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## Light Sport Aircraft Make Flying Fun and Cheap

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If you're looking for a Sunday-afternoon stroll through the sky without a lot of burdensome expense and regulation, the FAA created the sport pilot license in 2004 just for folks like you.

FAA's companion Light Sport Aircraft (LSA) category offers affordable, safe, basic aircraft for many people who would otherwise be unable to fly.

While the most recognizable light sport aircraft is the fixed-wing airplane, the light sport aircraft category includes six additional kinds of aircraft as well:

- Gyroplanes
- Powered (para)chutes
- Weight-shift control aircraft
- Gliders
- Lighter-than-air airships
- Lighter-than-air balloons

Not all of these may be familiar, so let's spend a little time on each set.

### **Gyroplanes**

The gyroplane (also known as the gyrocopter or autogiro) looks like a helicopter, but that's where the resemblance ends. Unlike a helicopter, where an engine provides power directly to the blades, a gyrocopter's horizontal blades turn freely and are pitched to spin and create lift by forward propulsion from a propeller. The thrust is to the rear, but the lift is up, so lift exists only so long as the blades spin. Accordingly, a gyrocopter cannot hover in level flight.

LSA gyrocopters can be fully or partially enclosed, with side-by-side or front-and rear tandem seating. The engine can be a pusher (in back) or a tractor (in front).

You will need at least 20 hours of flight time to qualify, of which at least five must be solo. All sport pilot certificates include a written, oral and practical test.

Gyroplanes have a reputation for safety and a bit of novelty. Since helicopters are not a light sport set, if you can't afford a helicopter (and they are pricey), an LSA gyroplane may be for you.

### **Powered (para)chutes**

Defined by FAA as powered chutes, the chute itself is a fabric square or elliptical canopy held in

shape by air moving over and through it. The pilot is suspended beneath on a set of riser ropes in a rigid cage containing seats, landing gear, motor and pusher propeller.

Since the canopy's angle of attack and airspeed are basically constant, altitude is controlled with engine power. Steering is done just like with a parachute -- by pulling the risers on either side. If you have seen unpowered tethered chutes at the beach, held aloft by wind or a moving power boat, you get the idea.

You must have at least 12 hours of training, at least two of which are solo. Powered chutes are available for both land and sea – no tether needed!

### **Weight-shift control aircraft**

Weight-shift control aircraft are very similar to powered hang gliders. You steer by shifting your weight in a specially designed sling. It will take at least 12 hours to learn -- at least two hours of which must be solo. LSA versions of these aircraft can have not only tricycle landing gear but also floats for water landing, and even skis. Sounds like real fun!

### **Gliders**

Gliders remain one of the safest forms of flying. To be an LSA glider it must weigh 1320 pounds or less and cannot carry more than two occupants. Minimum flight time training requirements include at least eight hours of dual instruction plus at least two hours by yourself.

### **Lighter-than-air airships**

As opposed to a balloon, an airship is tubular, like a blimp or a dirigible. It's great for going places at a leisurely pace with plenty of time for sightseeing. Powered and fully controllable, you can land and take off at an airport, not an option in a balloon.

What keeps you aloft is the fact that helium weighs less than air. You will need at least 20 hours of flight time, of which at least three are solo, to qualify for a license.

### **Lighter-than-air balloons**

Balloons are surely the most romantic way to go nowhere in style! Unlike airships, balloons rise and fall according to the temperature of the air in the balloon, or by throwing ballast weight (sandbags, not passengers!) overboard.

Limited directional control can be achieved by "flying" the balloon to an altitude whose winds happen to be going your way.

What goes up must come down, and this will probably mean not on an airport. You'll need a chase car and some people to get the bag in the air, and also to recover the balloon and you wherever you happen to come down!

Being unpowered, you'll need just seven hours of training plus one flight as pilot in command.

The FAA has gone to great lengths to ease the entry of new pilots into the aviation community, while retaining all the safety aspects for which it is known and respected worldwide. The FAA has

done its part – now it’s up to you!

For more information on light sport aircraft, see [You Too Can Fly: Light Sport Aircraft Come of Age](#) and the [Sport Pilot Association](#).

- [Video: Dolphins Play with Unmanned Seaplane](#)
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