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LOCAL

Air taxi a lifeline for islanders in winter

Pilot ferries passengers, groceries 20 to 30 times a day

Craig Shoup Port Clinton News Herald

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PUT-IN-BAY - Like most pregnant women, Alyssa Smith is preparing a room for the new baby, buying supplies, and visiting doctors for routine checkups every two weeks.

Unlike most mothers-to-be, however, Smith has to fly every time she visits her family doctor, goes for an ultrasound, or has blood work done, because she lives on an island surrounded by frozen Lake Erie.

For the resident of Put-in-Bay on South Bass Island, the frozen lake means ferry boats are no longer running this winter and flying is the most reliable way to get from the island to Port Clinton on the mainland.

[Put-in-Bay athletes take to the air in winter](#)

Some islanders use ATVs and air boats to travel over the Lake Erie ice, following a route lined by Christmas trees from South Bass Island State Park to Catawba Island State Park, but they make those trips at their own risk.

Smith and many of South Bass Island's 360 residents depend on Dustin Shaffer's [Island Air Taxi](#) and his six-seat Piper Cherokee Six 300 horsepower plane to travel during the winter.

Business starts booming

Dustin Shaffer, owner and pilot of the air taxi service, said the day after the ferries stop running his business starts booming as island residents and businesses look to him as their lifeline to the mainland.

To take an air taxi ride with Shaffer, passengers pay a \$40 fee each way.

Smith, who is 25 weeks pregnant and expects to take more than a dozen flights before her baby is born in April, said she tries to make the most out of each trip to the mainland.

"Because flying can be expensive, I try to schedule multiple things in one day," she said. "I will go to my doctor, my ultra =sound and my blood work appointments in the same day and I will take an empty suitcase and try go shopping to stock up on groceries. You really try to get your money's worth."

The only downside to air travel in the winter, Smith said, is having to schedule appointments around weather.

"Having to rely on an airplane, everything you do is based around the weather," she said. "The weather decides when you are going to go or stay home. Dustin does a great job and always makes you feel safe in the air."

Smith said when on the mainland, she uses taxi services and always has a backup plan for lodging in the event that flights back to the island are canceled due to extreme winds or whiteout snow conditions.

She also said preparing for a baby is easier with websites shipping many basic supplies throughout the United States.

"Thank God for Amazon Prime so I can buy in bulk," Smith said. "I never thought I would buy toilet paper online, but it is pretty bulky if you buy a lot at the store and try to fly it back."

Summer doldrums

For Shaffer, business is almost nonexistent in the summer except for some charter flights for locals traveling to Cleveland, Columbus or Detroit.

While Put-in-Bay is a major tourist destination during the summer, with 750,000 people traveling to the island between Memorial Day and Labor Day, virtually all tourists use ferry service provided by Miller Boat Line and Jet Express.

"When the boats quit it's like a light switch goes off and we go from zero flights to like 20 to 30 a day," Shaffer said. "Most people are coming over for bigger shopping trips to stock up for the winter on meats and food, but doctors' appointments are probably the biggest thing. Pregnant women are going over all the time."

Shaffer said between 50 and 100 people will take the seven-minute flight to the mainland each day.

And many of those passengers load up on supplies before the return trip home.

"They really make a full day out of it, because it's \$40 each way," Shaffer said. "Everyone leaves light and comes back heavy."

Shaffer did say if someone over-packs when using the air taxi return to South Bass Island, items will have to be left behind.

"The locals understand it, but sometimes ice fishermen don't know because it's a new experience so they're bringing beer and ice and minnows," Shaffer said.

"People come first and then the rest of the stuff will make it when it fits."

While many Americans take for granted being able to go to the grocery store at a moment's notice, South Bass Islanders have one option — Island General Food Market at 410 Catawba Ave. — to buy supplies or groceries, though the store closes daily at 5 p.m. in the winter.

Groceries and supplies

Shaffer also provides air taxi service for the grocery store, local restaurants that remain open year-round, and the island's hardware store.

"We will take thousands of pounds of freight every week," Shaffer said. "Everything that comes to this island, I basically bring it."

Shaffer said when Lake Erie freezes earlier than expected, he can often get strange requests.

"A couple of years ago the lake froze early and the island was out of beer so I was taking over pallets of beer," Shaffer said. "I made seven or eight trips just in beer."

This week Shaffer was asked to make unexpected flights to bring hundreds of pounds of minnows for ice fishermen taking advantage of the early lake freeze.

"Ice fishing is a big thing here so I got the call and Thursday I was bringing over hundreds and hundreds of pounds of minnows," Shaffer said.

Hauling freight has made Shaffer's seasonal business thrive when islanders and businesses are in need of supplies.

Island General Food Market store manager Don Ruggiero said that without Shaffer, the store's shelves would be virtually empty.

"We get groceries at least two, sometimes three days, a week," Ruggiero said. "We get most of the milk on Friday because it weighs so much. We get about 20 to 30 cases flown over and each case weighs about 20 pounds. "

Because of the costs associated with flying, Ruggiero said milk and other dairy prices do rise in the winter to offset costs, but all other grocery items remain the same price throughout the year.

Ruggiero said the grocery store will stockpile fresh meat and freeze it, selling it over the rest of the winter until the boats are running again and able to bring over fresh meat.

"We start in October and freeze it to use the rest of the winter so we will have fresh meat, and it usually lasts us the entire winter," Ruggiero said.

Although tourism drops off in the winter, and only about 360 people live year-round on the island, Ruggiero said the winter business can pick up as locals and ice fishermen stop in for groceries.

"When the boats stop our business can pick up, because people aren't able to do normal shopping by using the ferry," Ruggiero said.

Shaffer has been flying in Put-in-Bay for five years and is a Tampa transplant who used to come to Put-in-Bay as a child.

Takeoff on unlit runway

As a pilot for 19 years, Shaffer, 35, said he has experienced almost everything as a taxi pilot, including the rush of taking his pregnant wife Chontel — who schedules all of Dustin's flight — to the mainland by air taxi at 1 a.m. to give birth to one of their children almost five years ago.

"It was an unlit airport and you can take off, but she was calm, I wasn't," Shaffer said. "It's always the ladies that are calm, and the guys are the ones that are rushing."

Shaffer said he does not transport people who are experiencing medical emergencies because Life Flight helicopters do come to the island. But Shaffer does take people and animals with injuries that are not life threatening, .

"A couple of years ago there was a dog that got hit in the winter but we flew her over," Shaffer said. "She lost a leg, but she is still healthy today."

Even though the island lacks many amenities of the mainland, Smith, who is in her fourth winter living full-time on the island, said she would not trade the relaxing lifestyle and picturesque views of Put-in-Bay.

"The fall is beautiful here, and honestly in the winter, you want the snow, you want the ice," Smith said. "You want the experience of getting stuck here because it is beautiful here. The roads stay white, they don't turn brown and slushy."

cshoup@gannett.com

419-334-1035

Twitter: @CraigShoupNH