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## You Too Can Fly: Light Sport Aircraft Come of Age

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You're one of those people who likes airplanes and airports. You look up when an airplane goes by. Perhaps you've been to a small airport and watched the Cessnas and Pipers come and go, daring to wish that it could be you.

Well, it *can* be you, and even better, the U.S. government is here to help you.

### "I'm from the FAA and I'm here to help"

In late 2004, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) introduced a simplified license called the sport pilot certificate, offering basic flying privileges in a new class of simplified aircraft called light sport aircraft, or LSAs.

There are five additional types of light sport aircraft such as powered parachutes, but the term is most often used for two-seat, fixed-wing aircraft powered by 80-to-100-horsepower engines. The Rotax 912 engine is very popular with LSA manufacturers.

LSAs and the sport pilot license reduce training, flying and ownership costs, making aviation more affordable in money and time for those short on both. Your sport pilot license will cost about \$2,800-\$3,500, about half the cost of earning a private pilot certificate.

The LSA movement is gaining traction. Some 1,000 LSAs are FAA-registered, with 5,600 registrations expected by 2010. Significantly, respected manufacturers of general-aviation aircraft such as Cessna and Cirrus plan to offer LSAs, indicating that light sport aircraft truly have come of age.

Cessna reportedly has 900 orders in hand for its newly launched SkyCatcher, with deliveries beginning in 2009. Cessna recently signed a deal to have all SkyCatcher production carried out in China by Shenyang Aircraft, to keep manufacturing costs down -- and the price of the aircraft competitive.

### What is a light sport aircraft?

Light sport aircraft are exactly that -- light. Fully loaded, they must weigh 1,320 pounds or less. LSAs are limited to one engine, two occupants and cannot be flown faster than 138 mph (120 knots) or higher than 10,000 feet above sea level. Amazingly, this performance is comparable with a 160-horsepower, four-seat Cessna 172 Skyhawk!

LSAs are limited to daytime use in good weather (three miles' visibility and visual contact with the ground), and can't have fancy items such as retractable landing gear or constant-speed propellers.

In the interest of safety, LSAs must keep flying even at the low speed of 51 mph (45 knots) or less, without the benefit of lift-adding devices such as flaps or slats (although some LSAs have flaps). Many LSAs have stall speeds around 30 knots, half again better than the FAA expects.

You can buy a manufactured, fully FAA-certified LSA for around \$110,000. Co-ownership can bring the cost way down, or you can rent if you prefer. You can also build one from a kit or from scratch if you like, subject to periodic FAA inspections during construction, for about \$65,000.

Once you have your sport pilot license you can save money by doing preventive maintenance yourself. LSAs cannot be used for compensation or hire, but sharing of flight expenses is allowed.

Travel as far and wide as you like -- you can add a GPS unit to help you along the way and even buy an "all-glass" airline-style electronic cockpit. While there is no limitation on horsepower, ratings in the 100-horsepower range allow LSA engines to sip fuel at a very modest five gallons per hour or so.

Nearly 50 LSA manufacturers offering FAA-certificated aircraft are listed at [www.sportpilot.org](http://www.sportpilot.org), a comprehensive and authoritative nonprofit Web site addressing all things LSA.

Another solid source of information is the nonprofit Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association. Search on "light sport aircraft" to bring up some 1,300 articles covering all facets of LSAs.

### **Your sport pilot license**

Beyond aircraft, there is the matter of a license. The sport pilot certificate respects the all-important need for safety while reflecting the fact that sport pilot airplanes and privileges are comparatively simple.

In brief, here are the requirements:

- You must have a valid U.S. driver's license, which doubles as your medical certificate. You must be able to affirm that you are in good general health and not using substances or medications that impede your judgment, cognition and motor skills.
- You must be at least 17 years old to be licensed, but you may have a student pilot certificate at age 16.
- You must be able to read, write, speak and understand English. You need not be a U.S. citizen, but your FAA certificate will be valid only in the United States. It may be transferable to another country, especially one in Europe, since so many LSAs are being made there and imported to the U.S. For example, Cirrus' SR Sport LSA will be built in Germany.
- You will need at least 15 hours in the air with an instructor, plus at least another five hours of solo -- flying by yourself!
- You must pass both a written and an oral/practical test.

### **Get started!**

First, you need an instructor. Find one in your area at the [sportpilot.org](http://sportpilot.org) site, which also provides advice on how to choose the best instructor for your particular requirements.

Second, you need a student pilot license, which can be issued by a Designated Pilot Examiner for about \$50. You can get one for free at any FAA Flight Standards District Office.

Finally, you need to make the decision. Learning to fly is a golden opportunity to grow as a

person. As a pilot, you will savor experiences unique to those who truly exist in three dimensions.

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