

# Light-Sport Aircraft Ownership Classic Airplanes within Reach

by John S. Craparo

Student pilots and certificated pilots alike may find it advantageous to own an airplane. The student working toward sport pilot certification may benefit by having a light-sport aircraft (LSA) close at hand for all of their training. The certificated pilot would have an airplane not shared by students or pilots. Costs to own, operate and maintain an airplane may be surprising... because they are within the reach of most.

The FAA rules for light sport aircraft were written in a way that allows a wide variety of models to meet the specification. Airplanes can be home-built, experimental, and certified. While the special light-sport aircraft (S-LSA) were developed specifically for sport pilots, many classic airplanes qualify as models that these pilots may fly legally and inexpensively.

Standard category classic airplanes include the familiar Piper J3 Cub, Ercoupe 415 C, and the Luscombe 8A. These planes are still widely available on the used aircraft market. They are trusted for their fly-ability and longevity as they have all served as primary training aircraft since the 1930s. Today they have a renewed following due in large part to the sport pilot movement.

A quick survey of several airplane classified advertising websites found 11 examples of these airplanes all reported as airworthy. Average price for the Piper was \$40,000 with a range of \$32K to \$49.5K; the Ercoupe average was \$19,500 with a range of \$15.5K to \$26.5K; and the Luscombe average was \$19,800 with a range of \$17K to \$22.5K. These vintage aircraft can be obtained for the price of a used automobile. Those that are well equipped and maintained will be found on the high side of the price range, but even a superb example will cost a fraction of the price of most new S-LSA airplanes. Within reach is a handsome airplane that will attract attention wherever the wanderlust may lead while sipping about 5 gallons of fuel an hour.

The secret to buying an older airplane is taking time to insure the find is airworthy or can be made airworthy while moving quickly to secure its ownership. Well maintained classic airplanes, especially LSA machines, do not stay on the market very long, so a willingness and ability to act fast is essential. The basic steps to buying any airplane are:

**Identify the type of airplane** – In this case a standard category airplane

which meets the specification for LSA. According to the federal regulations, to be LSA compliant the airplane always had to fit within the specification for LSA. For instance, if an Ercoupe was changed from a 415-C model to a 415-D model during its lifetime, it is not an LSA and cannot be flown solo by a sport pilot.

**Search for good examples for sale** – Searching online websites is the fastest way to find aircraft for sale. Sites like aviatorshotline.com and tradeplane.com are the most popular online sources. Check FAA and NTSB records for any damage history that might have been reported on the airplane. An easy source for all these reports is report.myairplane.com. Their background investigation feature will compile reports from FAA and NTSB databases effortlessly. All that's needed is the N number painted on the side of the plane.

**Become familiar with terms** – The airplane advertising has condition descriptions. Acronyms like TT ( Total Time) refer to the amount of time the airplane has been flown since it left the factory; SMOH ( Since Major Overhaul) refers to the time the engine has run since it was overhauled, remanufactured or replaced. If stumped, acronymfinder.com proves to include most aviation abbreviations.

**Which make and model** – A list of standard category airplanes that fit the FAA's specification for LSA can be found on the EAA's SportPilot.org website. The specific model numbers of Piper, Luscombe, Aeronca, Ercoupe, Taylorcraft and others are listed. Float equipped planes are here too. Some feature side by side seating arrangements and others are tandem with one seat in front of the other. Visit a local airport to find examples to look at in person.

**Purchase or download two books** – Jim Ellis wrote the great book, now in its third edition, *Own Your Own Airplane*. It lists many of



John Craparo stands in front of his LSA eligible 1946 J3 Cub on straight floats. He "financed" this airplane by making a trade of a low time S-LSA airplane he owned with the seaplane's CFI owner. The owner was nice enough to throw many hours of training into the deal.

the classics and talks about the flying characteristics of each. He also provides a thorough discussion of how to insure an airplane and finance its purchase. The second book is an FAA publication which can be downloaded from [faa.gov](http://faa.gov). It is the standard manual used by all certified aircraft repairman, *Handbook for Mechanics: Federal Aviation Regulations, Advisory Circular 43-13-1B*. The contents of this book, and especially the appendix which provides aircraft inspection guidelines, are a great primer to what to look for in eligible purchases.

**Set a budget** – The little survey above gives a good example of the price range one can expect to find when shopping for a classic LSA. Airworthy

investment. There is a shortage of LSA aircraft available for flight training. A flight school or CFI might be interested in a lease-back arrangement that allows them to provide training in the airplane while creating a small income stream for the owner.

**Where to keep it** – The airplane will likely be about 60 years old. It may be cloth or metal skinned. Will it sit in a hangar at the airport, be tied down outside at the airport on the open ramp, or perhaps will it be parked under a shed with open walls? A tie-down on the open ramp at an airport may generally cost between \$20 to \$50 a month. A private hangar, offering the best protection from the elements and prying eyes and hands, can

but a great deal can be learned before jumping in. That includes leads on airplanes up for sale or about to be offered. Nearby owners might even offer a visit to see their airplanes.

**Find an A&P IA mechanic** – An airframe and power-plant mechanic with an inspection authorization will be essential to the airplane search. Go down or call the local airport and ask around for a mechanic who has worked on the make and model of the desired airplane. Many of the older mechanics will be familiar with the rigging, engines, carburetor and other features of the type. They will also understand how to repair them and give advice on what one should look for in a good plane.

**Contact the owner** – Once the search is narrowed, contact the owner. Ask questions about how long they have owned the airplane and how it was used. Ask if all of the records are with the airplane from the time it left the factory. There should be logbooks that cover the airframe, engine(s) and propeller(s). Records for the airplane and the components may have been recorded together or kept in separate books. There may be multiple volumes of each due to the age of the plane. It is best to have a complete record, but logs do get lost. During this process request a CD from the FAA. The FAA keeps a record of all filings about the airplane and will supply this record for a fee of about \$10. It is also advisable to do a title search on the airplane to insure the person selling has the right to do so.

**Arrange pre-buy inspection** – The plane under consideration may not be local. In that case, a pre-buy inspection may have to be done by a mechanic in the other locale. A pre-buy inspection might be offered by the current owner, but this is not advisable. An impartial set of eyes and hands must inspect the plane. As part of budgeting, expect to spend about \$500 on each inspection. I say each because the perfect aircraft may not be found on the first or even second try. The cost on the pre-buy inspection is lost if the choice to move on is made. When buying a plane, insist that it undergoes an annual inspection paid for by the current owner before taking delivery.



Flying over central Texas in his restored 1946 Ercoupe 415C is a great pleasure. On hot days he can slide the windows down for open cockpit flying. John paid \$10,000 for this airplane, but invested another \$20,000 in its restoration after trucking home to Texas from Maryland.

aircraft can be found for \$17 to \$50 thousand dollars. The spending decision depends on the goal. An airplane in pristine condition with a low time engine will demand a premium price. If the goal is a good plane, in need of cosmetic repairs and perhaps some serviceable problems, then spending less today is possible with the understanding further investment will be needed later. It is important to ensure the airplane considered undergoes a pre-buy inspection by a qualified mechanic. Banks will finance these aircraft and home equity loans are a viable source of funding. Placing the airplane into a flying club and allowing others to pay a fee for its use is a way to defray the

cost between \$200 and \$600 a month. Consider what is available at the local airport or an alternate one within reasonable driving distance to find the best accommodations. Some busy areas have waiting lists, so check before buying.

**Find a type or owners club** – A club that specializes in the aircraft being considered usually has one or more national owner-clubs. Many have a presence on the internet via electronic bulletin boards. Here one can read archived discussions about the airplane under consideration. Questions related to ownership can be directed to current owners that gather in these forums. Not all the advice will be impartial or expert,



Here is a before and after look at the cockpit of the Ercoupe. The restoration called for a classic look and original parts were sourced from Univair in Colorado, the type certificate owner.

This is where one can offer to have the person doing the pre-buy complete the annual if the current owner agrees to pay for the remainder of the inspection and needed repairs.

**Make the offer** – The current owner will likely have a price in mind that has been published or discussed. Take the results of the pre-buy, along with the costs of any parts and labor the A&P IA reports will be needed, and your offer. Ask the A&P to assess other aspects of the plane which would support the negotiation. Paint condition, interior condition, and existence of log books should be considered. Bad paint or hail damage can easily discount any bid by 30% (unless already considered and mentioned by the owner) and missing logs might call for a price half of what is being asked. When ready to make the offer, verbally list the reasons for the offer and then the dollar amount of the bid. Do not say anything more as to not help the seller's argument for something higher. Wait for a reaction. Be careful not to walk away from a great plane for a few dollars.

**Insurance** – The cost here varies with the underwriter, the flight record of those who will fly it, where the plane is kept and type of field it is flown from, where it is flown, and even the owner's credit worthiness. Generally these two seat airplanes have known track records from a risk perspective. Since they takeoff, fly and land at slower speeds, the likelihood of getting hurt in them is lower. It would not be unusual to find annual insurance coverage that includes damages for ground, movement, and hull to be in the ballpark of \$1,000. Be sure that the airplane is insured before taking possession as it may not be insured by the seller.

**Transporting it home** – If the airplane is airworthy, it can be flown home by the new owner after some training with an instructor and proper planning. Other options include paying someone to ferry the aircraft to the home airport. The student pilot may ask the instructor to use this time for cross-country dual training. Ferry pilots are available for hire and they can be found through the same publications that advertise airplanes for sale or in many cases the model's type club. If the airplane is not airworthy or there is no desire to have it flown, most of these airplanes can be loaded onto a trailer and hauled by road. This will require that the wings are removed by a certified mechanic. There are services available for moving airplanes and they are also bonded against loss and damage.

**Restoration** – Once the airplane is home, restoration can be considered. If that pristine example was purchased, nothing more than a proper maintenance program and a regular wash is needed. In other cases an investment of three or four times the purchase cost might be needed to create a show piece. The best thing to do from the very start is plan a budget for the new plane while deciding on whether it will be an everyday flyer or perhaps something to only be displayed at occasional airshows.

Other things to consider when purchasing a classic LSA include the engine installed in the machine. Earlier examples of these planes may have 50 or 65 horsepower engines. Today's pilots are heavier and airports have more urban sprawl around them. Consider airplanes with 85 to 100 horsepower output. These will generally provide better

climb rates. In addition, find out how the propeller is pitched. Is it a climb prop or one that is optimized for cruise speed? Depending upon the altitude of the home airport, density altitude and temperature should be considered when choosing an engine and propeller pitch. If the type certificate allows it or a special type certificate exists, both the engine and propeller can be optimized after purchase.

Of the standard category LSA classics, only the Ercoupe is a tricycle gear. A tail-wheel endorsement or seaplane privileges will be needed to fly any of the others. Most of these aircraft did not come from the factory with electric starters or radios. Some may remain that way. If an airplane without a starter is acquired, the pilot must be trained and confident enough to hand prop the machine. While radios are not required equipment, not having them will limit airspace operations and may jeopardize safety. Consider a good handheld radio at the very least.

These airplanes have all metal skins, cloth skins, or a combination of the two. Metal skins are sometimes left unpainted. These look great when polished, but take some work to keep sparkling. Unpainted skin is lighter as paint can add 100 lbs. to the gross weight of an airplane.

A used light sport aircraft can provide the owner with a great deal of pleasure and convenience. A classic airplane in nice condition is also a source of pride. These airplanes are beautiful and attract attention wherever they go.

As an aside, even though I love these classics, it does not mean that the new S-LSA models displayed at Sebring are not on my radar!

*John S. Craparo is both a private pilot, rated in balloons and gliders and an advanced ground instructor. He also flies airplanes and seaplanes as a sport pilot. He is a Light Sport Repairman with a Maintenance rating for airplanes, weight-shift control aircraft, and powered parachutes. The restoration of his 1946 Ercoupe is one of his accomplishments. That plane sits in a hangar next to his 1946 J-3 Cub on straight floats. John can be reached at john.craparo@gmail.com.*