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Buying an aircraft

by John Blackburn



>> Milan's small but professional factory



OVER the past 18 months I have been involved in the purchase of two aircraft - an LSA and an ultralight - the first for a relative and the second for myself. In the process, I dealt with a number of companies and their agents. The experience has taught me a lot about the process of buying an aircraft and has revealed a number of traps for new players I would have liked to have known about before I started the journey.

My most recent purchase, that of the BRM Aero Bristell through Anderson Aviation was a positive experience. I first saw the Bristell at NATFLY 2011 and, subsequently, flew to Melbourne to test fly the aircraft. I was impressed with what I saw. I decided to visit the manufacturer in the Czech Republic to determine if I should have faith in the designer and in the aircraft itself.

Milan Bristella and his small manufacturing facility impressed me. Milan is a professional aircraft design engineer with extensive experience in metal aircraft design and construction. The design approach, manufacturing standards and quality control all appeared excellent. My second flight in the aircraft at his test facility confirmed my opinion of the aircraft.

I placed an order for the Bristell but then made a

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basic mistake. I was tempted by the options of a retractable undercarriage and a higher-powered engine and ordered a configuration that had yet to be built and tested. In hindsight, I should have remembered the lessons I learned in my defence career - developmental systems always take longer to deliver than scheduled and take time to debug once built. Nine months after I signed the contract, I realised I would likely have to wait a further six months before delivery and that there would likely still be a number of systems issues to be resolved.

At that point I cancelled the order and purchased the demonstrator aircraft which Anderson Aviation had just imported and displayed at NATFLY 2012. The lesson was that, unless you like long delays, buy a configuration that has already been delivered and tested.

Throughout this process Brett Anderson of Anderson Aviation provided outstanding support. He expended a significant amount of effort to address my concerns and changed my order expeditiously. The support following delivery has also been excellent. I now have a top notch aircraft which has met all of my expectations.



>> Final engine and instrumentation fit out

So, what did I learn from my dealings with other companies and the purchase of the first aircraft for my relative? The following checklist summarises the lessons from those experiences and will hopefully assist readers who are contemplating buying their own aircraft.

A BUYER'S CHECKLIST

Identify the characteristics and capabilities you want and spend a lot of time researching the market. Read the RA-Aus website and learn about the design limitations / restrictions on LSA and ultralight aircraft. If you understand the limitations, you will be far better placed to make a well-informed decision regarding your choice.

Be very cautious about claims about aircraft or configurations which have not yet built or which are still under development; brochures are tempting, but in some cases they stretch performance or capability numbers. Ask not only where the aircraft is designed, but where it will be built. You must satisfy yourself that the design and manufacturing standards are excellent; remember you are placing your life in the

hands of the designer/manufacturer. It is important to ensure the aircraft being advertised, and the configurations offered for sale, comply with RA-Aus regulations and standards and can be registered in Australia.

Research the designer's background and the history of the aircraft - it doesn't take long to identify fundamental design flaws when you search accident records.

It is important to check, where possible, the financial viability of the manufacturer and of the importer /agent - a number have gone out of business.

Once you identify an aircraft which appears to meet your needs, you need to read the flight and maintenance manuals and then test fly it. If you are not experienced get someone to assist you. Talk to the folks at RA-Aus - I found their advice invaluable.

Conduct your own "assessment" and look for possible design flaws, safety risks and systems limitations. In my research, I went as far as calling aeronautical engineers to discuss aspects of the design of the aircraft I was assessing. Going

through this process and asking questions of the importer/agent and the designer can be revealing. For example, fuel injected engines with ECUs are growing in popularity - ensure that the designer understands the specific requirements for a fuel injected engine and the associated fuel system and that the ECU redundancy modes are fully analysed.

Talk to other owners and get their honest views regarding the aircraft, its performance and above all, the experience they had with the importer/agent. There do not appear to be any regulations or standards for importers/agents. Take the time to check out his or her reputation before you sign a contract. Find out how much experience they have importing and delivering RA-Aus aircraft. While I am sure most agents are good, there are incompetent and disreputable characters out there. I have had the misfortune to meet some of them. I subsequently learned their reputations usually precede them - if you take the time to ask around.

Read the contract very carefully; some agents try to place conditions on the purchaser but not on themselves. If it is an imported aircraft, be



>> A comfortable aircraft for touring

cautious about having all payments except the GST made before the aircraft arrives in country. Such an arrangement leaves the purchaser with little leverage if problems arise during the delivery process.

Ensure the contract specifies that the purchaser can test fly the aircraft at the time of delivery, before the final payments is made. I had the experience of one agent telling me I was not "qualified" to conduct a pre delivery test flight. I have a few thousand hours and am a graduate of the Empire Test Pilot's School in the UK. In that case, the agent refused to permit a check flight before delivery, and threatened to on-sell the aircraft to another customer if the final payment was not made and the aircraft accepted without a check flight. As I subsequently found out, it was because he had not rectified some known faults with the avionics.

You may have little success in contracting for a specific delivery date if the aircraft is ordered from overseas, but you should consider specifying the maximum time from arrival in country to delivery to you. If the agent prioritises other income producing business once they have your funds, you may wait for a long period of time to take delivery. If the manufacturer is in Australia you may want to ensure that delivery schedules and associated contract exit options are clearly specified.

Ensure that any installation works are quoted and checked before asking the agent to fit any customer supplied equipments. I know of a case where the agent charged almost \$1800 to fit a \$600 GPS in the instrument panel - a surprise for the buyer when the bill was presented.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Buying your own aircraft can be a rewarding experience. But, in a small number of cases it can also be a frustrating and aggravating one. Be prepared, do your research and your background checks before you sign any contract.

In buying an aircraft, as in other areas of aviation Prior Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance.

John Blackburn is a retired RAAF Fighter Pilot and Test Pilot who now flies a BRM Bristell UL aircraft and an ASG-29E glider.



>> Brett Anderson's "after sales service"



BRM AERO BRISTELL

