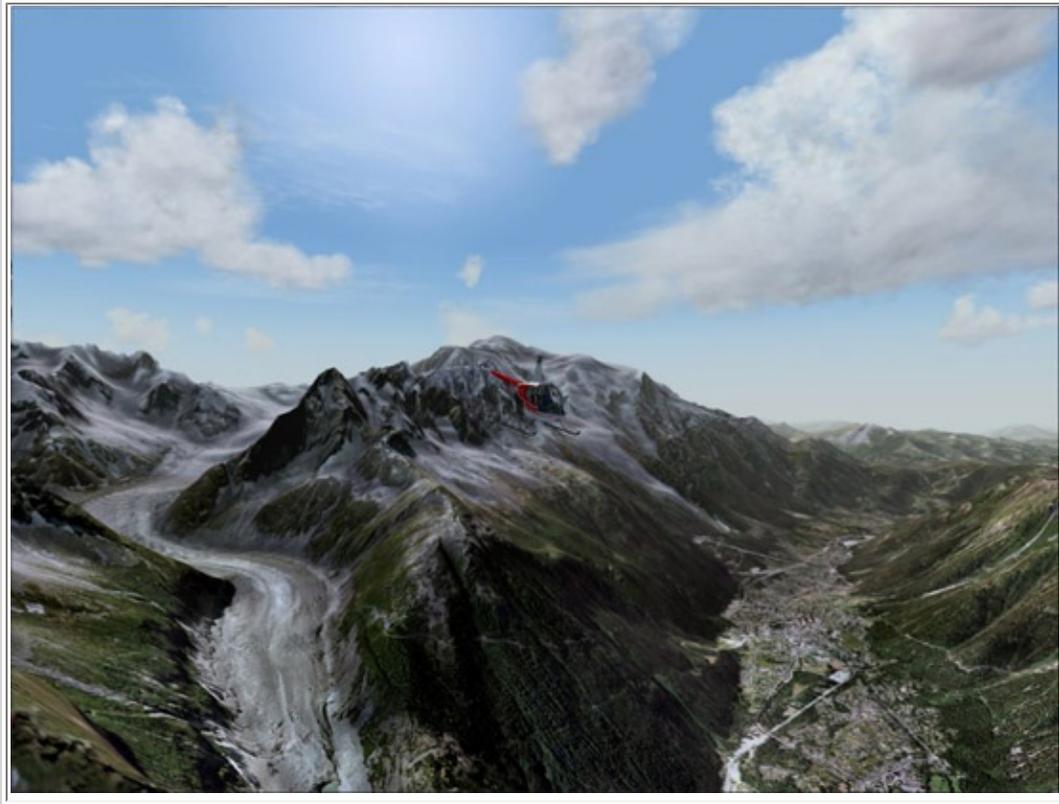


AVSIM Commercial Scenery Review

FlightAlpes BasePack Nord



Product Information

Publisher: France VFR

Description: Ground scenery produced from aerial photography for the northern Alps of France.

Download Size:
536 MB

Format:
Download

Simulation Type:
FS2004

Reviewed by: David Wilson-Okamura AVSIM Staff Reviewer - December 5, 2006

Introduction

With each new version of Flight Simulator, the scenery has gotten more detailed and covered more parts of the world. In the most recent version, FSX, there are now 24 thousand airports and 24 million roads. How does Microsoft fit the whole world onto two DVDs? The trick is to store an idea of the world instead of an image. In FSX, there are about 120 different land types, based on the Olson land classification system, with names such as "Large City Urban Grid Wet," "Irrigated Grassland," "Dry Tropical Woods," "Desert Rock," and "Savanna Grass." By combining these various types, it's possible to describe most of the world in convincing detail, without actually storing a picture of it (or paying someone to take it).

There are two drawbacks to this system. First, "Desert Rock" in Nevada looks exactly the same as "Desert Rock" in Africa; after awhile, you

Test System

Dell Dimension 2350
 P4 @ 2.2 GHz
 1 gig RAM
 Radeon 9100 w/ 128 Mb (PCI)
 TrackIR 3
 CH pedals, yoke
 Saitek ST290 joystick
 Active Camera
 Active Sky 6.5
 Flight Environment
 Ground Environment Pro II
 FS Genesis terrain mesh (76m)

Flying Time:
 14 hours

notice. Second, real "Dry Tropical Woods" aren't arranged in neat, square blocks of 1.2 km² each: they tend to cluster on the leeward side of mountains, curve, and line up with other features of the local topography.

What are the alternatives? One solution is to make custom land types for a particular region; this is what Holger Sandmann has done in his Misty Fjords, Vancouver+, and Tongass Fjords sceneries. The advantage of this method is it looks good up close and it doesn't require a lot of disk space.

The other solution is to purchase photographs, either taken from an aircraft or a satellite, and to lay them on the surface of the terrain. This is expensive, but it looks exactly like the real thing, and every bit is unique. This is the approach taken here to France's northern Alps.

Installation and Documentation

The download is one file, about half a gigabyte in size, and unlocks using a unique serial number. Installation was simple and went off without a hitch. There's a lot of data to unpack here, but with photoscenery there's not much that can go wrong. When it's done, the scenery will occupy about 600 MB on your hard drive, in addition to the download (which you

can delete, but first make a CD-ROM backup, in case you need to reinstall later).

The user's manual, in French and English, is only ten pages in each language, but it's a meaty ten pages. It explains how to optimize the sim for photoscenery and details which files are added and where they go. This is important information if you have other scenery add-ons for Europe.

In addition to the user's manual, there's a second PDF file with complete charts for all of the airports in the coverage area. As a bonus, you also get low- and high-altitude en route charts for all of France, a 39-page manual for VFR in France, and an 8-page manual for IFR. The only thing missing for VFR is an ICAO chart (the European equivalent of a U.S. sectional).

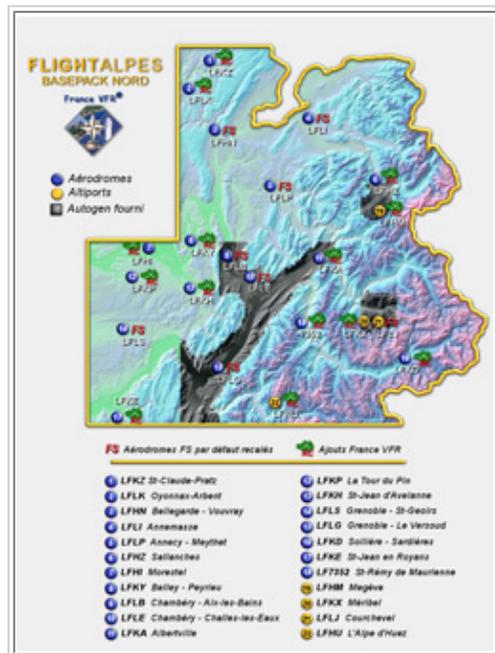
Unlike U.S. sectional charts, ICAO charts are copyrighted and therefore can't be distributed free of charge. That's too bad, but it explains why a VFR sectional chart couldn't be included. A usable substitutive, though not a complete one, is Tactical Pilotage Chart F-2A; I used the 1996 version, which is a U.S. government publication and not protected by copyright. Presumably this is something that the publisher could scan and distribute with its product, or provide on its website as a free download.

What You Get

According to the documentation, BasePack Nord provides 19m terrain mesh and photographic ground textures for approximately 18,000 square kilometers. The map here shows the coverage area. At the top you'll notice there's a little cut-out: that's Geneva. It's not included because BasePack Nord is a French scenery product, and Geneva is not part of France. The scenery's eastern boundary is also irregular, and follows the French border with Switzerland in the north and Italy in the south.

These country divisions are rigorously observed, with results that are sometimes undesirable. On the French side, Mt. Blanc is covered in gorgeous photographic ground textures, including the marvelous Sea of Ice. But on the Italian side it is back to default -- this is on the same mountain, mind you, the most famous peak in the whole chain.

From the border with Italy and Switzerland, the coverage area extends west as far as Grenoble. Looking now from north to south, the scenery starts at St-Claude and leaves off after St-Jean en Royans; the French Alps don't stop there, but for points south of St-Jean you'll need to purchase a



separate package, BasePack Sud.

So much for the extent of coverage. In addition to terrain mesh and photographic ground scenery, BasePack Nord also provides basic airport scenery for the region, including 12 airports that do not appear in either the default installation of FS2004 (which has 8 airports in this region) or FSX (which has 10). The additional airports are LFKZ, LFHZ, LFHM, LFKY, LFKP, LFKH, LFKE, LFHU, LFKX, LFKD, LFKA, LFLK, LFHI, and St-Rémy de Maurienne (which has no standard airport code).

Finally, about five percent of the coverage area has custom autogen; on the map, autogen regions are indicated with grey shading.

I will evaluate each of the product's three main features separately.



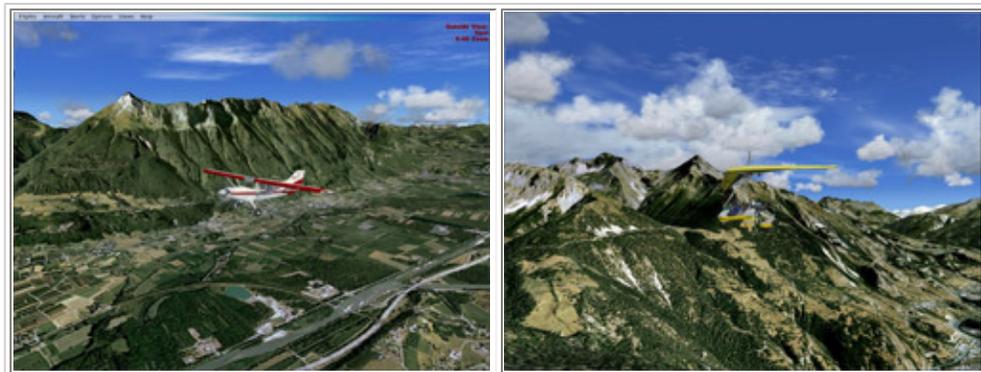
Mt. Blanc on the border

Terrain Mesh and Ground Textures

Terrain mesh is what determines the shape of land in Flight Simulator, whether it will be mountainous, flat, or in-between. The precision of a terrain mesh, its sampling rate, is measured in levels of detail (LOD). LOD 2 has twice as much detail as LOD 1, LOD 3 has twice as much detail as LOD 2, and so on. High LOD numbers are good, low numbers are bad. The mesh that comes with BasePack Nord is LOD 11. This is the most detailed mesh that FS2004 will actually display: one data point every 19 meters. For comparison, the default mesh in FS2004 is LOD 5 (one data point every 1,223 meters). This is a big difference and you'll notice it right away in the form of craggier mountains, deeper valleys, and more abrupt cliffs.



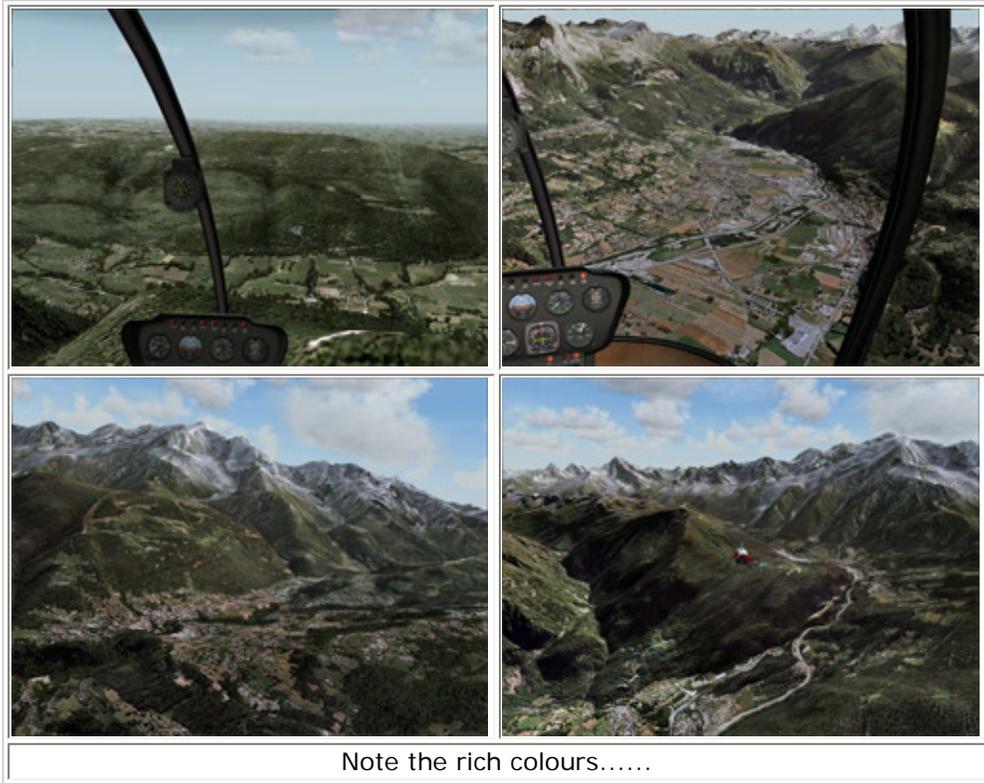
What will attract -- and satisfy -- most users of this product is the photographic ground textures. Until recently, most photosceneries for Flight Simulator were made using satellite photos. Because satellites operate from a high altitude, one photo covers a lot of ground. This lowers the cost, but detail suffers. In the last year, scenery developers have started moving to aerial photography. Aerial photos are more expensive, but result in sharper detail and richer color.



BasePack Nord is made from aerial, not satellite, photos and the results are nothing short of spectacular. Detail is crisp, even from a far distance. I won't say it's impossible to take a bad screenshot, but in fourteen hours of flying I easily racked up more than 200 screenshots, and they were all keepers. On very steep cliffs some stretching was noticeable. This was more than balanced, though, by the sharpness of the mountain crests. This is something that even very detailed terrain mesh doesn't

capture well at all: there is always some rounding at the top where there ought to be an edge.

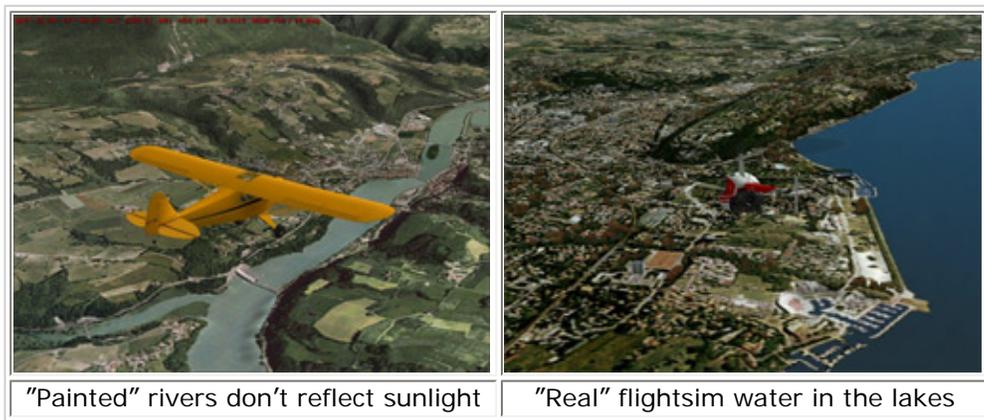
With photoscenery, however, there is an illusion of edginess, because the photo includes shadows. In theory, those shadows will be pointing in the wrong direction for half of the day, because they are frozen in time. In practice, though, this has never bothered me and my eyes accept the illusion as fact.



One of the challenges of producing Flight Simulator scenery from real-world photographs is balancing the color. It shouldn't look washed out (a complaint about some photosceneries), but it shouldn't be too saturated either. Again, BasePack Nord excels: the colors are subtle but still rich, vibrant but not cartoonish.



These two things -- crisp detail and balanced color -- are the bread and butter of any photoscenery. Get them wrong and nothing else makes up for it. Get them right and, when little things go wrong, we look the other way. BasePack Nord does get them right, triumphantly, but there are still some flaws, albeit not fatal ones



"Painted" rivers don't reflect sunlight

"Real" flightsim water in the lakes

First, while lakes are made with "real" flightsim water that you can land on and reflects sunlight, rivers are painted on with a dull green. Sure, it's more work to carve out the riverbeds and fill them with "real," reflective water, but it can be done. (An example is the popular MegaScenery: Pacific Northwest developed by Aerosoft Australia.) Second, the roads are black at night. Again, it's a lot of extra work to provide road lighting, but it has been done. (Again, MegaScenery is an example.) Finally, there is no snow in the valleys.

In the summer, that's all right, but in BasePack Nord it is always summer. Admittedly, seasons are a problem for all photosceneries. To my knowledge, no one has ever made a large-scale photoscenery with all four seasons. Why not? It would require the developer to purchase three additional sets of aerial photographs (expensive), and take up four times as much disk space. Apparently, though, it's possible to simulate a layer of snow; I don't know how it's done, but MegaScenery can do it, and BasePack can't.

Airports



Default airport adjusted to blend in

When you make a realistic scenery -- and BasePack Nord is extremely realistic -- the default elements can look out of place, unless they are adjusted. Such is the case here with the default airports in the coverage area: where necessary, the developers have shifted the airport elements in such a way that they blend smoothly with the underlying ground textures.

In addition, they have introduced 14 real-world airports that did not appear in the default scenery of FS2004. (Two of these new airports are now part of FSX.) The new airports, it should be said, are very basic. That makes sense: as the title implies, BasePack is supposed to serve as a base for additional scenery. I do have one complaint, though: eight of the airports don't have any parking spaces, so that you have

to begin your flight on the active runway. That's sloppy, unrealistic, and makes AI traffic disappear after landing instead of taxiing.

The real-life airports are small, GA affairs, so facilities are minimal: a few 3D buildings (nothing custom so far as I noticed, except for the placement), a windsock, and perhaps an apron or taxiway. Runway surface varies. At Courchevel (LFLJ), it's just a white strip painted on the hillside. This, I assume, is because the real runway has a pronounced slope, and in Flight Simulator a runway object would be flat; therefore some workaround was necessary, and this one is reasonable. What I can't understand is why, when you begin a flight at Courchevel, it sets you down on a nearby hill about half a mile distant. You can slew over to the correct position, but it shouldn't work like that.



New airports

Custom Autogen

The extra airports are a nice bonus, and the ground textures are smoothly rendered. But what really sets this package apart from other photosceneries—including MegaScenery—is the house-by-house and tree-by-tree placement of custom autogen. Areawise, it's only a small fraction of the total coverage area that has autogen: mainly the Isère valley (from Grenoble to Albertville), with pockets also at Méribel, Courchevel, Sallanches, Megève, and Chambéry. But since this includes about one third of the airports in the total coverage area, there's a decent chance that your take-off or landing will be in an area where there's autogen, and it's mainly during these two phases of flight that you're low enough for autogen to make any difference. (At cruising altitude, the photographic ground textures make autogen redundant, perhaps even a distraction.)



Carefully placed autogen buildings



Carefully placed autogen trees

To see what the difference looks like in practice, study the screenshots here. Notice that the 3D buildings are precisely aligned where there are houses on the underlying ground photo. The trees are placed with the same care. The effect is especially convincing at Megève, west of Mont Blanc, where the runway is lined with trees and then you take off over 3D buildings which are themselves, generic, but which have been placed and grouped with painstaking care.



At cruise altitude, autogen isn't necessary

Performance

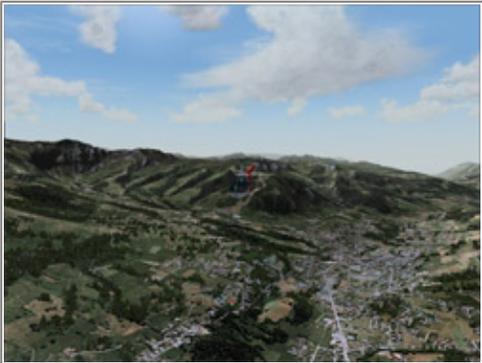
BasePack Nord performs exactly the same as every other photoscenery I have ever tried. That is, it takes a long time to load and if you fly fast, the ground textures blur. Blurring, it needs to be emphasized, isn't the fault of developers; for an explanation, read [Steve Lacey's blog](#). On the plus side, frame rates usually go up with photoscenery, and BasePack Nord is no exception.

FSX Compatibility

As of this writing, BasePack Nord does not come with an installer for FSX, though one has been promised. Following instructions on the support forum, I was able to install the scenery manually and test it. I found no problems, and was pleased to see moving traffic on the main roads.



FSX compatible



The illusion is complete

Conclusion

FlightAlpes BasePack Nord costs 26 euros (plus VAT if you live in Europe).

The roads go dark at night and there's no snow in winter. But the basic elements of any photoscenery -- sharp details and balanced colors -- will stand comparison with any product on the market today.

In the areas where custom autogen is available, the illusion of being there is complete.

Printing

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