

Buying a Used Homebuilt

Kitplanes

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There are many reasons why you might want to buy a used homebuilt instead of building. Those who have built their own airplanes know the satisfaction of spawning a flying machine with their own two hands. But the reality is, some folks are either not in a position to build, or they simply aren't interested.



This is a fine example of a used homebuilt. It is a 2008 Starduster Too for \$37,000. This machine appears to be well built and is in excellent condition. It has tons of ramp appeal and probably flies as good as it looks.

That doesn't mean you have to be a builder to enjoy the benefits of Experimental aviation. There are plenty of used amateur-built aircraft for sale, and many are an excellent value. Nevertheless, buying a pre-owned homebuilt can seem like a daunting task. I will attempt to dispel the myths and provide helpful advice so you can understand what's involved. For this article, I'll assume you are interested in purchasing a flying aircraft, not a project to be restored or completed. I'll also assume you have decided on your budget and mission.

Why Not Buy a Used Production Aircraft?

One reason is the sheer variety of homebuilt aircraft available. Many designs are significantly different from anything that exists in the production world. This point alone draws a large crowd to Experimentals that might otherwise opt to buy something built in Wichita. Another consideration is some homebuilt aircraft are no longer available in kit or plans form, but are for sale on the open market as flyable airplanes.

One universal difference between factory-built and Experimental aircraft is the cost. Because an Experimental is amateur-built, it doesn't carry the burden of liability insurance, factory overhead, and certification costs. Also, depending on the popularity of the model, most homebuilts are valued near the cost to build, with no consideration for the labor involved. This represents a tremendous value for the buyer.

There are also some regulatory differences between factory-built and homebuilt aircraft. These regulations vary from country to country, and should be well understood before getting too far into the buying process.

In the U.S. there are no restrictions on buying a used homebuilt, as long as it is maintained and operated in accordance with the regulations governing Experimental/Amateur-Built aircraft. The current U.S. regulations even allow non-builders to do their own maintenance, as long as the annual condition inspection is conducted by a licensed A&P; this is another big advantage over factory aircraft.

In many cases, modern homebuilts offer safety features that simply aren't available in a comparably priced used factory aircraft. Some examples include modern EFIS displays that provide incredible situational awareness, better ergonomics, and human-factors considerations in the cockpit design, and advanced engine monitoring and warning capabilities. All are very common in today's Experimentals. However, in the production world, only the newest models have these features unless an older aircraft has been retrofitted at great expense. In both cases, most of these are out of reach for the average buyer.



The devil is in the details when it comes to homebuilts. You can see this builder took great pains to even match his labeling with the color scheme. The layout of the cockpit is nice and clean, and works well for the mission.

Doing Your Homework

Since you already have a budget and have set a goal for what you intend to do with your new machine, the next step is research. This is vitally important. You need to know what's out there that meets your needs.

One way is to spend some time on the Internet learning about various makes and models. A good place to start is the KITPLANES® online Buyer's Guide. At the end of the specifications for many aircraft are links to related articles. The KITPLANES® archive contains hundreds of pilot reports and builder articles about a wide range of homebuilts, so there's a good chance you'll find what you need. Access to all information is free for subscribers and newsstand customers who purchased this issue (See page 28 for details).

Other publications are also a good source of relevant information. And you'll gain valuable insight by surfing the Experimental sections of the Internet classifieds. When you see something that looks interesting, click to investigate it further and see if it suits your needs. For modern buyers, the Internet is definitely your friend.

It's important not to fall in love with an aircraft that is plagued with issues or doesn't meet your objectives. Spending more time here will pay off in the long run, plus why wouldn't you want to fully educate yourself on your future pride-and-joy?

As part of the learning process, you'll want to determine if this aircraft is something you have the capability of maintaining. Many Experimentals are straightforward and employ factory

construction techniques and systems, but some can be very unorthodox. This can be a huge hindrance for finding a qualified and willing mechanic. You don't want to buy a complicated machine and later be forced to sell it because you can't maintain it. If you work as an engine builder for a NASCAR team for your day-job, that V-8 powered Mustang replica might not be an issue. For the rest of us, shop accordingly.

As far as the aircraft itself, you'll want to know if it is still supported by the kit manufacturer. Can you still obtain parts? Are they costly? Can they be easily fabricated? These are important details to flush out that will not only affect maintainability, but resale as well. An aircraft constructed from unobtainium might be cause to reevaluate. That's not to say you shouldn't buy an out-of-production homebuilt. In fact, plansbuilt airplanes—the genesis for this industry—have never enjoyed support. In the end, it's all about being informed and making the appropriate decision for your situation.



Getting a good look under the cowl is key when buying any aircraft, but maybe more so with an Experimental. As is often the case, you'll find that these machines are built with a lot of TLC. The good news is, it is easy to detect sloppiness. In this example you can see there was careful consideration firewall-forward.

Let's Go Shopping

Once you have a short list of aircraft models that will fit the bill, you'll want to do some serious shopping. Again, print and online classified ads are very helpful. You might get lucky and find your dream machine on a bulletin board at the local FBO, but even then, use classifieds to compare it with what's available on the open market. It might take some time, but this will let you determine two important elements: how big is the market, and what are the price ranges.

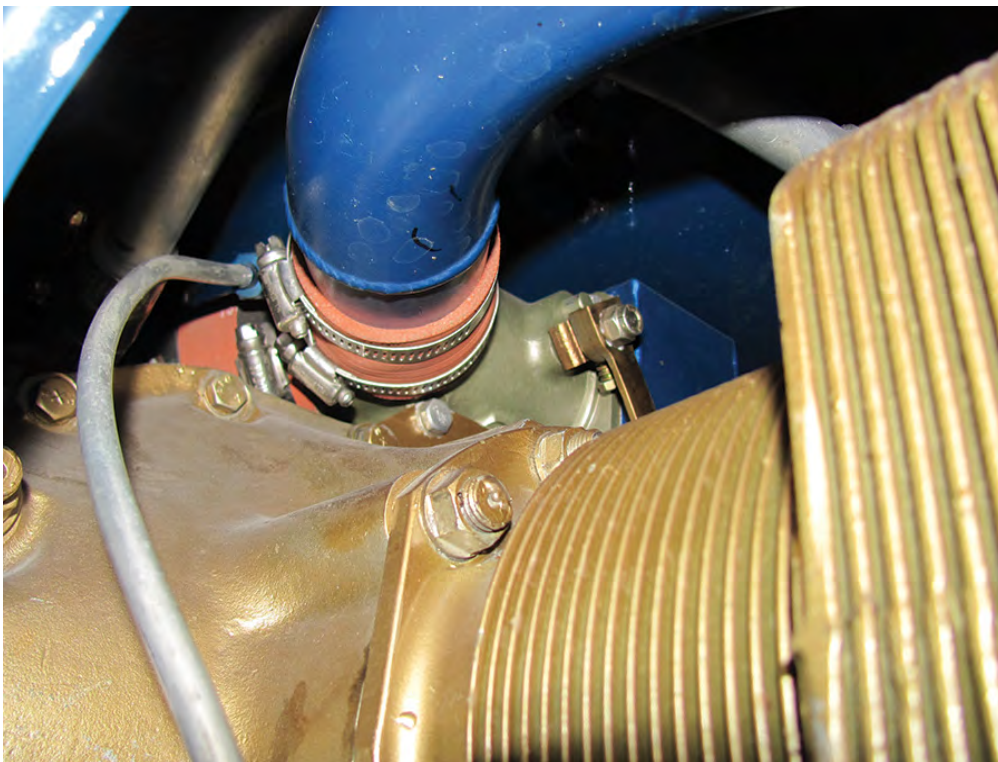
Since you have done your homework, those classifieds should also provide relevant information about that model to improve your decision-making process.

If there is an aircraft based locally that is on your list, you could approach the owner about selling it. Many have purchased their aircraft this way. You save a lot of money and hassles when buying close to home.

At this point you need to take your research and build a questionnaire or checklist, so you can ask the right questions when you contact sellers. If there are certain items you must have, or pitfalls that you want to stay away from, asking those questions first saves everyone a lot of time.

If possible, talking to the original builder can be very insightful. You can pick their brain about details that might not otherwise be available.

If the market is large enough, it is helpful to have a list of two or three final candidates that you can prioritize and go visit (with the intent to buy). Recognizing that you may be traveling long distances to view these birds, you need to plan carefully; the expenses can add up quick. Often you can get a good feel for how well an aircraft is constructed and maintained at first glance, but you'll still want to crawl around and take a very close look at everything. Even if you don't feel like you know what you are looking at, common sense can be a powerful judge. However, this should not replace a pre-purchase inspection. A thorough pre-purchase inspection is an important part of any aircraft transaction.



Noting details like the condition of these intake couplings (not weathered or oil soaked) and the overall cleanliness of the engine room can tell you a lot about an aircraft.

Hire an A&P or Inspect It Yourself?

If you are qualified to do the pre-purchase inspection, it's easy enough to do it yourself. Otherwise you will need to rely on a third party (not the seller). You can use an A&P mechanic, a nearby EAA Technical Counselor, or another builder. If the person inspecting the aircraft has experience with the model, it's helpful. But sometimes that's just not possible. The key thing is to make sure the airplane is safe. That means it must be built and maintained to aircraft standards. These findings will determine if the aircraft is something you need to walk away from or not. Small issues that can easily be corrected shouldn't be a problem. In many cases, you might be able to make the go/no-go determination yourself—but only you can judge your qualification to make that decision.

Even with a third party inspection, you'll want to pour over the aircraft yourself. Beyond the airworthiness determination, you need to be generally satisfied with your potential purchase. The same goes for the logbooks and all the records.

The Paper Jungle

You (or your inspector) need to make sure that all the documents are in order and there are no concerns. Each Experimental aircraft is issued a unique set of operating limitations by the FAA. Make sure there is nothing in there that would be onerous for you or the next buyer. The paperwork review is an important step for many reasons:

1. You'll be using an A&P to sign off future annual condition inspections. If they see something that makes them uncomfortable, you may be in for problems. You wouldn't be the first person to have to redo a 10-year-old repair or modification.
2. If you plan to resell the aircraft, the next buyer will be combing through the records as well. You don't want to lose a deal or take a hit on the value due to inherited paperwork, or lack thereof. If it is possible to get copies of the records before traveling to the airplane, you should—it's that important.

Demo Flights

If possible, you should fly the aircraft before making the purchase. If the airplane has a single seat, you'll have to work out the best way to do this, or maybe forego this step. For multi-place aircraft, the seller should be able to take you up and at least demonstrate that everything is in working condition. This is your chance to see the airplane in action and get your initial impressions about how it flies.

If you are not qualified to fly the aircraft and the seller is not an instructor or highly skilled in the aircraft, use caution! Do not use a demonstration flight as your checkout. Leave that for subsequent flights with someone qualified.

One of the telling accident statistics for Experimentals is first flights—but it's not just the first test flight that is a problem. Many folks attempt to teach themselves to fly their new aircraft with disastrous results. Seek out an instructor or someone with experience in the aircraft. A local builder or EAA flight advisor can help. Some models have transition courses available that

can really lower the exposure involved. This is one area that you need to put your ego aside and carefully consider the risks.

Don't Forget Insurance

This is an important consideration. More than one excited buyer has found that the combination of the aircraft and their pilot experience made them uninsurable, or the insurance was so expensive it was cost prohibitive. It's worth mentioning that insurers are wildly different, so exhaust all your resources before you give up. However, if insurance is a challenge, it might be a hint that you are running into an area of risk. Insurance isn't required, but at least some insurance to protect you from personal liability is highly recommended.

Completing the Sale

Once you have satisfied all the questions and you feel good about the deal, it's time to purchase the aircraft. This involves a title search, title insurance, possibly money in escrow, a bill of sale, and most likely a purchase contract (optional). I won't go into the details here, but you'll want to research these steps thoroughly. Many of these items can be completed before ever traveling to see the aircraft. It's also quite possible that the seller may not be up to speed on all the transactional matters, so you need to have a firm grasp on the process.

Additionally, you'll have local tax implications, as well as state and federal registrations, to comply with. And don't forget—you'll need a home for your acquisition, so these details need to be flushed out as well. This all sounds ominous, but it's not really hard.

Bringing it Home

Once everything else is completed, it's time to get the aircraft home safely. There are a couple of ways to do this:

1. Obtain a ferry pilot. This could be an experienced colleague or a professional ferry pilot that you hire.
2. Ferry the aircraft yourself, if you are qualified to do so.
3. Have the seller fly the aircraft to its new home.

In all cases, don't compromise safety. This isn't the time or place for you to learn to fly your new steed. Swallow your pride and live to fly another day.

When it comes to value, it's hard to beat buying a previously loved homebuilt. If you have ever been to Sun 'n Fun or AirVenture, you know that oftentimes they are built with such care as to put factory aircraft to shame. I know a lot of pilots that have jumped into Experimentals and have never looked back. Don't let the process intimidate you; there are plenty of knowledgeable people out there that are more than willing to help. All you have to do is ask.

Happy hunting!