

FYI:
Fresno Yosemite
International Airport Offers

Tree-mendous Experience

by Connie Naylor

John Muir called the big trees of his beloved Yosemite “immortal.” With life spans measured in millennia, they remain a constant in a rapidly changing world and are memorialized in Fresno’s largest public art project—the airport’s own Sequoia grove.

Each year thousands of pilgrims pass through Fresno on their way to the big trees. Giant Sequoia, found only on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, merit a spot on everyone’s “bucket list.” Unfazed by disease, protected by chemicals that make their wood resistant to insects and fungus, they soar to over 300 feet in height and are the world’s largest living things. The big trees are top draws at Yosemite, Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks—just an hour’s drive from Fresno Yosemite International Airport (FYI).

The Sequoias typically inspire awe and wonder. In the case of the Fresno airport, the big trees also prompted an idea that transformed a mundane—albeit extensive—airport renovation into a project of distinction.

Director of aviation and self-proclaimed nature lover, Russell Widmar explained his desire to provide something of serious interest that would engage travelers. “I’ve worked at many airports and they all seem the same. It’s like going to a retail mall, whether you’re



Yosemite National Park remains open in winter when cross-country skiing and snowshoeing through the Mariposa Grove of Sequoia trees are favorite activities.

in Fresno or Cincinnati or Gainesville, Florida, there’s not much difference. This is a 60-year-old facility and we were doing everything new, from ceilings to seating to carpeting. I wanted to have one thing that captured the real sense of this place.”

He found that “one thing” on a walk through Yosemite’s Mariposa Grove, a stand of several hundred Sequoias including two of the tallest in the world. “I must have taken 500 pictures of the trees,” he said. “They’re all shapes and sizes and they have so many stories. They’ve been burned, hit by lightning; they’re still alive. At the airport we had these gigantic columns at a confluence where people come together exiting and entering security. So I thought if I could find somebody on a Disney-type scale—that kind of quality—who could create trees from the columns, that would give us something really interesting.”

An Internet search revealed four firms in the world capable of carrying out his vision. One—NatureMaker—was in California. Widmar said he

“floated the idea as part of the terminal project.” Civic leaders and the public got on the bandwagon. Bringing the sequoias to air travelers cost \$1 million of the total \$65-million dollar renovation. “It was the largest public art project in the history of Fresno,” Widmar said.

The project was achieved with funds from private donations or pledged revenue from sources apart from the airlines serving FYI. (All the components of the airport project, including a \$16-million solar power system and a \$6.5-million corporate aircraft hanger, were funded in this manner.)

Gary Hanick, president of NatureMaker, the Carlsbad, California-based company charged with the project, has been transforming architectural elements into replicas of the natural world since 1983. His projects span the globe from the Grand Hyatt in Moscow to private residences in Dubai. Zoos, children’s museums, and retail centers also benefit from NatureMaker’s creative construction. “The columns we had to work with in FYI were 25-feet tall. I went to Yosemite and

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Sequoia & Kings Canyon national parks and we set about creating trees that would replicate the bottom portion of the Sequoias,” Hanick said. “So in the airport, viewers see a believable, forest perspective. They see a gargantuan trunk and a few branches. It gives you the feeling that the airport was built around the trees.”

Hanick said the designers went for an immersion experience. “There are areas with stumps and fallen logs that are set apart with rail fences just like you’d see in Yosemite. My favorite tree is the one with the split trunk. You can walk right through it. It represents the famous drive-through tree.”

Many of NatureMaker’s trees are built as cantilevered structures. All use precisely crafted tubular steel for the trunk’s core. The bark material is a special mix created by NatureMaker based upon a substance used in zoo exhibits. “The bark is designed for public scrutiny, it invites touch,” he said.

“I think this really positions Fresno on the map,” Hanick continued. “It alerts people that these trees are really waiting right in Fresno’s backyard. If travelers are on a quick business trip and they don’t have time to make it to one of the parks, at least they have the feeling for five minutes that they’ve been there. Texturally and visually, the airport trees feel like the real thing.”

FYI Director of Aviation Russell Widmar said response has been extremely positive. “Feedback from the community has been overwhelming. I’ve had people ask if they’re real. The park service has provided some interesting videos. They’ve been very supportive of the project. We’re giving people interesting ways to wile away the time. We’re also planning to install artistic lighting so it seems that the sun is shining on the trees. We like to say ‘fly Fresno, it’s like a walk in the park.’ And it’s true. I recently went to Nelder Grove in the Sierra National Forest and sat there among the Sequoia and said, ‘this looks just like our own trees,’” he concluded. ■



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