



TYPE ENVY

IT'S AMAZING HOW one's perspectives change. There was a time when I dreamed of flying—flying anything. I wasn't fussy, which was perhaps as well since all I could fly, for reasons regulatory and financial, were early-model Cessna 172s, the sort with valves in their radios and mammoth-hide seat covers, planes that even Orville and Wilbur themselves would consider hideously primitive. I flew anything I could get my hands on, regardless of how much duct tape was holding it together. Radios were a luxury; working radios were almost unheard of in the planes I flew when I was a still-fresh private pilot. Anything would do if it had wings and an engine.

Then I moved up to real flying. Real flying, as any instrument-rated pilot knows, is instrument flying. Suddenly pootling around under visual flight rules was passé in the extreme. Navigation was something that one did strictly within the cockpit; looking out and following roads, rivers and railways was for the birds. Real pilots don't do

pilotage; real pilots live (and, if they're not careful, die) by VORs and NDBs. GPS, of course, was strictly for wimps; this judgement was based, of course, solely on empirical evidence and in no way upon the fact that the planes in which I learned instruments didn't have GPS units.

I had arrived. I was an instrument pilot. An instrument-equipped 172 was a real man's plane—I was doing some serious flying. Or so I thought. Then I saw the error of my ways; then I saw the real real man's plane sitting on the ramp. The Piper parked at the far end of the tarmac was clearly more of a plane than I'd been flying until now. And it wasn't hard to see why.

It was the second engine. That was what I needed. I knew as soon as I saw the Seminole that I'd been wasting my time flying toys around the sky until now. Cessnas—keep 'em. I took my first flight in a twin and realized that now I'd found my real home in the sky. Singles? Thank you very much, but I flew real real men's planes now. A sin-

gle-engine plane, as any real pilot could see, was just for pilots who couldn't handle more than one engine at a time.

I trained in the Seminole, the new object of my aeronautical lust. Yes, this was flying at its best, flying multi-engine planes, flying proper planes. I was having fun. Of course, most of my flying was VFR again, but that was fine. I came to realize the error of my ways—IFR was for pilots who needed controllers to tell them how to fly. Real pilots knew how to fly purely by the seats of their pants. Who needs a directional gyro? Just follow that dirty great road down there. Navigation? Just get to the beach and turn left and you'll be there in no time.

And so I was a happy man until last week. All was well as I flew what I had believed—oh, how deluded I had been—to be a proper plane. How little I knew. Seminoles? Keep 'em. Last week I found out what I've been missing all this time. Last week I finally lost my virginity, so to speak, in the cockpit of a true flying beauty. It's not something



BY STEVE MCCABE

that every pilot gets to do; I fully appreciate just how utterly privileged I was.

Last week I flew an Airbus. Let me say that again, just because I love the way it sounds—I flew an Airbus. An A320-200, to be exact; let's face it, when one reaches these dizzy heights, we jet pilots (and yes, I now consider myself a jet pilot...) really care about what we're flying. The fact that I only logged an hour and a half does nothing to detract from the experience. The fact that I was in the right seat doesn't affect the fact that I was the pilot in command, the sole manipulator of the controls (well, the control—the side-stick is such an effortless way to fly, and, quite frankly, any plane with anything less than the stick and fly-by-wire, well, it doesn't really deserve to be in the air, does it?). The fact that it was a simulator (a full-motion sim, mind you; nothing but the best for us real pilots) in no way diminishes the fact that I've finally made it to the ranks of the few, the proud, the lucky bastards who actually get to fly jets.

Feel free to make awe-struck “we’re not worthy” noises any time you like.

So here's the problem. I flew the Airbus once, and—wonderful though it undeniably was—it's over. I was lucky enough to get a flight in an Airbus, but there's no more jet time on the horizon until the aviation industry finally picks up again, so I'll be lucky to make it to the right seat of an airline ship before I reach the mandatory retirement age. If I'm lucky I might make it out of basic indoc before I fall foul of Part 121's age limitations. What this means, of course, is that I'll likely never again get my hands on the miracle of engineering and design that is an A320. Real plane? You don't know the meaning of the phrase until you've flown one of these things. Who needs VORs when you have FMS? Why hand-fly when you have autopilot, autoland, autoprettymucheverything? It's even got electrically adjusting seats! And yet I've had to say goodbye to it, probably for good.

And this morning I went back to the airport where the Seminole still sits on

the ramp. It's still the same plane, still the same two engines, but somehow it's different. Once you've tried Airbus, you'll never go back—at least not entirely out of choice. But the choice isn't entirely being made by me, but rather by those nice gentlemen over at the Bank of America. After all, while \$150 is a lot to pay for an hour in my previously beloved Seminole, it's trivial in comparison to the 500 hard-earned dollars I'd have to pay for every hour I wanted to prolong my love affair with Airbus Industrie's masterwork. So it's time for the doublethink to start again. Autopilots? Who needs 'em? No real pilot needs autopilots, FMS or any of that other nonsense. Where's the real seat-of-the-knickers stick-and-rudder flying when you've got a flight director to guide you through the sky? No, I'm going back to my old flame, safe in the knowledge that once I get back behind the yoke of a real twin, I'll know that this is where I belong.

Of course, that Bonanza down the way looks awfully appealing... 