



A Better Way to Fly?

After years of hiring and owning aeroplanes, including classic 'group A' types, one experienced and active pilot concludes that microlights are the real answer to his- and, very likely, your needs

Words: Ray Wilkinson

Welcome to the World of Aviation – you are now officially broke.' So says one of my tee-shirts, and for many it's not far wrong. The Editor's article in *Pilot's* most recent 'Where to

Fly Guide' (July 2024) detailed the cost of learning to fly, and the numbers were big, and are getting bigger. I fly 100 hours a year, and have averaged that number over the last ten years. I'm paying for it all myself, yet I'm not a banker, Premier League footballer or a high court judge.



Maybe not the best looking of aircraft, the SkyRanger is a popular syndicate microlight that can provide lots of flying at minimal cost

A pilot colleague at my club is in a syndicate with one other member, and he flies 200 hours a year. If I were hiring an aircraft – even a Cessna 152 – for 100 hours of flying, I would be forking out upwards of £20,000 a year. In a syndicate with a Cessna 152, a hundred hours would cost me perhaps £12,000; in addition I need to shell out to join the syndicate, plus a monthly subscription towards the fixed costs. For something bigger, like a Cessna 172 or Piper PA-28, you can add a few more thousand pounds. There must be a better way, and there is.

AN ALTERNATIVE?

Let's step back a little and look at this differently. One point that needs to be made very clear – you *don't* need a PPL to fly a Part-21 aircraft, like the aforementioned Cessna 172 or Piper PA-28. You can fly a simple aircraft up to two tonnes MTOW, and with no more than four on board, on an NPPL, which is easier and cheaper to obtain. In this case, 'simple' means not a twin and with a piston engine. Retractable undercarriages and constant-speed propellers do not stop an aircraft being simple, according to the regulations. The SSEA (simple, single-engine aircraft) rating on an NPPL makes this possible. Most pilots don't know about the SSEA, and the training schools aren't going to tell you. The CAA has done a dreadful job of publicising it as well, and it's



PHOTO: KEITH WILSON



PHOTO: WENDY TURNER

▲ The Cessna 152 remains an attractive training aircraft – especially when refurbished like the Cambridge Aero Club model illustrated – but is appreciably more expensive to operate than a microlight

costing student pilots dear – and costing the whole business of flying by putting many off learning in the first place. To add the rating to an existing NPPL requires a minimum of five hours of flying, plus two flight tests – a navigation test and a GST (General Skill Test, once known as the GFT – General Flying Test), though the NPPL GST is much shorter than the PPL GST.

Ask yourself what kind of flying you really want to do, taking costs and

benefits into account. Don't start by considering what kind of *licence* you'd like, but what kind of *flying* you want to do, and how much of it you'd be able to afford. Why not set a realistic annual

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budget for your flying, and work out how many hours you could afford within that budget? Let's take an example of £5,000 a year, plus an option to invest some (returnable) money up front, making a

syndicate a possibility. Put more money up front and you could consider buying your own aircraft – it's affordable, if you go about it the right way. If you haven't got the money, a mortgage on the aircraft might be an option – it may still save money in the long run.

I've taken some typical prices from UK websites, where relevant, plus my own experience. Ignoring for the moment any up-front investment, and any shiny things we all seem to be drawn to, but including



▲ No, you don't need a PPL to fly a Part-21 aircraft like this Robin DR400, though the fuel and maintenance costs will really hurt



PHOTOS: KEITH WILSON

▲ 'Everything a 152 should be, but isn't,' says Ray: the Ikarus C42 has broadly similar performance, is wider inside, and burns twelve to thirteen litres of mogas an hour at eighty knots

monthly costs, £5,000 buys you:

- Hiring a Cessna 152: £159 per hour with no monthly fees = 31 hours
- Hiring a Cessna 172: £219 per hour with no monthly fees = 23 hours
- Syndicate PA-28 or Robin DR400: £120 per hour plus £100 per month = 32 hours
- Syndicate SkyRanger microlight: £30 an hour plus £45 per month = 150 hours
- Owning a Group A or microlight Eurostar: £20 an hour plus £3,000 a year = 100 hours

Yes, you read that right – you could fly 150 hours a year in a SkyRanger microlight for five grand. It's not the most glamorous of aircraft, but you can fly five times as many hours as any of the three Part-21 options I've listed. Invest a little more, and you might be able to find an Ikarus C42 or

a Group A Eurostar syndicate, with very similar hourly and monthly costs to the SkyRanger, I've often described a C42 as everything a 152 should be, but isn't – it has broadly similar performance, is wider inside, and burns twelve to thirteen litres of mogas an hour at eighty knots. It's a delight to fly, being light and responsive, and is very reliable and long-lasting, which is why so many microlight schools still use it for training. My own club has a C42 that's flown well over 10,000 hours training student pilots. If buying is an option, then second-hand SkyRangers start at about £20,000, and a Eurostar will set you back about double that.

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Of course, with a microlight you can't fly at night, can't carry more than one passenger, can't fly in IMC, and so on. Sure, but in ten years and almost 1,000

hours of flying everything from flexwing microlights to Cessna 172s, PA-28s and Robin DR400s, I've never taken more than one passenger at a time. Maybe I should have, but take another look above at the price you have to pay just to have these options, before the necessary training is even considered. What you *can* do is fly a microlight in most countries, and most will accept a self-declared medical (though not on a Group A aircraft).

LOW-COST LEARNING

Walk into a typical flying school and ask how much it costs to learn to fly, and they will probably quote at least £15,000, if they are being realistic. (If they quote any less, they definitely aren't being realistic.) That's based on a series of assumptions – that you want to get a PPL, and that you will complete the training in the



▲ Excellent for training, especially in modernised form like this Cambridge Aero Club example, the C152 is well equipped – but how essential is this to your personal flying, where the SkyRanger (top) or C42's sparse Day VFR panel (left) may offer all you need

minimum time. They may add a caveat on this second point. Until the CAA reforms pilot licensing, even if it goes the way we hope and expect, for the time being those wanting a PPL must

PHOTO: RAY WILKINSON



▲ It's perfectly possible to fly a microlight aircraft abroad – this is Ray's C42 landing at Le Touquet, where he was made very welcome. Most large airports such as Southend and Norwich will also welcome microlights and small Group A aircraft

complete at least 45 hours of flying training, which must take place at a DTO – a Declared Training Organisation. Very few will achieve the required standard in this time, and a typical middle-aged student with average ability might need 60-65 hours. I wonder how many potential pilots simply turn round and walk out when they hear these numbers.

Unless you specifically approach a microlight training school, nobody will consider cheaper options, of which there are several. I hear that some DTOs will actually start training in a C42, but I doubt those schools would be easy to find.

Getting the licence isn't the end of it – it has to be kept in validation. That means that there's a minimum number of hours to maintain the licence, and of course those hours have to be flown at the rates above.

Even if you decide that a PPL is, after all, what you want to achieve, consider starting with a few hours in a microlight. Before you listen to the warnings (here and elsewhere) that microlight hours don't count towards your minimum

hours, remember there are two aspects to the training – acquiring the necessary skills to fly the aircraft to a suitable standard, and completing the minimum hours. If you accept that you won't reach the required level of competence within the minimum, you can opt for cheaper training to begin with, and save some money. Not only that, but those who learn on a single type learn to fly *one aircraft*, whereas those who fly several types learn to fly *aircraft*.

Microlight training costs around £140 per hour. Some clubs charge £150 or even £160 per hour, but in some parts of the country it can be as little as £130. You'll still be flying a real aircraft, with the same basic controls as a larger aeroplane – stick and rudder. Flying is flying, and you can use these cheaper lessons to learn the basics. Even twenty hours will be a great benefit, even if they don't count towards the minimum PPL hours. You may even decide that you prefer the microlights after all, and want to stick with them, or perhaps fly a variety of aircraft through a mix of ownership and syndicates. My own

aircraft is a Group A Eurostar, bridging the two classes, and it's a delight to fly, though I'm also a member of a syndicate that has a beautiful Robin DR400.

If you decide to stick with microlights,

then you will benefit from a licensing policy that requires fewer of those cheaper hours. For an unrestricted licence, the minimum is 25 hours, and there are only five exams to take. Once you have the NPPL with a microlight rating, you can begin to think about adding that useful SSEA rating, though many microlight pilots are happy to stick at 600kg.

GIVE IT A GO!

If you haven't been into the real world since the millennium (and don't usually read *Pilot*), you may be stuck with the idea of microlights as being toy aircraft, somehow not quite like real ones. The days of microlights being powered by smelly two-strokes that seized every other flight are long gone, and most are powered by the robust, reliable and fuel-efficient Rotax 912 and its derivatives. These excellent engines will rival the 'Lyconental' gas guzzlers for service life and reliability, and are much cheaper to maintain. If you *have* got loads of money, then you could invest in one of the new 600kg Light Sport Microlights like the Shark. The price will rival top-end sports cars, but it has retractable undercarriage and a constant-speed

propeller, and will leave most light aircraft in the dust. Even the Group A Alpi Pioneer 300 I used to own (at a rather more modest price) could cruise comfortably at around 125-130 knots,

PHOTO: KEITH WILSON



▲ Offering impressive fuel economy and proven reliability, the ubiquitous Rotax 912 flat-four powers the SkyRanger and most other modern microlights, and is the key to their ascendancy

burning about eighteen litres per hour of mogas – again, less than £30 an hour in fuel and, as a permit aircraft, didn't cost me £10,000 a year to keep flying.

Studies, I advise many people about flying, but never tell them specifically what they should fly. Instead, I recommend trying both microlights

and light aircraft and making up their own mind. I would do the same for

any seasoned pilot who likes to try something different, especially if the finances are tight.

You may be stuck with the idea of microlights being toy aircraft...

Having started with an old saying, I'll finish with one: don't knock it till you've tried it. As a university lecturer in Pilot

▼ This Pioneer 300 is fast and enjoyable to fly, but running costs are very low, burning eighteen litres per hour of mogas at 125 knots – about £30 an hour in fuel



PHOTO: RAY WILKINSON