Why Trikes?

Let me start out with a disclaimer. This article is NOT about why trikes are the best flying machines (they are, but that's not what this article is about☺). One of the things I think is so great about ultralights and light sport aircraft is that we have so many ways to scratch the flying itch. What I want to do here is shed some light on why my wife Beth and I, and many other aviators have settled on trikes as our wings of choice. For those of you looking to get into the air and confused by the available chooses hopefully you will find this helpful. Not that it will necessary lead you to trikes but will drive you to the aircraft best suited to fulfill your dreams of flight. With this disclaimer out of the way let's get to the question – Why Trikes?

I cannot even begin to tell you how often I've been asked this question. I came to triking from a General Aviation background flying fixed wing airplanes so fixed-wing pilots find my going over to trikes puzzling. They are trying to fly something bigger and faster while I went in the opposite direction. Many of them measure the value of an airplane by how fast it can go from "A" to "B." I guess that's where I parted company with many of my GA brethren. I was more interested in what lay between "A" and "B" and did not really care if there even was a "B." Consequently, I wasn't looking for the fastest flying machine. I was looking for something entirely different.

Beth and I saw our first trike in the movie *"Fly Away Home."* This is the movie about the young girl and her dad helping geese migrate and she flew a trike. By the time I saw that movie I had been out of GA flying for several years – too expensive and boring. I was not flying for transportation and flying a Cessna 172 or Piper Arrow had become as much fun as flying the family minivan. The trike looked like a flying motorcycle and to me that spelled freedom and excitement – real flying.

It took several years before we got our first flight in a trike. During that time we asked ourselves why Cessnas weren't doing it for us, and why the trike in *"Fly Away Home"* was so appealing. This introspection resulted in the following list of characteristics we wanted in a fun flying machine:

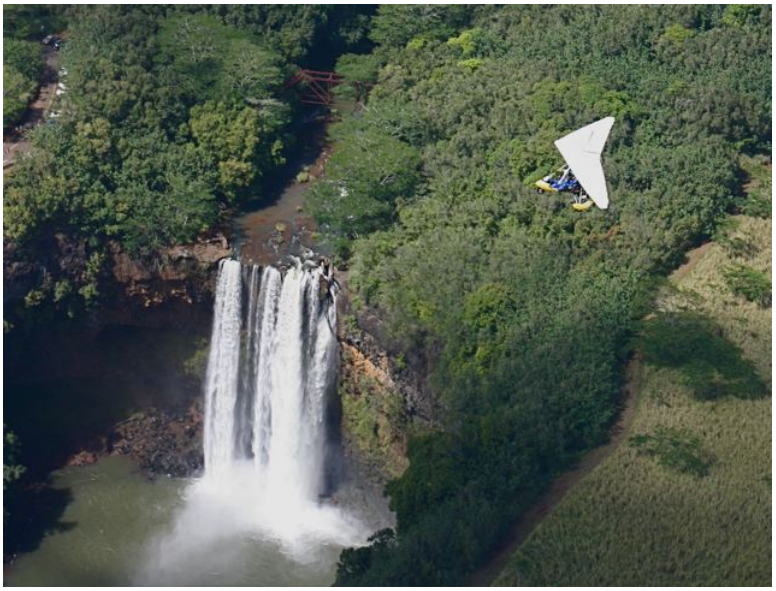
- A joy to fly (remember, this is supposed to be a "fun flying machine"),
- Ideal for exploring in the same way a motorcycle is ideal,
- Portable (makes it easier to explore and cheaper to store),
- Affordable to purchase, fly, and maintain,
- Easy, and
- Safe

With this list in mind we actually turned our focus to powered parachutes first. They were and remain the most affordable, most portable, and easiest to fly. If flown within their design parameters they are very safe. But as we continued researching we determined that they did not meet our "exploration" criteria. We wanted an aircraft that could handle some wind and had at least 200 miles in range – we wanted to be able to fly at least 100 miles from our base and get back with an hour reserve. That brought us back to trikes. And almost seven years after we saw *"Fly Away…"* we took our first trike introductory flight – unknowingly with an instructor who had worked on that movie, though we didn't discover that until later. We were hooked. A few days after that ride we bought our first trike and purchased a second for Beth a couple of months later. Not long after that we turned our passion for trikes into our business, Precision Windsports, Inc. (www.PrecisionWindsports.com).

Motorcycles of the Sky

Did you know that motorcycles are weight-shift vehicles? Anyone who has ridden one knows it. The handle bars help you initiate the turn but you have to lean into it to make the turn work. In trikes we use the "control bar" to help us "lean into" the turn. By pushing the control bar to the left or right we are actually pushing ourselves and the trike pod in the opposite direction and that causes the trike to turn in that direction. After a couple of hours in the air it becomes completely natural. Unlike an airplane you don't have to coordinate the use of rudder and ailerons to carve beautiful turns in trikes.

Like the motorcycle the trike is an open air machine. If you are looking for a sedan or station wagon the trike is NOT for you. Like the motorcycle you get to feel and smell the air. You are in it. You are flying, not driving. You are recreating. The visibility is unbelievable. Like a motorcycle you are cranking turns as you follow rivers, streams, ridgelines, railroad tracks, shorelines, and canyons – wherever your adventure takes you. But unlike a motorcycle you don't need roads. You are climbing and diving. You are in a 3-dimensional world and are no longer held captive by ribbons of asphalt. A few years ago we were exploring the Cody, WY area and saw more in an hour than most residents saw in their entire lives. I took a corporate jet pilot up for an hour and he had no idea there was so much to see at 500 feet.



Birds in Paradise (www.birdsinparadise.com) in Kauai, HI

Portable and Storable

Until triking became our business we stored our trikes in an enclosed trailer and saved ourselves a few hundred dollars a month. We would look for a promising weekend, pick

out a promising airport and go there to do some flying. We could unpack and assemble our two trikes in an hour and would use the weekend to fly/explore within 50-100 miles of the airport. When we were done we could be packed and on the road in an hour. While we have now graduated to a hanger the trike's portability remains an important aspect of their appeal. We routinely pack them up for airshows and often will combine a mini-vacation in conjunction with the show to do some exploring.

Even for those who upgrade to a hanger trikes are compact so you can typically split a hanger with one or more hanger mates.

Affordable

Like so much of life the definition of "affordable" is a relative term. I was at an airshow last June and when asked for the price of our most expensive model with all the options the guy was amazed that it was so "affordable." Just minutes before another had exclaimed trikes are too expensive and he was looking at our entry level model. Today's light sport compliant trikes range from $23,000 all the way up to $85,000 (though the average high-end trike is in the mid to high 50's). But in comparison the fixed-wing aircraft prices start in the 50's and head quickly north into the high 90's and low 100's. And for airplanes the purchase price is just the beginning of the expense. Unlike trikes, which can be "hangered" at home airplanes have to be stored at airports. There are very few truly trailer-able airplanes. The airplanes typically burn 5-6 gals/hr or more of aviation fuel (avgas) while trikes are burning 2-3 gals/hr of regular automobile gas (usually a dollar or more a gallon cheaper than avgas). Not only are trikes burning fewer gallons but the automobile fuel they use is easier on the engines and the environment than avgas.

Then there is maintenance and repairs. There is very little to maintain on a trike because there are so few moving parts. Most of trike maintenance consists of caring for the motor and periodic inspections of the rest of the aircraft. I set aside $10/hr for my trike's maintenance and may reduce it to $5 because my trikes never come close to using the money I've saved in the maintenance account. An annual inspection, if I do it myself, averages $75-100. When I was having an A&P do it I paid $350-450. Airplanes will run you two to ten times that amount.

When it comes to repairs trikes remain the affordable choice. Trikes are pretty much bolted together while airplanes are riveted, bonded, welded, and/or stitched. If you damage a trike component the repair typically consists of unbolting the damaged part and bolting the new one on. A couple of years ago a trike friend of mine damaged the leading edge of his trike wing – the repair was $1000 including the cost to ship the part from Australia. The same damage to a Cessna wing would have been $15,000 or more. For a composite airplane the cost would probably be even higher.

Safe

Maybe I should have put this at the top but when it comes to choosing a flying machine we don't even consider whether the machine is safe if we haven't already concluded it is fun and affordable. But while

"safe" may be last on the list that does not mean it is any less important than the other factors we've considered.

As a fixed-wing pilot I know that one of the greatest killers of airplane drivers is getting too low and slow. We must always be aware that if we are not careful when low and slow we can stall and potentially spin into the ground. Every year airplane pilots lose their lives on landing approaches by mismanaging speed, ailerons, and rudder and spin into the ground. But most modern trikes are hard to stall and they do not spin. Trike pilots have no fear at all of the dreaded stall/spin scenario.

Trikes are inherently stable and forgiving machines. They are powered gliders so an engine failure is rarely a life threatening event. In fact, many trike pilots routinely turn their engines off and glide to landing (not my cup of tea but for a glider pilot no big deal). For airplanes though an engine out is an in-flight emergency and considered life-threatening. And for an extra measure of safety emergency parachutes are easily installed on trikes (and more and more airplanes are offering them now too).

The biggest threat to trike pilots is the pilots themselves. While the same can be said about airplanes trikes are more forgiving. Even so trike pilots can make stupid decisions about the weather they fly in or the altitude they fly at. They can get in trouble when they fly in conditions that are too windy or they fly too low to the ground and hit something. I had a customer who ran into a 4' fence – he walked away but his trike was a mess and he was not that pretty either. I know trike pilots argue about how low is too low. Let me just say this – if you hit something while you are flying then you were flying too low. And flying low is optional – not mandatory – so give yourself some room.

The bottom line with trikes is that they will not bite you unless you kick them really hard. They are not temperamental. So for the pilot who wants to be safe trikes will treat you very well indeed.

Conclusion

So there you have it. We love trikes because we are recreational pilots with motorcycle leanings. Trikes are flying motorcycles that meet our recreational needs without breaking the bank or breaking their pilots. For us they are the essence of flying and bring joy and wonder into our lives. For more information on trikes visit our website at www.PrecisionWindsports.com.

About the Author

Terri Sipantzi is a Sport Pilot Instructor and Examiner as well as a Light Sport Aircraft Repairman and DAR. Terri & Beth Sipantzi own and operate Precision Windsports, Inc. (*www.PrecisionWindsports.com*). Precision Windsports is a full-time AirBorne dealership, providing aircraft sales and support in conjunction with concentrated flight training. They are centrally located in Lynchburg, VA and are responsible for eastern US sales. Our thanks to Birds in Paradise (*www.birdsinparadise.com*) operating in Kauai, Hawaii for the beautiful falls trike picture.