

Cars vs. Small Planes

Cars are wonderful machines. In a car, we transport ourselves with speed and safety through a three dimensional world with our hands on the wheel and our minds in gear. We travel quietly and in reliable luxury or we can drive loud and demanding vehicles that produce stirring sounds of mechanical complexity and defy the laws of physics as we accelerate, corner and brake. Your sense of movement is feed by the wind, the road surface, shadow and light and bugs hitting your windshield. Your car can be a convertible, coupe, sedan, SUV, station wagon, pick-up etc. in any color. You can slam, chop, channel, shave, deck, flame, your car. Your car can be an extension of your personality and your automotive tastes. You are your car.

Driving a car, you don't need permission to leave, arrive or park. You can go anytime anywhere you want. Along the way, you can stop to refuel, eat or enjoy a view. Should misfortune strike and your car run out of gas, blow a tire or put a rod through the cylinder wall, you merely pull to the side of the road, get out and curse.

Now consider small aircraft. As you might have noticed, there is not a lot of variety in the look of small aircraft. There are few basic differences in small aircraft; wing on top or wing on the bottom, one engine or two. Almost all are white with stripes of primary colors. A new small aircraft looks pretty much like one built in 1946. You have to be a real aircraft buff to be able to tell the difference between a Beechcraft Sierra 200 and a Bellanca Viking. When you were a kid, did you know anyone who could tell the make, model and year of a small airplane when it flew overhead?

Ever go for a flight in a small airplane? Climbing into the tight cabin is much more challenging than getting into a car. The door opening is small and high. The overhead wing is low. The seat frame fills half of the door. Sometimes, there is one small step on the wheel strut placed for some other reason than usefulness. You try to put one foot inside the cabin and bring along the other after you put your butt in the seat. Don't sit on the headset that is lying unnoticed on your seat. Closing the door, the locking mechanism reminds you of a porta-john door lock. "This is going to keep the door closed at 4,000 feet?" you ask yourself. Once inside, the narrow cabin, you are aware of the personal hygiene practices of the pilot. You are surrounded by somewhat worn interior panels that look like cardboard. What passes for an instrument panel is a collection of instruments and displays of various vintages surrounded by a padded dash that Nash did better in 1956. The overall design, fit and finish remind you of the economy cars of the fifties. Don't even think about air conditioning while on the ground. There is no need for air conditioning once aloft.

When the motor starts you realize that the headsets are primarily for communicating with the pilot, less than two feet away, over the engine noise. Engine noise means that internal combustion is taking place and that is one of the things we love about cars, except this aircraft motor sounds more like it should be powering something produced by John Deere. Clutch slip feels positive compared to the sensation as the engine is raced to urge the craft grudgingly into motion. Before going anywhere the pilot needs the permission of a government official perched in an observation tower who must approve of your airplanes movements. With approval, the awkward, three wheeled bird trundles toward a flat piece of concrete to try to take-off. The engine revs to close to its redline around 2800 RPM or so for maximum power to lift

the craft slowly from the earth. Then you are up. You must be careful to follow the flight plan you submitted before leaving. Permission must be obtained for derivations.

Once up in the wild blue, drifting along in a cabin with all the refinement of a Plymouth Valiant, but with more sophisticated instruments, the sense of speed is absent. "Oh look, we are catching up to that train." Should you need to relieve yourself while droning through the clouds, you must find a place to land. "Was that an airport back there?"

Careful of your knees so that you don't jam the extra set of controls in front of your chest that move in unison with the pilot's set. It would be troublesome if your legs accidentally jammed your set should the pilot have to pull the craft out of a death spiral from high in the sky after you hit a pigeon.

Safety is always a big issue with small aircraft. While it is fun to pile the whole family in the car to go for a drive to South Haven, imagine trying to convince your wife that the whole family should go along for a flight in your single engine Cessna over Lake Michigan. Consider the insurance part of aircraft ownership.

Let the weather act up and travel by small aircraft becomes particularly gamey. In a car, you turn on the wipers and the lights. In the small aircraft you don't fly unless you have three miles of visibility. When the weather cools off, you have to watch for carburetor or wing icing, if you are permitted to fly at all.

Still want to be a pilot? Once you have your medical certificate, it's at least \$5000 to earn a basic license. Think how much fun the same amount would buy you at the Bob Bondurant School of Performance Driving, burning the tires off their Z06's while you improve your automotive driving skills and techniques.

Around \$30,000 buys you a typical 30 year old small aircraft like the Cessna 172. This plane is one of the most common private small aircraft parked at small airports across the country. So not much individuality here. Renting or a partnership are typical alternatives to buying a small plane. What do you think about rental cars? Have you ever been in a partnership? If you did buy a plane, it's likely you would not be parking it in the pole barn out back of your house, so you need hanger space at \$250 per month or more. You can save money, but risk the weather by tying it down out on the tarmac for \$35 per month. "Mmmm storm coming, did I tie the plane down tight enough?" Maintenance cost will go up when a plane is parked outdoors. The corrosion of aluminum is a major maintenance factor for aircraft.

Chances are you won't be turning the wrenches on your Cessna. You need the services of a certified aviation mechanic. That is about \$1500 per year, just for the annual inspection. Engine overhauls run into the five figure range. Then you have to make sure your plane is up to date with the Airworthiness Directives. Parts for your plane cost ten times what the same part costs for your car. \$16 per spark plug for example.

The average small aircraft owner spends just 50 hours a year piloting his bird after all this. Contrast that with your favorite automobile. Your car is the far superior vehicle for fun and satisfaction, dollar for dollar. Your car can be a unique and exciting vehicle that expresses your interest and personality. A means of enjoyable and satisfying transportation that you can maintain, easily garage, drive anywhere you want and have fun with anytime the mood hits you. Sure, you can't drive your car to Mackinaw Island,

but in a car you are not limited to driving from one parking lot to another parking lot either.

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