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Frugal Flyer: No compromise

Chasing the lowest price can be penny wise and pound foolish

By Dave Hirschman

I'm all for good deals and aggressively pursue them whenever, and wherever, they make sense. But there are times when chasing the lowest price can be penny wise and pound foolish and there are a few areas in aviation where even the most frugal fliers are willing to open their wallets. Even though spending freely goes against my nature (and at times causes actual physical pain), here are some things that are just worth spending money on.

Flight training: If a more experienced instructor costs more per hour but can provide a superior value through better transfer of knowledge, experience, and insights, I'm willing, even happy, to pay the higher price.

The late Lee Manelski, my first aerobatic instructor at Santa Paula Airport in California, cost more on an hourly basis than anyone else on the field at the time. But he taught his students more in one hour than others got in multiple lessons. The same is true of such sages as Morris Ray in Memphis, Tennessee, or Clint Rogers in Atlanta, Georgia, or the best teachers in your area. Some instructors have a gift for imparting potentially life-saving knowledge in understandable, lively, and thoroughly enjoyable ways—and they're a bargain.

Insurance: Eddie Ruhl, a former U.S. Air Force and airline pilot and a legendarily frugal flier, used to own a Pitts biplane. He fully insured his aircraft every year because he knew himself and his penny-pinching tendencies. "If I ever have an aerial emergency and bailing out of the aircraft is a serious consideration, I don't want to worry about how much my decision is going to cost me," he said. "I want to be able to make the right decision, at the right time, for the right reason. If I have to factor in the financial implications of an aeronautical decision, it's just going to slow me down—and that compromises safety." Fortunately, Ruhl never had to make such a choice during his many years of Pitts flying. But his sound reasoning is equally applicable to other aviation pursuits.

Partnership agreements: It's generally a good idea to have an aviation lawyer or someone familiar with aircraft partnerships write or review an agreement in advance. Doing the legwork on the front end, and asking the sometimes difficult questions about how a partnership eventually will terminate, can avoid misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and costly disagreements in the future.

Members of AOPA's Legal Services Plan get free reviews of such documents, which the Frugal Flier especially likes (see www.aopa.org and www.theapa.com for example partnership agreements).

A parachute: If the time ever comes to use it, you'll want to know that yours wasn't the cheapest one available on eBay that day.

Anything you sit on (or sits on you): [Oregon Aero](http://OregonAero.com) makes fantastic seat cushions. If you make long flights, the cushions can prevent untold amounts of squirming and discomfort.

A light, comfortable aviation headset also can be essential to your state of mind on long flights. Some pilots swear by noise-canceling models, but I'm not totally convinced. (Foam ear plugs underneath an old-fashioned, passive headset can effectively reduce noise and fatigue as long as the headset is comfortable and radio reception is clear.) But whatever your strategy, make sure your headset does an adequate job of protecting your ears.

I once chided fellow aviator (and medical doctor) James Freeman about his purchase of an ultra-high-end Bose headset—and his retort stuck with me. "Yeah, they're awful expensive compared to other headsets," he said. "But they're cheap compared to hearing aids."

Good tools: This one is tough, maybe impossible to justify for us amateur, non-A&P mechanics. A basic set of hand tools can do the same tasks as a fancy, high-end set. But pilots tend to enjoy precision for precision's sake, and there's something about a good set of tools that makes even the most rudimentary mechanical tasks more pleasant. You sure don't need Snap-On or Matco tools to change the oil, rotate the tires, or perform the myriad preventive maintenance tasks that owner/operators are permitted to do on their aircraft. But well-crafted tools can turn chores into fun, and that enjoyment is worth something.

I once asked Terry Adams, an AT-6 pilot, mechanic, and former Snap-On executive, to assemble a small, traveling tool kit that I could bring with me in the airplane. He filled a tiny canvas tool bag with a variety of items that included a \$75 ratcheting screwdriver that I considered extravagant. I started to give the screwdriver back, saying I already had one, but Adams insisted. "That screwdriver is a tremendously versatile tool and you're going to be glad you have it someday," he said. "It's essential equipment." I ended up keeping the screwdriver, and the truth is I use it all the time and don't know how I ever got by without it.



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SEND US YOUR TIPS

In an ongoing effort to squeeze more flying out of our aviation dollars, AOPA is seeking your tips on frugal flying. Have you found creative ways to operate your aircraft more efficiently? Better manage maintenance, training, hangar, tie-down, or insurance costs? Or buy aviation-related goods in bulk or at lower prices? Share your experiences with fellow members on the [Frugal Flier blog](#).

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