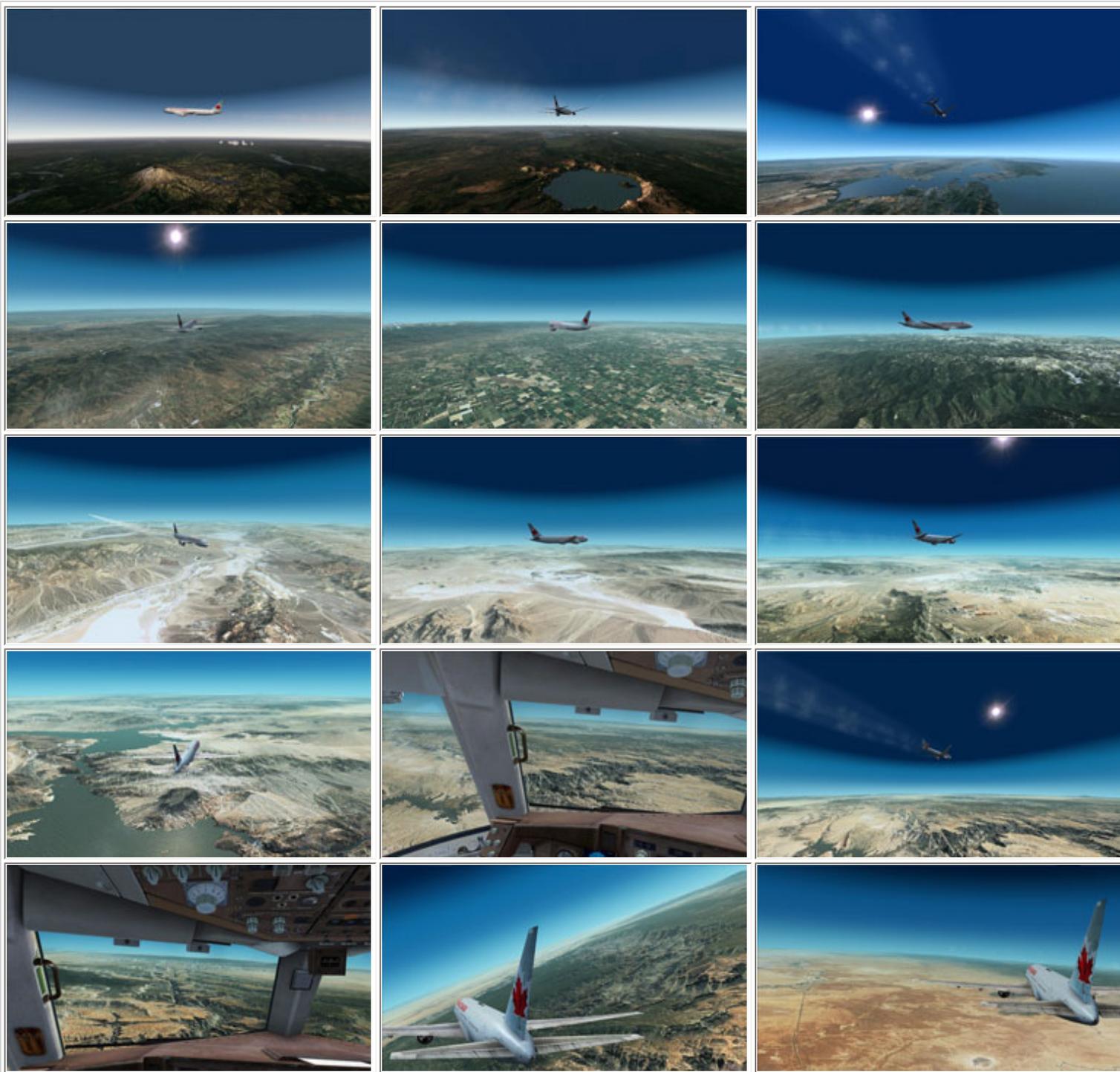
Finally, as many of you know, Orbx makes four excellent FTX regional packages covering Australia. These combine large tiles based on aerial photographs with accurate placement of features and special autogen. Although I do not own them myself, I know they are popular, and I was curious about how they stacked up against FS Altitude. Senior AVSIM Reviewer Angelique Van Campen had reviewed them, and I exchanged some emails with her. I also downloaded the demo version of Orbx's "Blue" scenery package, consisting of Tasmania, which is also covered by FS Altitude.

Judging from the screenshots Angelique kindly sent me, the drab, repeating pattern of standard FSX terrain is not so much an issue with the Orbx products. They don't look bad from high altitude. More importantly, they look fantastic down low. Still, although the tiles are large and in themselves based on real photos, they remain generic, and much of their benefit is lost at airline cruising altitude. Orbx FTX Red owners are in a better position to know whether the dramatic views of Lake Erye we saw in the FS Altitude screen shots are available with Red. On the other hand, if I were more interested in VFR flight, I would definitely prefer Orbx FTX. While there is nothing stopping you from combining the products -- after all, FS Altitude only slowly replaces your scenery as you gain altitude -- it would not be cheap. Personally, I have decided to go ahead and get Blue, YPJT and YMML just so I can have one area to enjoy Australian GA flying, and a major airport from which to fly some Pacific routes, while keeping the wonders of Lake Eyre and the Outback the way FS Altitude presents them.

For those who own neither product and might be considering a purchase of one or the other, I think the answer lies in how high you like to fly. It is worth repeating, however, that for those GA flights, all it takes is unticking the FS Altitude box in your scenery library to banish it until your next high altitude excursion.

Western USA

FS Altitude Western USA (which gives you most of Mexico, too, incidentally) works the exact same way. My UTX and GEX made no difference. They were in effect in the FSX footprint, and were completely replaced wherever FS Altitude had asserted itself. There is really no more to be said about the Western USA version, except to let the pictures speak for themselves. They are in order, and represent a "Famous Landmarks of the West" aerial tour on a chartered Air Canada 767. Feel free to amuse yourself by trying to identify some of the individual features and describe the route. The only hint I'll give is that it starts at a place associated with the airplane (not in Canada, by the way) and ends at the city where Bugs Bunny always takes a wrong turn.



Things to Consider

You are going to see mismatches between the FSX footprint and the FS Altitude terrain under some circumstances. Some will be dramatic, as I found in Australia, but others blend very well, which was generally the case in Western USA. In fact, I found the footprint -- when I looked for it -- actually enhancing things when green blended into green in California. There was detail up close, and, further away, not, and they came together harmoniously. (Must be those good vibrations.) In any event, the footprint did not bother me much, even at its most jarring, because I knew it was just for a second before I settled on a view that was going to be spectacularly realistic. From inside the airplane, you should not see it at all, unless you are banking.

This is low-resolution scenery. It is not going to be as crisp as native FSX scenery. Zoomed out per the recommendations in the documentation, it looks very nice (as you can see from the pictures). But even when you want to take that shot without the zoom-out, it doesn't look blurry. If you fly with realistic weather at something less than 100% visibility, things look even more realistic.

I should mention that your water will be the same, since the photorealistic scenery is "cut out" where the water goes.

In addition to the two products reviewed here, there are also editions for the Eastern United States (available at a discounted bundle with Western USA as an option) and Western Europe.

In case you're wondering, there are lights down below at night, although, again, from certain angles you will likely notice the footprint difference in urban areas below.

The Snow-Capped Hills of Tasmania

The biggest problem is the snow-capped hills of Tasmania. And the white-blanketed summer highlands north of Mexico City. At some latitudes, clouds on the satellite photographs can apparently be interpreted as snow. I would not call it a major problem and you can fly many different routes and never run into it. However, eventually you are likely to see this oddity.

The last point I wanted to mention is that these are only summer textures, if that makes a difference to you from 35,000 feet.

At 49.90 Euros, that is around 70 USD for each product. Add another 5 Euros for shipping (anywhere). Improving your scenery this way is not cheap. If you like to fly high and dry, however, you will probably consider it money well spent, if you can live with occasional "snow" glitches. On the other hand, if you spend most of your time on the other side of the firewall from a Lycoming engine, and only occasionally venture to 20,000 feet and above, this is not the product for you.

Closing Remarks

VFR France has devised an elegant solution to the up high-down low scenery dilemma, and one which does not so much cooperate with your other scenery as benignly ignore it. If you like to fly airliners, cruise will become something more than the time you do something else between taking off and landing. It will be an entertainment, an education, and at times a reflection on this beautiful planet of ours. This is one of those products that truly elevates the flight sim experience.

Test System
Dell XPS 430 2.5 Core 2 Quad 6 GB RAM Nvidia GeForce 9800 GT Vista 64
Flying Time: 20 hours

What I Like About FS Altitude's Australia & Western USA

- Completely eliminates the "patchwork quilt" scenery tile effect
- Ease of installation (although feeding three DVDs into FSX is not a matter for a spare moment)
- As far as I can tell, no potential for scenery conflicts, which makes it a good partner with UTX etc.
- Good frame rates
- Turns routine virtual airline flights into voyages of discovery
- Potential to see interesting places in the world as they really appear from the air

What I Don't Like About FS Altitude's Australia & Western USA

- Snowcapped hills of Tasmania (and other cloud artifacts)

Printing

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[FS Altitude's Australia & Western USA](#)

[\(adobe acrobat required\)](#)

Comments?

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