



# EURO-FEES FEARS

Want to see how user fees could affect U.S. general aviation?

Just cross the pond

BY THOMAS A. HORNE

For many years, pilots in the United States have looked upon European general aviation with an amorphous awareness, tinged with fear. Fear that European general aviation, with its high costs, could serve as a model for America's future. Now that the FAA funding debate is upon

us, there's a very real threat that the United States actually could replicate a European fee-based style of airport and airspace access. It's as though the current administration views the European general aviation system as a template for future fundraising.



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That's too bad. Because under the European scheme of things, high fees keep prospective students from taking up flying, prevent currently certificated pilots from being more active, do not equate with improved service, are inefficient and expensive to collect, and adversely impact safety. In other words, European pilots pay more, receive less, and can face higher risks.

Under the current funding mechanism, money from the U.S. Treasury Department's general fund, airline ticket and cargo waybill taxes, and taxes on avgas and jet fuel does a great job of providing financing for FAA operations and modernization. There's no need for user fees or higher fuel taxes, yet the current administration's fund-

ing proposal advances this very concept—including a 70-cent-per-gallon fuel tax, up from today's 19.4 cents. And if passed into law this coming September, the cost of flying could soar. If you think flying costs a lot now, then fasten your seat belt if higher taxes or user fees are instituted. All you have to do is look at Europe to see why.

Just how expensive is flying in Europe? Let us take a brief look at some of the costs, using the United Kingdom and Germany as representative examples, and see how they exert a disproportionately adverse effect on general aviation. Costs vary from nation to nation, so an exhaustive tally is outside the scope of this article. But you'll get the idea.

## Pilot certification

Apart from the hefty charges for hourly aircraft rental (say, \$220 to \$250 for a Cessna 172), a prospect seeking a "European ticket"—a Joint Aviation Authorities (JAA) private pilot certificate—faces some big burdens when it comes to ground school and knowledge exams. In Germany, for example, it costs 100 euros (\$130; the exchange rate at the time of this writing is \$1.30 to the euro) to take the private pilot knowledge test. A required criminal background check sets you back 70 euros, or \$91. In all, a German private pilot license can set you back as much as 15,000 euros, or \$19,500; of that amount about \$1,800 is taken up by landing fees. The cost of getting the

# Flying fees

## A trip from England to Germany

To help research this story, I traveled to London, where I visited with AOPA-U.K.'s Martin Robinson. A trip to the Elstree Aerodrome just north of London let me visit with Cabair Holdings Executive Steve Read, the American Flight Academy's owner and chief flight instructor Galina Crosby Creese, and businessman-pilot Steve Copeland.



"It costs 40 to 50 euros to make a landing in a Cessna 210...we're losing our flying 'middle class.'"

—Michael Erb, managing director, AOPA-Germany

Then it was time to fly to Egelsbach, Germany, for visits with AOPA-Germany's managing director Michael Erb, local pilot Dr. Alexander Bubenik, and flight school Chief Executive Officer Arndt Raf-flenbeul. Portions of interviews with these individuals, plus Thomas Schuettoff, owner of a flight school at the Berlin-Tempelhof Airport, can be seen online ([www.aopa.org/pilot](http://www.aopa.org/pilot)).

Our 350-nm IFR cross-country flight from Biggin Hill to Frankfurt-Hahn cost \$232 in user fees alone. It would have been much more, but the Twin Comanche we used has a max takeoff weight less than 2,000 kg, the lower limit for en route fees.



Jan Brill, editor in chief of Germany's *Pilot und Flugzeug* magazine, graciously offered photographer Mark Wagner and me a ride from England to Germany. *Pilot und Flugzeug* is a monthly magazine ([www.pilotundflugzeug.de](http://www.pilotundflugzeug.de)) for active German-speaking general aviation pilots, and Brill flies a 1964 Piper Twin Comanche in his business travels.

Our flight from London's Biggin Hill Airport to Egelsbach gave graphic illustrations of the drawbacks of user fees, and the European general aviation flying environment. A video of the trip highlights can be seen online ([www.aopa.org/pilot](http://www.aopa.org/pilot)).

Brill began by accessing his online flight planning and weather briefing services on his laptop computer, services

for which he pays \$104 per year. Good thing Brill is an experienced instrument pilot; there would be no face-to-face or telephone briefing and flight plan filing.

His software is designed to query Eurocontrol about any airspace or routing restrictions. Up popped 12,000 altitude and/or route restrictions, so Brill chose a route approved by Eurocontrol, then filed it. The route went first to the Dover VOR, passed over the Koksy, Mackel, and Olno VORs in Belgian airspace, and then crossed a series of intersections before reaching Egelsbach. Because the airplane—N7311Y—weighs less than 2,000 kg (4,409 pounds), we wouldn't be paying en route fees to Eurocontrol.

But for Brill's arrival at Biggin Hill, he was assessed a \$150 fee that included the price of his instrument approach and landing. Another \$17 went for overnight parking. When he paid these fees, he received a fax from Eurocontrol confirming his routing and providing the weather. "This is nice, but useless, really," Brill said. "I mean, you have to file the flight plan before you get the weather. So you don't have a

instrument rating is another \$20,000, and the price just to sit for the instrument rating knowledge test runs \$900.

In the United Kingdom, the total cost of earning a private pilot certificate runs from approximately 4,000 to 6,000 pounds (about \$8,000 to \$12,000; at the time of this writing a pound is worth just shy of 2 dollars). Of that amount, about 800 pounds (\$1,600) represents landing fees. As for the instrument rating knowledge test, in England it costs 712 pounds, or about \$1,424. Want an air-



N-registered aircraft are very popular in Europe. Owners of these aircraft can save money by earning U.S. certificates and ratings. Surveys indicate that about 30 percent of European powered GA airplanes have N-numbers.

#### N-number flying

With prices like those, you'd certainly be interested in finding a lower-cost alternative. And there is one. Pilots who own aircraft

registered in the United States (those with N numbers) can earn U.S. pilot certificates and ratings, and fly their own airplanes legally in European airspace. Under this FAA-certificate alter-

line transport pilot certificate? Expect to fork over 50,000 pounds, or \$100,000—a significant portion of that taken up by user fees for practice instrument approaches.



"It would be a shame if the U.S. enacted user fees...it would be devastating to business."

—Steve Read, CEO of Cabair Holdings, owner of flight schools in the U.K. and U.S.

chance to make any weather decision before you plan the flight—unless you have your own online service."

Then it was out to the airplane, where the Twin Comanche's tip tanks were topped off with 11 gallons of avgas. Cost: \$88.

For the departure on this 350-nm IFR cross-country, Biggin Hill reported a 500-foot ceiling. We climbed on top of the undercast, passing through 5,000 feet, then leveled off at 11,000 feet. (N7311Y is fitted with manual turbochargers.)

Nearing the Frankfurt area (Egelsbach is only 9 nm from the huge Frankfurt-Main International Airport) we went over the plans for the approach into Egelsbach, which was reporting a 600-foot overcast. It involved a dubious procedure, but one that I was assured was common.

Here's how it would go: We'd begin by obtaining a clearance to fly Frankfurt-Main's ILS 27L. For this, we'd of course be charged a \$12 approach fee, but flying the ILS would get us below the clouds.



"Students save money by not practicing landings.

I think U.S. pilots land

better." —Galina Crosby Creese,

American Flight Academy, Elstree Aerodrome



After flying this "cloud break" approach, as it's called, we'd level off at 500 feet agl, turn left, and fly under special VFR.

We'd fly down an autobahn and then turn left after passing a cell phone tower, and a few seconds later the Egelsbach airport would appear. A \$43 landing fee would await.

This all seemed a bit risky, because if we couldn't maintain VFR, or didn't see Egelsbach, we'd have to climb away on a makeshift missed approach. The problem would be that we had canceled IFR back when we did the cloud-break maneuver. And there is virtually no airfiling of IFR flight plans in Ger-

Jan Brill (right) pays yet another landing fee at the Frankfurt-Hahn airport. This stop was preceded by charges for two ILS approaches. Immigration paperwork also needed to be filled out.



native, the savings are enormous. A pilot pursuing a JAA certificate in the U.K., for example, would pay \$11,000 for a private pilot certificate. For the FAA equivalent, the cost is about half, thanks to our more streamlined, and less time-consuming, flight training requirements. These savings have prompted large numbers of European pilots to pursue their pilot training in the United States, where flight schools catering to foreign nationals thrive—many of them in warm, picturesque climes. In most cases, a European pilot can fly commercially to the United States, take lessons at one of these schools, rent a room and car, earn his certificate and/or rating, and still have enough money left over to take a flying vacation.

No wonder that approximately 40 percent of Europe's 90,000 general aviation pilots who fly powered aircraft hold FAA pilot certificates and ratings, and that 30 percent of Europe's 60,000

powered general aviation aircraft carry N numbers.

American pilots, you don't know how good you have it! But more taxes and new user fees could make our learning and proficiency expenses the same as Europe's. Cost would go up, safety would go down, fewer students would be able to take up flying, and fewer pilots could train often enough to preserve a high level of proficiency. That's not a pretty picture for general aviation's long-term future.

### Landing fees

In Europe, each airport imposes fees for every landing—whether flying under visual or instrument flight rules. In the U.K. it'll cost you about \$33 each time your wheels hit the pavement at a small general aviation airport. Touch and goes? Half that amount. So, a student pilot who makes three touch and goes and a full-stop landing would be charged about \$83 for the learning experience—plus, of course, the cost of

aircraft rental and fuel (more on fuel costs shortly).

Of course, landing fees impact a student's proficiency and safety. Many, many students limit their practice landings to save money, with the result that they take longer to meet proficiency targets, make less precise landings along the way, and—after earning their pilot certificates—fly fewer practice landings. "Pilots who earn FAA pilot certificates can land better than European pilots," says one high-time flight instructor in the U.K. "In the States, you can do touch and goes as long as you want, and there's no cost deterrent."

But in Europe, not all landing fees are alike. Land at a major airport like Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport and it'll set you back \$518. Frankfurt? Another \$518. London's Heathrow Airport? How about \$1,000. And this assumes you have made arrangements for your arrival, and obtained a landing "slot." Show up out of the blue and you could easily face a stiff penalty on top of your



"I pay 900 to 1,000 euros per year in user fees...it affects me quite a bit."

—Dr. Alexander Bubenik, engineering professor, Cessna 182 owner

many—unless you declare an emergency and face the prospect of a heavy fine for your poor decision making. So the pressure would be definitely on to see Egelsbach after canceling IFR.

All of this was rendered moot when a controller told us the weather at Frankfurt had just gone down to "few 300, overcast 500." As a destination, Egelsbach was now out. Our cloud break would have us flying at cell-tower height—way too low.

Why not fly the ILS right to the runway at Frankfurt-Main and avoid all the cloud breaking? Because it would have cost us about \$1,000 in penalties and landing fees.

We made the decision to divert to the nearby Frankfurt-Hahn Airport,



"Sometimes pilots fly in marginal weather in hopes of avoiding an approach fee."

—Steve Copeland, businessman pilot

where the weather promised to be slightly higher, but in reality was much, much worse than "few 300." Turns out the METAR was more than an hour old.

In hindsight, the ILS and a landing at Frankfurt-Main, although more costly, would have been safer. Our low weather was widespread, and an alternate with suitable weather was more than an hour away.

So Brill flew the ILS Runway 21 approach to Hahn, only to perform a missed approach. There went another \$12.

On the second try, we saw the approach lights right at minimums—a 200-foot ceiling and visibility that was certainly no more than a half-mile. That approach cost another \$12, and landing and parking fees at Hahn came to another \$43.

Total cost of the day's flying in fees alone: \$195.23. Add in the 19-percent



"It costs 40 euros per landing here...so we go to other airports for practice." —Thomas Schuettoff,

owner, Tempelhof Aviators

value-added tax and the bill reached \$232.32. Add the avgas bill and the charges came to \$320.32. And this doesn't even factor in the operating costs of the airplane itself.

The next day, the weather improved and Brill flew the Twin Comanche to meet us at Egelsbach. Charge: another

\$43. The trip was quite an educational experience, from a number of viewpoints. Check out the video ([www.aopa.org/pilot](http://www.aopa.org/pilot)) for a front-seat view.

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European avgas costs have always been high, but now they're skyrocketing. Current prices are in the \$8-to-\$9 per gallon range. Some fear that a proposed tax hike of \$2 per gallon will drive pilots to use automotive gas.

already outrageous landing fee. A last-minute decision to divert to Frankfurt for mechanical reasons, or to use its ILS approach to land in adverse weather, and you'll fork over another \$777 in fines—on top of the \$518 for the landing itself.

It's all part of a scheme, driven by airline traffic and flow-control measures, to limit general aviation traffic at major airline hubs, and raise extra money in the process. The strategy works. As anyone who has flown commercially to Europe can tell you, there are very, very few general aviation airplanes at European hub airports.

#### Noisy and heavy landings

Landing fees are bad enough, but in noise-sensitive nations such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, noise penalties are added for aircraft that rate high on complicated noise tables. A stock Cessna 152 landing at a German airport pays an extra \$17 in noise fees. If the airplane is fitted out with a special exhaust system and muffler, that fee is reduced to \$9. The really big noise fees are reserved for louder, heavier airplanes like the Beechcraft A36 Bonanza (\$42), turboprop twins (\$200), or very large business jets (\$624). The heavier and louder the airplane, the higher the landing fee.

As if this weren't enough, the calculus of landing fees is further escalated if you

arrive after an airport's official closing time or, even worse, arrive late in a "noisy" airplane. At Germany's Egelsbach airport, a late landing in a stock, non-noise-attenuated air-

plane will cost you an additional noise penalty of \$111. For that stock Bonanza, this makes a total landing fee of \$153.

#### Approach fees

The bad news doesn't end with landing fees. There are charges for each instrument approach, too. These can range from \$11 to \$33 per approach. Similar charges apply to missed approaches, in cases where an instrument approach is flown to completion, the pilot cannot see the runway environment, and must climb away to attempt another approach (for another charge) at the intended destination or an alternate airport with better weather.

Like landing fees and high training costs, approach fees also impact safety. There are plenty of examples to illustrate this fact. To avoid approach fees, some pilots have chosen to make unwise decisions in marginal VFR or instrument meteorological conditions. Like canceling IFR and flying in marginal weather conditions in hopes of squeezing into an airport on a visual approach instead of paying for a full-blown instrument approach. Or just plain scud running to airports not having instrument approaches.



Step into the "aircrew only" room at London's Biggin Hill Airport to get your approved flight plan and weather briefing—and to pay your approach, landing, parking, and handling fees. All major credit cards are accepted!

The adverse effects of approach fees also are felt as pilots train for the instrument rating, or try to maintain their instrument flying proficiency and currency. In the U.K., for example, at \$34 per approach, three practice approaches add up to a hefty \$102. And don't forget to make a reservation with air traffic control to shoot those approaches, or else you pay a fine. Ditto if you don't arrive for the approach at your allotted approach reservation time.

#### En route fees

Most American pilots have heard of Eurocontrol, which is an air traffic management organization composed of representatives from the 27 nations in the European Community. Its Central Flow Management Unit is charged with ensuring the smooth movement of airplanes in European airspace. But another arm of Eurocontrol has the job of assessing route charges. If you fly on an IFR flight plan in Europe, you pay Eurocontrol to use the airspace, nav aids, and communications frequencies you need to complete your flight.

If you want to know more about Eurocontrol and its Byzantine structure and functions, visit the Web site ([www.aopa.org/pilot/eurocontrol](http://www.aopa.org/pilot/eurocontrol)).

Fortunately for the majority of general aviation pilots, Eurocontrol does not charge en route fees. That's because aircraft weighing less than 2,000 kilograms (4,409 pounds) are exempt. This explains why Piper Aircraft manufactured a "European" variant of some earlier models of the Seneca se-

ries of light twins, all of them weighing in at a hair under 2,000 kilograms, and consequently popular sellers in Europe. It also explains why Piper's Meridian, at a maximum gross takeoff weight of 2,310 kilograms (5,093 pounds), is less popular.

How does Eurocontrol calculate its en route charges? There are three arcane formulas, but the one relating to individual charges is the following:

$$r_i = d_i \times p \times t_i$$

where  $r_i$  is the individual charge,  $d_i$  the distance factor,  $p$  the weight factor, and  $t_i$  the unit factor (the charge levied for flying in the airspace of each individual nation). This means the charge is dependent on the maximum takeoff weight of the airplane, the distance it travels, and the rates charged by member nations to fly through their airspace. The heavier the airplane, the farther it flies, and the more nations it overflies, the higher the fee will be. It's a complex system of charges designed not just to recover the costs of operating the airspace system, but also to cover the costs of collecting the route charges themselves.

Such a complex arrangement involves many permutations—too many to list here. But here's a chart to give you a representative idea of what en route fees can be for airplanes of varying weights flying the 350-nm trip from Hamburg to Munich, Germany:

Aircraft	Fee
Cessna 172S (2,450 lb/1,111 kg)	0 euros \$0
Piper PA-34 Seneca III/IV/V (4,750 lb/2,154 kg)	215.29 euros \$281
Beech F90 King Air (10,950 lb/4,966 kg)	326.92 euros \$425.55
Cessna Citation V (15,900 lb/7,212 kg)	393.94 euros \$512.81

So it's easy to see how the fees—and the administrative cost of paying the fees—on such a short trip can skyrocket for larger airplanes, especially business jets. Obviously, this drives up the cost of business travel. Fees like these would be crippling to American businesses using corporate aircraft, and business jet manufacturers.

Bottom line: Eurocontrol exists to facilitate airline operations, and its en route fees are designed to discourage general aviation travel. A recent proposal to institute en route fees for VFR flights further exposes this motive.

### Weather briefings

Pilots in the United States take FAA-approved telephone weather briefings for granted. Just dial 800/WX-BRIEF. But in Europe, where instrument meteorological conditions prevail more often than not, it'll cost you. In the United Kingdom, you can certainly call a briefer in the government's meteorological office, but the call runs \$3 per minute; a typical 10-minute call for a local flight will set you back about \$30. Consequently, this "service" is not much in demand. A government-approved online source of preflight weather information is available online ([www.metoffice.gov.uk/aviation](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/aviation)), and its basic level of weather information is free—once you register. The basic level offers METARs, TAFs, and winds aloft, but no sigmets or airmets. The more advanced level of services costs \$109 per year for an online subscription. Because these costs are so punitive, many GA pilots seek free aviation weather information from other Internet sources, such as the data posted on U.S. Air Force weather Web sites that deal with European weather.

In Germany, official weather briefings also may be obtained via a call to the Deutscher Wetterdienst (German weather service), but it's \$1.63 per minute. Listening to prerecorded telephone weather information is less (84 cents per minute) but, of course, there is no opportunity for

in-depth questioning. The same charges apply to a weather-by-fax service run by the German government. As with those in the U.K., most German pilots opt for an online weather subscription service costing \$104 per year.

In essence, European general aviation pilots are very much on their own when it comes to weather information. They must do more of their own weather interpretation, and must pay to ask in-depth questions vital to safe preflight decision making when tricky weather prevails. Is there a temptation to skimp on paying, and boost the risks of launching into adverse weather without a full complement of information? You bet. Does the pay-per-briefing scheme prevent pilots (even instrument-rated ones) from making use of the airspace? Yes again.

And although European aviation weather is readily available on many Web sites (such as [www.aopa.org/pilot/euroweather](http://www.aopa.org/pilot/euroweather)) let's reiterate an important point: These are not government-endorsed sites, and they don't permit any interactive questioning of briefers. However, the information is free so pilots make use of them. Is this conducive to safe decision making in marginal weather or instrument meteorological conditions? For the majority of general aviation pilots with limited experience in weather flying, the answer is no.

### Fuel taxes

While the FAA mulls over a proposal to raise fuel taxes as a means of increasing its funding levels, Europe has already done it. And it may well hike taxes once more. Gasoline of any type is more expensive in Europe to begin with, but when it comes to avgas the prices are staggering. Per-gallon prices now hover around the \$8-to-\$9 mark.

The European Commission recently ordered all but a few European nations to raise avgas taxes by \$2.20 per gallon. If enacted, \$11-per-gallon avgas could soon be a reality. Obviously, the effect on flight training and decision making would be tremendous. There are already stories of pilots taking on partial fuel loads to save money, only to be trapped by unforeseen headwinds into making precautionary landings in adverse weather at airports poorly served by instrument approaches—mainly to avoid the huge landing fees levied at larger airports. What better way to increase risk than tempt pilots to limit their fuel reserves? Again, more food for thought in the FAA funding debate.



There are many more costly and inefficient aspects of the European general aviation model that we could explore—landing slots, airspace restrictions, unconventional instrument approaches, and unsafe instrument-flight-plan operations at uncontrolled airports come to mind—but there's not enough space in this issue. A future article will take the discussion further. But the main points have been made. If you don't now understand why European general aviation is seen as the province of the very rich, then you haven't been paying attention.

To a monumentally overwhelming extent, the airspace structure in Europe is designed for the airlines. This is, after all, congested airspace, with some 9.6 million airline flights per year out of 15 major airline hubs concentrated in an area roughly the size of the continental United States. And airline traffic is growing ever faster—about 4 percent a year, by some estimates—since Europe's burgeoning economic growth following the collapse of the Soviet Union. European general aviation, you might say, is lost in all this bustle.

But think of this: The FAA already manages an airspace system larger than Europe's, with about 11 million airline flights per year, yet safely and efficiently accommodates a growing number of general aviation operations. All without user fees, increased fuel taxes, or other funding schemes. Given what we've learned about how general aviation suffers under Europe's setup, why would anyone think that safety or efficiency would improve under a pay-as-you-go operational mandate?

**AOPA**

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▶ *Links to additional information on the FAA funding debate may be found on AOPA Online ([www.aopa.org/FAAFundingDebate](http://www.aopa.org/FAAFundingDebate)).*

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