

SAVVY BUYER TIPS

Even though these aircraft are bought for the enjoyment of flight rather than serious travel, replacing emotional appeal with an educated opinion of the aircraft's worth is critical for staving off inevitable heartache later.

All of these aircraft qualify for autogas use with the proper paperwork. But this is a double-edged sword. Mechanics and restorers tell us they commonly see fuel systems and engines full of rust and other junk they attribute to the hydrophilic and other properties of alcohol in auto gas.

Speaking of engines, total hours on small Continentals is often less of an issue than recent use. In addition to compression checks, a borescope for cylinder rust is a good idea for any plane that hasn't flown much recently, especially if it's been tied down outside. Some of these engines have been rebuilt so many times they won't maintain oil pressure well. Cub expert Steve Krog recommends a close check of that, both cold and hot.

If it's a cloth aircraft, the health of the fabric is central. Get an expert opinion. Recovering a Champ or Cub is \$6000 in materials alone. The labor starts at \$12,000 on top of that and can double depending on what horrors they find underneath. We can't understate the need for expert eyes here. Krog told us of a Cub buyer who showed up with a sweet deal airplane that, on examination, had its cloth screwed to its wing rather than stitched. Both wings had to be completely replaced.

The Luscombe and the Ercoupe don't get off easy. The issues there are corrosion, corrosion and corrosion. There are only a few ADs for Luscombes, but some are drill holes to drain the carry-through spar, vertical tail and gear. Ensure these have been done. Watch for cracked doorposts, too.

Corrosion on Cubs, Champs and T-craft is common at any low point, such as lower rear longerons and tail. Tapping and probing all these areas for flex or the rattle of loose rust in key. Aeronca lower landing gear legs and both Cub and Taylorcraft aileron horns often corrode due to a steel-aluminum sandwich construction. This usually means a whole new aileron.

Wooden wing spars should be checked for cracks and dry rot. Replacement with metal spars is an option for several of these aircraft. For an Ercoupe, be sure the AD for its rear spar has been complied with.

Almost all of these planes have had landing damage at least once, even Ercoupes. Check the logs for when and what was repaired. The logs may not be complete, but further records can be purchased on CD from the FAA. Also watch for old landing-gear bungees on Cubs and unserviced oleos in the Champ. The latter are very expensive to replace. Ercoupes can have issues with damaged nose gear forks and main gear struts.

This isn't just a matter of cost. None of these aircraft are quite as crash-worthy as a modern machine, especially those with a fuel tank in the cabin. We think it's an acceptable risk given the mission and low speeds. But even if the plane sings to your heart, you've got to purchase with your head.