

Aircraft Buying Guide

Use this aircraft buying guide to shortlist light aircraft more intelligently, compare UK listings, and move into live inventory with better questions.

Who This Guide Is For

Use this guide to compare aircraft types, ownership routes, and listing quality before you contact a seller or arrange a viewing.

Guide Summary

- Use the guide to set budget, mission fit, and shortlist criteria before contacting sellers.
- Move from the guide into the aircraft hub, live UK listings, or aircraft shares when you are ready to compare adverts.
- Use advert facts like category, registration, manufacturer, model, location, and price to filter weaker listings faster.

Aircraft Buying Guide

A practical checklist for shortlisting aircraft, evaluating listings, and avoiding expensive mistakes when buying a light aircraft in the UK or Europe.

Buying a light aircraft is one of the most rewarding steps a pilot can take, but it is also one of the easiest ways to make a very expensive mistake. Listings rarely tell the full story, and small differences in maintenance history, avionics, or paperwork can change the real value of an aircraft by tens of thousands of pounds.

This guide focuses on practical steps: how to shortlist aircraft, compare listings, and ask the right questions before committing to a purchase.



1. Define Your Mission

Before looking at listings, take time to think about how the aircraft will actually be used. Many buyers start by browsing aircraft types and only later realise that the aircraft they like does not suit the kind of flying they plan to do.

Typical missions include:

- Local leisure flying
- Touring around the UK or Europe
- Flight training
- IFR travel
- Grass strip or short-field operations

Questions worth answering early include:

- How many people will usually be on board?
- What distances do you realistically expect to fly?
- Will you need IFR capability now or in the future?
- Will the aircraft operate mainly from grass or hard runways?

Key specifications to compare when looking at aircraft types include useful load, cruise speed, fuel burn, range and runway performance. Many first-time buyers focus heavily on cruise speed but underestimate how important useful load can be.

2. Choose the Right Aircraft Class

Different aircraft classes exist because they serve different kinds of flying.

Common categories in the UK market include the following.

Two-seat trainers or recreational aircraft

Examples:

- Cessna 152
- Piper Tomahawk
- Robin DR400 two-seat variants

These aircraft are generally inexpensive to run and ideal for local flying or training.

Four-seat touring aircraft

Examples:

- Cessna 172
- Piper PA-28
- Robin DR400

These are among the most common private aircraft in Europe and work well for family flying and cross-country touring.

High-performance touring aircraft

Examples:

- Cirrus SR20 and SR22
- Mooney M20 series
- Beech Bonanza

These aircraft are faster and often used for longer journeys or IFR travel, but ownership costs rise significantly in this category.

3. Understand the Real Cost of Ownership

The purchase price of an aircraft is only the starting point. Ongoing ownership costs can be substantial and should be considered early.

Typical annual costs include:

Cost Item	Typical Range
Insurance	£1,000 - £5,000
Hangarage or parking	£1,500 - £8,000
Annual inspection	£1,500 - £5,000
Maintenance reserve	£3,000 - £10,000
Fuel	Highly variable

Engine overhauls are usually the largest long-term expense. A Lycoming overhaul may cost roughly £25,000 to £40,000, while a Continental overhaul can reach £30,000 to £50,000 depending on the engine model.

Aircraft that are close to engine TBO (time between overhaul) should normally be priced accordingly.

4. Private Sale vs Broker Sale

Aircraft are usually sold either privately by the owner or through a broker or dealer. The buying experience can feel quite different depending on which route the aircraft is sold through.

Private sale

In a private sale the buyer deals directly with the owner.

Advantages:

- Prices can sometimes be slightly lower
- Direct communication with the person who has actually flown the aircraft
- More insight into how the aircraft has been operated

Disadvantages:

- The process may be less structured
- Documentation can sometimes be poorly organised
- Negotiation and due diligence rest entirely with the buyer

Private sales can offer good value, but they require careful checking of maintenance records and logbooks.

Broker or dealer sale

In this case the aircraft is sold through a specialist aircraft broker or dealer.

Advantages:

- The transaction process is usually more structured
- Documentation is often prepared in advance
- Brokers may assist with escrow arrangements, contracts and registration paperwork

Disadvantages:

- Broker commission is reflected in the purchase price
- Brokers ultimately represent the seller rather than the buyer

Even when buying through a broker, an independent pre-buy inspection is still essential.

Aircraft listings appear in a range of places including specialist aircraft marketplaces, broker websites, flying clubs and word-of-mouth within the aviation community.

5. How to Evaluate a Listing

Aircraft listings often leave out details that matter to buyers, so it is worth learning how to read between the lines.

Details to check early include:

- Total airframe hours
- Engine hours since overhaul
- Type and age of avionics
- Damage history
- Which maintenance organisation looks after the aircraft

Potential warning signs include missing logbooks, vague descriptions, poor photographs or freshly repainted aircraft with little supporting documentation.

The lowest-priced aircraft is not always the best value once maintenance history and equipment are considered.

6. Check the Paperwork Early

Before travelling to view an aircraft it is sensible to ask for key documentation.

This usually includes:

- Airframe logbooks
- Engine logbooks
- Propeller logbooks

- ARC or airworthiness certificate
- Weight and balance data
- Equipment list

For UK-registered aircraft it is also worth checking the CAA registration details and confirming whether any damage history has been recorded.

Reviewing logbooks in advance can often save significant time and travel by ruling out unsuitable aircraft early.

7. Pre-Buy Inspection

A pre-buy inspection is one of the most important parts of the buying process.

Ideally the inspection should be carried out by an independent engineer rather than the maintenance organisation that currently looks after the aircraft.

A typical inspection will look at areas such as corrosion, engine condition, AD compliance, avionics functionality and general structural condition.

Costs commonly range from around £500 to £2,000, which is small compared with the potential cost of hidden problems.

8. Test Flight Considerations

A test flight allows the buyer to confirm that the aircraft behaves as expected.

During the flight it is worth paying attention to engine temperatures, oil pressure, avionics operation, autopilot behaviour and general handling characteristics.

A well-maintained aircraft should feel predictable and stable rather than temperamental or inconsistent.

9. Negotiating Price

Aircraft prices are rarely fixed. Negotiation usually takes place after a buyer has reviewed the aircraft's documentation and inspection results.

Common points that influence price include engine hours approaching overhaul, ageing avionics, upcoming maintenance work and cosmetic issues.

Independent valuation tools such as VREF can help buyers understand typical price ranges for a particular aircraft type and configuration.

10. Ownership Structures

Full ownership is not the only way to operate an aircraft.

Sole ownership provides maximum flexibility but also carries the full cost of maintenance, insurance and storage.

Group ownership, often called a syndicate in the UK, spreads these costs across several pilots. A typical syndicate might consist of four to ten members who share both expenses and aircraft availability.

For many pilots this can be an affordable way to gain access to aircraft ownership.

11. Insurance and Legal Steps

Before completing a purchase the buyer should arrange insurance, confirm how the registration transfer will be handled and ensure that the bill of sale documentation is correct.

International purchases may involve additional regulatory steps depending on the aircraft's current registration and where it will be based.

12. After the Purchase

Once ownership has transferred the new owner will normally arrange ongoing maintenance support, confirm the aircraft's next inspection schedule and become familiar with its systems and documentation.

If the aircraft type is new to the pilot, differences training with an instructor is strongly recommended.

Final Advice

Buying an aircraft is rarely a process that rewards rushing. The market moves slowly and the right aircraft is worth waiting for.

Experienced owners often recommend looking at many listings, inspecting several aircraft and seeking independent advice before making a final decision.

A careful buying process usually leads to a far more enjoyable ownership experience.