Optimal Irish Scenery for FS2004

by Claudio "Cloudy" Di Veroli, Bray, Ireland, June 2019

As was about to submit this article to PC FLIGHT, they sent me and asked a review of the very last news: Eiresim Dublin 2009. Eventually the present review was never published.

Although—understandably—underrepresented in meetings, where we mostly gather to see and/or show the latest "tools of the FS trade", still a sizable proportion of Flight Simulator enthusiasts "fly" FS2004 rather than the more recent FSX. The reasons for this situation are manifold:

1) FSX needs a powerful PC that many cannot afford,

2) FSX also requires the additional expenditure of acquiring aircraft and scenery add-ons,

3) even seasoned "flightsimmers" need months of time to learn the new simulator and many of us simply do not have the necessary time and

4) the premature abandonment of the camp by Microsoft has caused many to believe that they would be investing too much in something that is a dead end anyway.

In the meantime we are in Ireland, many of us fly FS2004, and it is by no means clear which is the best scenery for flying around the country. I have carried out an extensive analysis and here are my personal conclusions. At the onset it became obvious that there are two different solutions, requiring different prerequisites: it all revolves around whether we are willing to use the recent VFR Ireland Scenery East/West for FS2004 (VFRI) marketed by Playsims. This article thus can also be seen as a review of this product.

FLIGHT SIMULATOR SCENERY COMPONENTS

For readers who are new to Flight Simulator(FS) scenery, let me briefly explain its main five components.

- MESH: this is the grid of points with their altitude that Flight Simulator uses to simulate ground altitude.

- ROADS AND COASTLINES: the roads and water contours.

- GROUND TEXTURES: they are files depicting the main type of terrains: city, agriculture, forest, desert and so on.

- LANDCLASS: information that tells FS which Ground Texture to employ at every single place on the scenery.

- DETAIL: objects such as ramps, taxiways, runways, buildings in both airports and cities.

(There are also a few further items but they are not relevant for this review).

OPTIMAL FS2004 IRELAND SCENERY WITHOUT VFR

Although arguably the best solution is the recent VFR Ireland (VFRI) scenery, there are two reasons why some flightsimmers prefer not to use it:

> (1) to avoid the expenditure (I paid €71 recently) and

> (2) if you frequently fly by night. VFRI has only daytime photos, at night the country is shown dark, with no lights except for the airports.

If you have decided not to use VFRI, before we even look for a suitable alternative scenery for airports/cities, we need to fix some basic shortcomings of FS2004 default scenery: the very poor MESH (with abysmal resolution of 1 point every 1200m implying a flat scenery over which only large mountains show), the limited ROADS AND COASTLINES and the just adequate GROUND TEXTURES. My recommendations follow.

- MESH: You should install a good Mesh for Ireland: this can be a free download for Ireland or Europe, with resolution at least 76m (LOD 9), or part of a worldwide mesh such as payware FS Global (FSG), which I recommend because it significantly improves the worldwide flying experience.

- ROADS AND COASTLINES: I recommend the affordable Roads & Rivers of Europe (RRE), yielding—for all European countries not just Ireland—very accurate coastlines and all the roads, including those inside cities and towns.

- GROUND TEXTURES: You should optionally consider installing the Ground Environment (GE) by Flight1, a replacement for all the default textures of FS2004, thoroughly enhancing the visual flying experience.

  At this point we are ready for the scenery provided by the—unfortunately defunct—Irish Flight Sim Design (IFSD). Their website is no more, but the files are at present available from Avsim in a single file. You should also find in either www.avsim.com or www.flightsim.com two additional airports: a full scenery for Weston and a modest one for Shannon. [For brevity below when I refer to IFSD I include not only Dublin City but also Weston and Shannon sceneries].

- IFSD LANDCLASS: IFSD scenery will install the Landclass as a separate scenery. It will provided a very significant improvement to the match between locations and the texture best representing them.

- IFSD AIRPORTS AND BUILDINGS: Separately from the Landclass, IFSD will install a set of airports with their updated ramps, taxiways and runways, plus buildings for the airports and a few elsewhere also, mainly in Dublin City Centre. With respect to the default FS2004 airports, IFSD will introduce improvements (in most cases remarkably realistic and detailed) to the following 8 airports: EICK_Cork, EICM_Galway, EIDW_Dublin, EIKL_Kilkenny, EINN_Shannon (separate add-on by Giacomo Gramazio), EISG_Sligo, EIWF_Waterford and EIWT_Weston (separate add-on by Philip Quill). You also have 3D sceneries for Dun Laoghaire, Dublin port and Howth harbour.

  Please find comparative screenshots at the end of the article.

- SCENERY ORDER: In FS2004's Scenery Library the installed sceneries should be in the following order:

> …
>
> Aerial Photo – (default cities)
>
> …
>
> Ireland-IFSD-Dublin City
>
> Ireland-IFSD-Airports
>
> …
>
> Roads and Rivers of Europe
>
> …
>
> Ireland-IFSD-Landclass
>
> …
>
> Mesh76m-FSGlobal
>
> …
>
> (default continents)
>
> …

You should expect minor visual mismatches here and there, because neither RRE nor IFSD provide for deleting the rivers and roads wrongly placed by the default FS2004 scenery. Also, different meshes are not coincident: both RRE and IFSD were developed before the latest crop of improved FSG was available, so expect minor mismatches between FSG and RRE and also between FSG and IFSD. All of these are mostly minor quibbles, however, and the solutions proposed above make for a suitably integrated and fully enjoyable flightsimming experience.

OPTIMAL FS2004 IRELAND VFR-BASED SCENERY

If there may be some reasons for not using VFR Ireland (VFRI), there are also alternative reasons for using it:

(1) If you are mostly into flying visually with small aircraft and are looking for the utmost in local scenery and

(2) if you fly mostly in Ireland and wish to avoid the hassle of buying and installing the three major add-ons outlined above: FS Global (FSG) Roads & Rivers of Europe (RRE) and Ground Environment (GE).

Indeed, though limited to the Republic of Ireland only, VFRI substitutes for many packages with a better solution. Once the East and West packages are separately installed, feel free to merge them into one (suitably amending the Scenery Library), keeping however the "5mPhoto" sceneries separate: thus you will have installed 4 sceneries: 19mMesh, 5mPhotoEast, 5mPhotoWest and Vectors.

The details:

- MESH: VFRI installs an accurate 19m (LOD 11) mesh, much better than FSG (which, if installed it will be automatically bypassed: you should simply ensure to move VFRI's Mesh below—not above!—FSG).

- ROADS AND COASTLINES: They are included in the photographic scenery, therefore you do not need RRE (if installed it is automatically ignored if VFRI is there.

- GROUND TEXTURES: However improved the GE generic textures are, they are certainly no match for the photographic pictures which VFR provides with excellent resolution. Every pixel represents 5m, therefore rows of houses show quite well: I was even able to spot clearly—as a white rectangle with roof—Toner House, where I live in Bray.

- LANDCLASS: Obviously such a thing is irrelevant in photographic scenery, where every spot in the ground is associated with an individual photograph.

- DETAIL: VFRI also provides details for all the two-dozen-or-so airports and airstrips included in the default FS2004, and then a few more! The "Vectors" folder (to which we will refer again below) includes a total of 32 airports. They belong to three groups as follows.

- DETAIL-AIRSTRIPS: These are 23 airports: EIAB_Abbeyshrule, EIBN_Bantry, EIBR_Birr, EIBT_Belmullet, EICA_Connemara, EICL_Clonbullogue, EICN_Limerick (Coonagh), EIDL_Donegal, EIER_Erinagh (Tipperary), EIFR_Finner_Heli, EIGM_Gormanston, EIIH_Midlands_Heli (Portlaoise), EIIM_Inishmore, EIIR_Inisheer, EIKC_Knock (Ireland West), EIKH_Kilrush, EIKN_Ireland_West (Connaught), EIKY_Kerry (Farranfore), EIMH_Athboy, EIMN_Inishmaan, EINC_Newcastle, EIRT_Rathcoole, EITM_Trim and EITT_Trevet. Each one consists of their ramps, taxiways and runways, i.e. polygons (with lights) located over their correct place in the photographic ground. In the few cases where the default FS2004 provided a few buildings, VFRI reproduces them identically, with the only proviso of moving them so that they are in their correct places with respect to the new ground coverage.

- DETAIL-MINOR IMPROVEMENTS: A second group consists of only 2 relatively minor airports that VFRI improves with respect to default FS2004: EIKL_Kilkenny and EIME_Baldonnel (Casement).

- DETAIL-AIRPORTS: As for the remaining 7 they are the major airports: EICK_Cork, EICM_Galway, EIDW_Dublin, EINN_Shannon, EISG_Sligo, EIWF_Waterford and EIWT_Weston. Unfortunately, where we would hope to see a good dose of nice buildings and other 3D objects, VFRI simply includes the default FS2004 buildings, a few of them simply moved around in order to agree with the new ground scenery. Very disappointing.

- SOLUTION: At this point, luckily, an optimal solution becomes apparent: with VFRI we should also install the full IFSD scenery (the install order is irrelevant). After uninstalling things we no longer need—such as the IFSD Landclass—we can enjoy the marvellous IFSD buildings and other objects, seen over the improved ground of VFRI. Technically the sceneries should work well together, but for every airport now we have the VFRI photographic ground, the VFRI Vector airport objects and the IFSD airport objects (with higher priority: thus if an airport is in IFSD the VFRI detail in "Vectors" does not show in the simulation). Obviously, there may be incompatibilities, which is why we have tested every single component of IFSD, as follows.

- GOOD INTEGRATON: Out of the 8 major airports in our "IFSD set", the following 5 provide 3D objects that match very well the photographic VFRI ground: EICK_Cork, EICM_Galway, EIDW_Dublin, EISG_Sligo and EIWF_Waterford. In Galway IFSD includes a green texture around the airport, no solution, but this is really a minor issue.

- NEED SOME WORK: For EIWT_Weston VFRI "Vectors" provides ramps, taxis and runways perfectly matching the photographic ground, while "IFSD scenery" (actually a separate development by Philip Quill) adds over it many buildings, trees and other lovely objects. Unfortunately, two hangars, some bushes and two fences are located over the end of VFRI's

taxiways and runways. After some experimentation I have found how to omit them and enjoy the rest of the scenery: simply rename the extension .BGL into BGo for the following files: Bushes1 to 7, Fence, Fence2, Trees14, Weston Hanger, Weston Hanger Small and Weston Shelter.

- POOR INTEGRATION: Finally, the 2 remaining IFSD airports are incompatible with VFRI. In EIKL_Kilkenny the VFRI mesh sets the runway too high with respect to the IFSD buildings, with awful results. To allow the VFRI "Vectors" airstrip to show, in the IFSD scenery find the 4 files named KILK*.* and substitute, in the extension, the last letter with an "o": the simulation will show the VFRI Kilkenny ramp and runway, with no buildings. The other incompatibility is with EINN_Shannon: here Gramazio's scenery has insurmountable mismatches with the VFRI ground. Also, IFSD is only a minor improvement over the VFRI "Vectors": the simple solution is then to allow the latter showing by simply renaming EINN_ADE9_GG:BGL so that the extension becomes BGo (or else you simply refrain from installing Gramazio's single-file Shannon scenery).

- The following is the order in the Scenery Library:

> …
>
> Aerial Photo – (default cities)
>
> …
>
> Ireland-IFSD-Dublin City
>
> Ireland-IFSD-Airports
>
> Ireland-VFRI-Vectors
>
> …
>
> Ireland-VFRI-PhotoEast
>
> Ireland-VFRI-PhotoWest
>
> Roads and Rivers of Europe
>
> …
>
> Mesh76m-FSGlobal
>
> Mesh19m-VFRI
>
> …
>
> (default continents)

   …

The marriage of VFRI with IFSD shows stunning results in Dublin City where no other solution is anywhere as good, with IFSD buildings located almost exactly in their place over the photographic ground, which fully replaces the wrong default-FS2004 rivers and roads.

In the comparison screenshots below, the above shows the default FS2004 scenery, the middle one shows GE, RRE and IFSD, and the bottom one shows VFRI and IFSD. The improvement is apparent and noteworthy in all the cases.
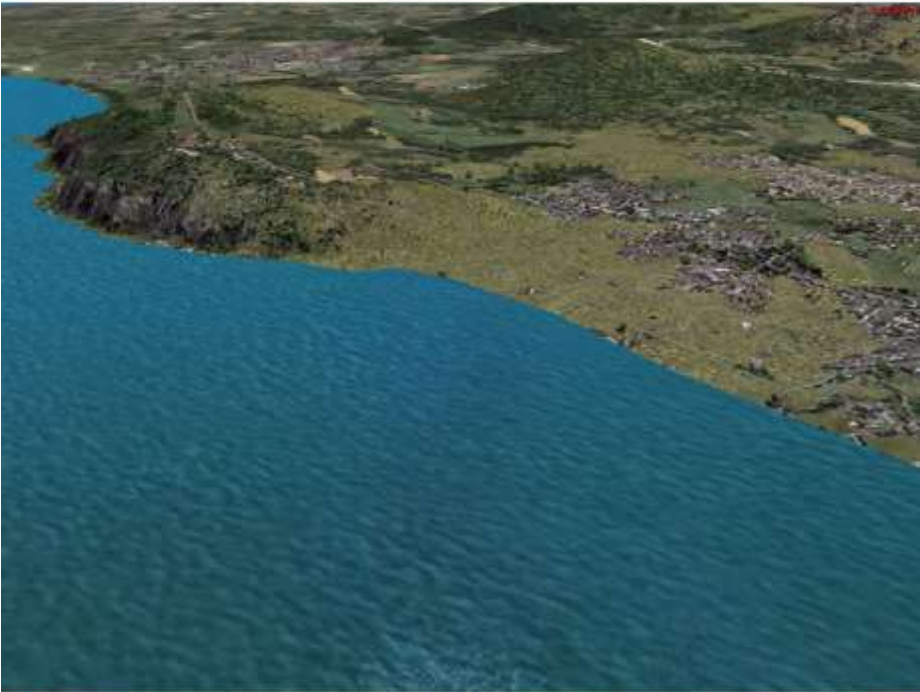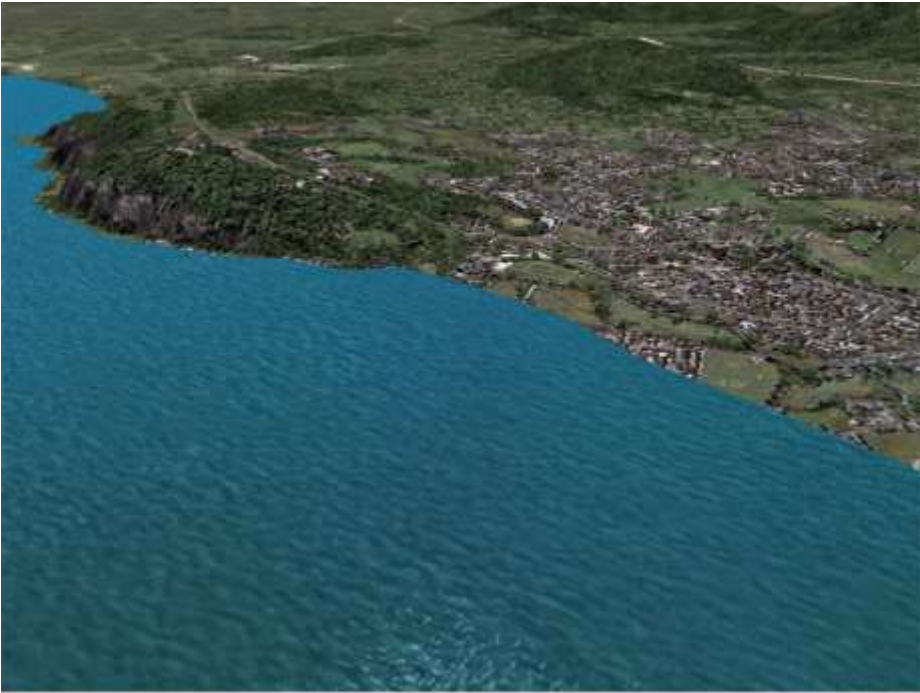
EINC-Newcastle airstrip

EICK-Cork airport

EIDW-Dublin international

Dublin city centre

Bray coast view. Happy flight!