

Most of us would love to own our very own aircraft, but not everybody is able to commit to the cost of owning outright. Apart from initial purchase price, the responsibility for all the fixed costs, as well as the running costs and maintenance, can be rather daunting. However, for once in your life, there is a way you can have your cake and eat it – by having a share in a group-owned aircraft. Not only is it a lot easier on the pocket, but having others to share the responsibilities of ownership helps greatly to minimise any concerns you may have.

I first saw an RV-4 in 1988 at a fly-in in mid-west USA where I was living at the time. As soon as I saw it, I realised I needed one. The owner kindly invited me to try it on for size and as I slid into the snug front seat the fighter pilot manqué in me insisted I must have one. OK, so there's a seat behind you for talking baggage, but once you're in that front seat you feel like you're in a fighter and it's the closest I'll get to a Spitfire or Mustang. When I came back to the UK, I brought most of an RV-4 kit with me.

Enter the Twerps. I recruited three retired friends to help me build it. We called ourselves The Winged Engineering Retired People's Society and we cheated a little by buying a set of tail feathers (empennage in American-speak) and wings from an RAF flight engineer who'd realised he needed the somewhat larger RV-8 for his big frame. We also borrowed (stole, really) a slogan from the Kansas City Dawn Patrol – 'We may not be good but we're slow.' After some time of desultory building, our oldest member complained that if we didn't get on and finish it soon, he'd be too old to fly it. So we got on and finished it, and ultimately he carried out the test flight, coming down with the legendary RV grin spread over his face.

We then sold shares, as a result of which I now own 1/8th of it, worth £5,500, but I can tell you that when I'm flying in that front seat it's all mine and feels just like my own little fighter. It's enough to satisfy the Biggles in me.

I simply wouldn't have been able to afford the hangarage and insurance on my own, so I share the running costs and enjoy brilliant flying on a budget.

TYPICAL SHARED COSTS

Some years ago, the CAA issued rules on shared ownership. These state that the minimum shareholding shall be 5%; it doesn't take A-level maths to work out that the maximum number of shareholders is therefore 20. However, very few groups are that big and a typical group may be around six owners; whatever the number, they should legally own a minimum share of 5% in the aircraft, though typically each will own an equal share.

Standing costs, like hangarage and insurance, are usually covered by a fixed monthly payment from each shareholder, while an hourly rate covers running costs. It may or may not include fuel and landing fees, depending to the wishes of the group, but it's necessary to include somewhere an element for tyres, oil, filters, repairs, etc. Our group hourly rate includes fuel (conventionally called a wet rate) and excludes landing fees, but it does include a percentage which goes



Group ownership

Harry Hopkins explains how the cost of ownership can be reduced significantly by becoming part of a group

Two-seat Aeroncas are very popular with low cost groups, as are many of the vintage factory-built Permit types

panels and making the tea – that's vital to the social harmony of any group.

Let's now consider a smaller group, say with six members, owning an older, less expensive aircraft, like a Jodel or an Emeraude, and operating from an unlicensed grass strip. Share cost might be as little as £2,000 to £3,000, and the monthly fixed cost £30 to £35 because hangarage and insurance will be considerably less at around £1,200 and £1,000 respectively. A smaller, less thirsty and cheaper-to-replace engine will typically put the hourly rate at £45 to £55.

The above two examples are for aircraft flying on an LAA Permit, where owners can participate in the maintenance, working under the supervision of an LAA inspector. This of course has cost benefits not enjoyed by most groups owning Certificate of Airworthiness (C of A) aircraft, but all the other benefits of shared ownership apply to group-owned Cessna 152s, Piper PA-28s or other C of A types.

TIME TO FLY

One of the most common misconceptions about group ownership is that the aircraft won't be available when you want it, but remember, in the UK there are about 4,300 hours of daylight in a year, so even the most used light aircraft spend over 90% of their time waiting quietly for someone to fly them. The personal situations of some group members often means that they prefer to fly during the week, leaving the aircraft available for those who maybe only have weekends available. While we were building, we all belonged to a 20-strong group with two aircraft and they spent most of their time waiting to be flown.

All groups will have some sort of booking procedure, whether that be each member having a priority week in turn, or weekends being shared out at the start of the season. On-line systems are available, which make it easy to check availability without having to ring around. Two or more members flying together is also a regular situation, each sharing the flying and making it cheaper still to enjoy a cross-country trip to a fly-in or rally.

A very important consideration for any group is a set of rules. They're usually only needed when something goes wrong or members don't see eye-to-eye on some unexpectedly contentious point. One of the biggest issues a group will face is when one of the members decides he wants to move on and needs to sell his share. Rules need to be specific on how this is done. Some groups have a clause that gives the existing members first refusal for purchase of an available share, and most will want to vet a potential new member. A suggested outline for a set of group rules is available for guidance on the LAA website at tinyurl.com/cspsae

Group ownership will certainly give you a great deal more bang for your flying buck than renting, plus you'll have a new circle of friends to fly with and to pass on their collective expertise and guidance. For many, it's the perfect 'next step' in progressing their aviation enjoyment. ◀



The author's group's Van's RV-4. Owned by eight individuals, it makes operating a modern, high-performance aircraft a viable proposition for many LAA members



The SportCruiser makes a good group aircraft with its ultra-reliable Rotax 912 and frugal fuel burn

into an engine replacement fund. A 'dry' hourly rate would not include fuel costs.

Let's take a look at some examples. As mentioned, for my RV-4 the 1/8th share value is £5,500 + 1/8 of the what's in the bank, i.e. the engine replacement fund. We keep it hangared at a licensed airfield, and with insurance and Permit fees, the fixed costs amount to around £5,200 per annum. Divided

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eight ways that comes to just £54 per month. Hourly costs, excluding landings fees but including fuel, general maintenance costs and an engine replacement element works out at £63 per hour.

A lower-powered modern VLA type such as a Tecnam Sierra, Eurostar or SportCruiser will offer similar purchase and monthly costs to the RV, with operating costs perhaps being

slightly less due to lower fuel consumption. But remember, to achieve these running costs, each member of the group is expected to do their bit, keeping the aircraft clean and tidy and helping with maintenance tasks and the annual service and inspection. Often one or two of the group members will lead on maintenance but all are expected to turn up and help, even if it's only cleaning, removing