

The Aircraft Buyer's Guide

How much it really costs to own an aircraft, where the money actually goes, and the habits that separate happy owners from stressed ones. Plain English, honest numbers, and a checklist you can take to a viewing.

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 Written by SkyStudy · skystudyatpl.com

SECTION 1

The two price tags on every aircraft

Every aircraft is sold with one price on the listing and a second, invisible price that never appears anywhere: the cost of keeping it flying, year after year. The first number is the one buyers negotiate over. The second is the one that decides whether ownership makes them happy.

Here is the uncomfortable rule of thumb: over five to ten years of typical private flying, the ongoing costs of a piston aircraft often add up to as much as the purchase price, sometimes more. Buyers consistently underestimate this, not because they are careless, but because the purchase price is one visible number and the ownership cost is twenty small invisible ones.

The fix is simple: before you fall in love with a specific aircraft, build its annual budget. The worksheet at the back of this guide walks you through every line, and the free online calculator listed there does the arithmetic for you.

SECTION 2

Buy for the flying you actually do

The most expensive mistake in aircraft buying is not overpaying. It is buying for the mission you fly twice a year instead of the one you fly every other weekend. A six-seat twin bought for the annual family trip to the coast spends fifty weekends a year burning twin-sized fixed costs to carry one person on sunny-Saturday flights a simple single would have done better and cheaper.

- Write down your last twelve months of flying: trips, seats used, distances.
- Buy for the 90 percent mission. Rent or charter for the exceptions.
- Be honest about hours. If you flew 60 hours last year, you will probably not fly 150 next year just because you own the aircraft.

SECTION 3

New versus used

A new aircraft costs dramatically more to buy, carries warranty cover and the steepest early depreciation, and should produce very few maintenance surprises in its first years. A used aircraft costs far less up front but brings its history with it: the engine has consumed part of its life, parts age on calendar time as well as flight time, and deferred maintenance from a previous owner becomes your bill.

Neither is automatically the better deal. The used aircraft with a fresh engine, clean records and a careful owner is often the sweet spot. The cheap one with a run-out engine is not cheap at all: it is a full-price aircraft that has hidden the overhaul bill inside the discount.

SECTION 4

Fixed costs: what you pay even if it never flies

Fixed costs arrive on their own schedule, completely indifferent to whether you flew. For a modest aircraft they typically include:

- **Hangar or tie-down.** Indoor storage protects paint, avionics and resale value, and costs accordingly. Location moves this number more than anything else you control.
- **Insurance.** A hull premium (a percentage of the aircraft's value) plus liability cover. Section 8 covers this properly.
- **The annual inspection.** A mandatory yearly check by a maintenance organisation, plus the airworthiness review. Budget for the inspection itself; anything it finds goes in the maintenance column.
- **Financing.** If you borrowed to buy, the loan payments arrive monthly whether the weather cooperated or not.
- **Subscriptions and fees.** Navigation database updates, charts, weather services, tracking, registry fees, owner association memberships. Individually small, collectively real.

Why low utilisation hurts

Fixed costs spread over your flying hours. At 50 hours a year, hangarage and insurance dominate and the hourly cost can be shocking. If the fixed share of your budget is much above two thirds at your realistic hours, price the alternatives: renting, a syndicate share, or block charter.

SECTION 5

Running costs: what every hour really costs

Running costs are created by each flying hour. Fuel is the obvious one, and the only one most new buyers price. The honest hourly rate has more lines:

- **Fuel.** Burn per hour times your local price. Avgas for most pistons, Jet A-1 for diesels and turbines, and prices vary widely by airfield and country.
- **Oil and consumables.** Small but constant.
- **Engine and propeller reserves.** The overhaul is coming; the reserve is how you pay for it without drama. Section 6 explains this properly.
- **Unscheduled maintenance.** Alternators fail, radios die, tyres wear. Experienced owners budget a per-hour amount for the things that break between inspections, because something always does.

SECTION 6

Reserves: the smartest habit in ownership

Aircraft engines run to a published TBO, a time between overhauls, often around 2,000 hours for pistons and more for turbines. When it arrives, the overhaul can cost as much as a nice car, or for turbines, a nice house. This is not a risk; it is a certainty with a known date.

The habit that separates calm owners from panicked ones: divide the overhaul cost by the TBO and move that amount into a separate account for every hour flown. An engine with a £32,000 overhaul and a 2,000-hour TBO costs £16 per flying hour, every hour, from day one. Fly 100 hours a year and the account grows by £1,600 a year, quietly, until the overhaul pays for itself.

Buying mid-time

If you buy an aircraft with a mid-time engine, the market has already priced that in, but your reserve account should start from the hours actually consumed, not from zero.

SECTION 7

Financing: how borrowing changes the picture

Aircraft loans work like mortgages: a deposit, a fixed or variable rate, and a term often between 10 and 20 years. The monthly payment becomes one more fixed cost, and over the term you repay noticeably more than you borrowed; that interest belongs in your ownership budget, not in a mental footnote.

Two honest questions before borrowing: could you still afford the flying itself (the variable costs) comfortably after the monthly payment, and could you absorb a surprise maintenance bill in the same month as the payment? If either answer is shaky, a cheaper aircraft or a share is the calmer route.

SECTION 8

Insurance basics

Aircraft insurance has two main parts. Hull cover insures the aircraft itself and is priced as a percentage of its agreed value, commonly somewhere between roughly half a percent and two percent a year depending on the aircraft and the pilot. Liability cover protects everyone else: passengers, people and property on the ground.

The premium is personal. Your total hours, hours on type, ratings and recent flying all move it, which is why two owners of identical aircraft can pay very different premiums. Low-time pilots stepping up to faster aircraft pay the most, and insurers sometimes require dual instruction on type before solo cover begins. Get real quotes early; the insurance market has opinions about your dream aircraft.

SECTION 9

The pre-purchase inspection: never skip it

A pre-purchase inspection is an independent examination of the aircraft and its paperwork by an engineer who works for you, not the seller. It typically costs a few hundred to a couple of thousand pounds depending on depth. It routinely finds corrosion, undocumented repairs, aged components and paperwork gaps that change the price by far more than the inspection cost.

There is no version of this decision where skipping the inspection is the smart move. A seller who resists one is telling you something important. Walk away happy; the inspection fee on a deal you abandon is the cheapest aircraft lesson you will ever buy.

SECTION 10

Depreciation and resale

Aircraft are depreciating assets, just slower and lumpier than cars. New aircraft lose value fastest in their first years. Used aircraft depreciate more gently, but the engine clock never stops: an aircraft approaching TBO is worth roughly the same aircraft with a fresh engine minus the overhaul bill.

What holds value: complete and tidy maintenance records, no damage history, hangared storage, desirable avionics, and honest engines. What destroys it: gaps in the paperwork, corrosion and long periods parked outside without flying. If you buy well and care for the aircraft, depreciation is a modest annual cost; if you buy the wrong airframe, it is a large one you discover only at resale.

SECTION 11

Shared ownership and syndicates

Here is the arithmetic most private pilots eventually discover: the fixed costs do not care how many owners the aircraft has. Split a hangar, an insurance policy and an annual inspection four ways and each member's fixed bill drops to a quarter, while everyone still pays their own fuel and reserves for the hours they fly. For pilots flying under 75 to 100 hours a year, a well-run syndicate is very often the most rational route to the same flying.

The trade-offs are availability (booking the popular sunny Saturday), group decisions about maintenance and upgrades, and the need for a clear written agreement about money, usage and exits. Good syndicates solve all three with a calendar, a bank account and a one-page agreement. Aircraft shares are listed alongside whole aircraft on aircraftsaleshub.com, so you can compare both routes in one place.

SECTION 12

The hidden and forgotten costs

Every experienced owner has a list of lines that never appeared in the pre-purchase spreadsheet. The common ones:

- Landing, approach and handling fees away from home.
- Calendar-life components that expire unflown: hoses, belts, batteries, life rafts.
- Avionics database subscriptions that quietly renew.
- Airworthiness directives: mandatory fixes on your type, on the regulator's schedule, at your expense.
- Repainting, interior work and corrosion treatment as the airframe ages.
- Training and currency: type checkouts, revalidations, instructor time.
- The ferry flight and duties when you buy from another country.

None of these is ruinous alone. Together they are why seasoned owners add a contingency line of 10 to 15 percent on top of any budget, including the one this guide helps you build.

So, is it worth it?

Financially, ownership rarely beats renting until you fly serious hours. That is the honest answer, and every good broker, engineer and owner will tell you the same. But ownership was never really a financial product. It is walking to your own aircraft on a summer evening, knowing every noise it makes and every entry in its logbooks, and going where you want, when you want, without a booking sheet.

The owners who love it are the ones who went in with honest numbers. So build yours: run your realistic hours, your region and your class of aircraft through the worksheet on the next pages, add the contingency, and see how the figure feels. If it still makes you smile, you are probably going to be one of the happy ones.

Quick answers

Typical piston single, 100 hours a year, UK or Europe: honest all-in budgets usually land between roughly £18,000 and £35,000 a year (EUR 20,000 to 40,000) once everything is counted. **Rent or buy?** Below roughly 75 to 100 hours a year, renting or a share is usually cheaper per hour. **Do aircraft hold value?** Better than cars, worse than most buyers hope; records, engine time and storage decide it.

The viewing-day checklist

Print this page and take it to every viewing. It will not replace the pre-purchase inspection, but it will stop you paying for one on an aircraft that fails the basics.

Before you travel

- ☐ Confirm total airframe hours, engine hours since new or overhaul, and propeller hours.
- ☐ Ask for the last three annual inspection reports and the current airworthiness review certificate.
- ☐ Ask directly: any damage history, gear-up landings, prop strikes or major repairs?
- ☐ Check the type's common airworthiness directives and whether they are done.
- ☐ Ask what avionics databases and subscriptions transfer with the sale.
- ☐ Get an insurance quote for you, on this type, before you view. Surprises here kill deals.

At the aircraft

- ☐ Logbooks first, aircraft second. Complete, continuous, legible records for airframe, engine and propeller.
- ☐ Match the serial numbers in the logbooks to the data plates on the airframe and engine.
- ☐ Look for corrosion: battery box, control surface hinges, under the belly, wing spar area.
- ☐ Check for fresh paint used to hide filler or repairs; sight along the fuselage and wings.
- ☐ Oil: when was it last changed, and is there an oil analysis history?
- ☐ Ask when each calendar-life item is due: hoses, seat belts, ELT battery, transponder checks.
- ☐ Fly it, or have someone qualified fly it. Every system, every radio, every instrument.

Before you pay

- ☐ Independent pre-purchase inspection by an engineer YOU choose, at a shop the seller does not control.
- ☐ Title and registration check: no liens, no registry surprises, deregistration status clear.
- ☐ Written record of what is included: headsets, covers, tow bar, spare parts, documents.
- ☐ Budget built and stress-tested: the worksheet on the next page, plus 10 to 15 percent contingency.
- ☐ If it is a share: read the syndicate agreement, the accounts and the booking rules before signing.

Your annual budget worksheet

Fill in each line for the aircraft you are considering, in your own currency. Quotes beat guesses: an insurer and a maintenance shop will pin down the biggest unknowns.

FIXED COSTS (PER YEAR)	WHERE TO GET THE NUMBER	YOUR FIGURE
Hangar or tie-down	Your airfield's current price list	.....
Insurance (hull + liability)	A real quote, for you, on this type	.....
Annual inspection + airworthiness review	The shop that will maintain it	.....
Loan payments (if financing)	Your lender's schedule, 12 months	.....
Subscriptions and databases	Current owner's renewal invoices	.....
Registry fees and memberships	Regulator + association price lists	.....

RUNNING COSTS (PER FLYING HOUR)	WHERE TO GET THE NUMBER	YOUR FIGURE
Fuel (burn per hour × local price)	Type handbook + your airfield price	.....
Oil and consumables	Type clubs and owner groups	.....
Engine reserve (overhaul cost ÷ TBO)	Overhaul shop quote for this engine	.....
Propeller / rotor reserve	Prop shop quote ÷ overhaul interval	.....
Unscheduled maintenance reserve	Owner groups; be pessimistic	.....

PUTTING IT TOGETHER	YOUR FIGURE
Realistic hours per year	
Annual total: fixed + (hourly × hours)	
Contingency: add 10 to 15 percent	

Honest annual budget	.....
Cost per flying hour (total ÷ hours)	.....

Prefer it done for you?

For a quick estimate by aircraft model, Aircraft Sales Hub's own operating-cost calculator lives at aircraftsaleshub.com. The free online version of this full worksheet, with starting figures for your aircraft class and region and up to three aircraft compared side by side, is at skystudyatpl.com/aircraft-ownership-cost-calculator. No sign-up, every figure editable.

Frequently asked questions

How much does it cost to own a plane per year?

For a typical four-seat piston single flown about 100 hours a year in the UK or Europe, honest all-in budgets usually land somewhere between roughly £18,000 and £35,000 a year (EUR 20,000 to 40,000) once fuel, hangarage, insurance, the annual inspection, maintenance reserves and subscriptions are all counted. Turboprops and jets sit in a different league entirely.

Is it cheaper to rent or own an aircraft?

Below roughly 75 to 100 flying hours a year, renting or a syndicate share is usually cheaper per hour, because ownership's fixed costs spread over too few hours. Above that, ownership starts making financial sense, on top of the non-financial benefits like availability and knowing the aircraft's history.

What is an engine reserve?

Money set aside every flying hour towards the engine overhaul that is coming at TBO. Divide the expected overhaul cost by the TBO hours and save that amount per hour. Owners who do this pay for the overhaul calmly from the reserve account; owners who skip it meet one of aviation's largest bills overnight.

Do aircraft hold their value?

Better than cars, worse than most buyers hope. Airframes with good maintenance records, no damage history, mid-time engines and desirable avionics hold value best. Aircraft age in hours and calendar time both matter, and an engine approaching TBO is priced down by roughly the cost of the overhaul it needs.

About this guide

This guide is a free resource for the readers of **Aircraft Sales Hub** (aircraftsaleshub.com), the independent UK marketplace for aircraft and aircraft shares, where you can browse whole aircraft and syndicate shares side by side.

It was written by **SkyStudy** (skystudyatpl.com), an independent EASA ATPL exam-preparation platform that also builds free aviation tools, including the online ownership cost calculator mentioned in the worksheet. SkyStudy and Aircraft Sales Hub are independent of each other; this guide is a goodwill resource, not a commercial partnership, and neither party earns a commission from the other.

This guide is general information for prospective aircraft owners, not financial, legal, tax, insurance or aviation advice. All figures are indicative examples based on typical mid-2020s market levels; real costs vary with the aircraft, region and market. Confirm everything with insurers, maintenance organisations and qualified advisers before any purchase decision. It is provided in good faith, as is, without warranty of any kind. You are welcome to share this PDF freely in unmodified form. © 2026 SkyStudy (skystudyatpl.com). Version 1.0, July 2026.