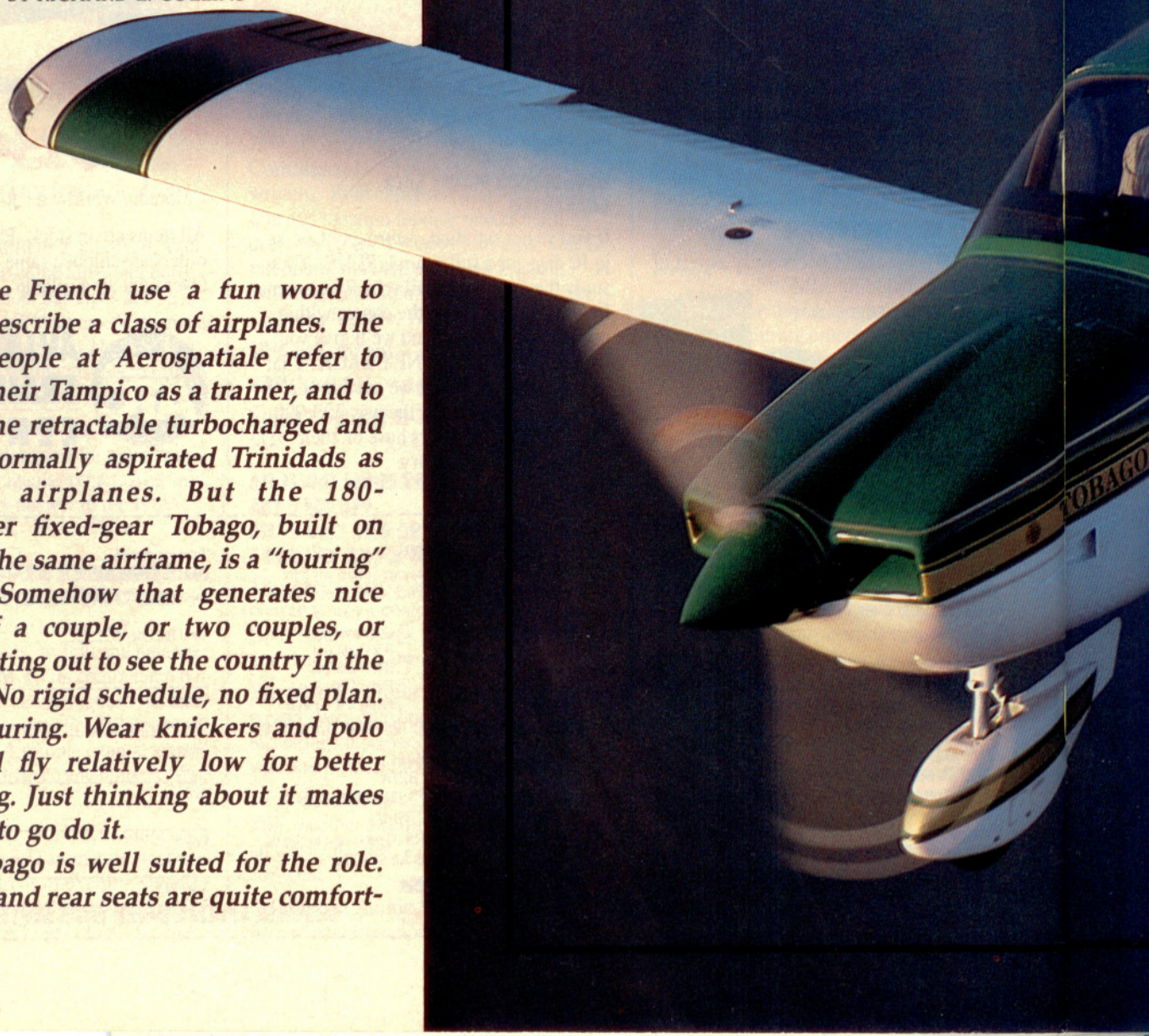
TOURING TOBAGO

The French bring style to American skies

BY RICHARD L. COLLINS



The French use a fun word to describe a class of airplanes. The people at Aerospatiale refer to their Tampico as a trainer, and to the retractable turbocharged and normally aspirated Trinidads as business airplanes. But the 180-horsepower fixed-gear Tobago, built on basically the same airframe, is a "touring" airplane. Somehow that generates nice visions of a couple, or two couples, or friends setting out to see the country in the airplane. No rigid schedule, no fixed plan. Just go touring. Wear knickers and polo shirts and fly relatively low for better sightseeing. Just thinking about it makes you want to go do it.

The Tobago is well suited for the role. The front and rear seats are quite comfort-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

able, the visibility out of the airplane is good, and the baggage compartment has plenty of room for the raiments of serious tourists. The airplane looks neat, too. Some have suggested that the vertical tail is too far forward, but that's likely because it is different. The instrument panel is quite attractive and will hold a full set of IFR gear, including a Stormscope.

With three full-size guys on board, plus camera gear and full fuel, the Tobago was within a few pounds of its 2,535-pound gross weight for my first takeoff. The acceleration didn't seem great, but the airplane soon reached its 65-knot rotation speed. Flaps are used to shorten the run, and the airplane flies away eagerly, though you do have to have the nose rather high to keep the airplane at a speed that yields a substantial rate of climb. A takeoff the next day was made in formation with a Cessna Cutlass, and the Tobago accelerated slightly better than and climbed right with the Cutlass.

The way you are seated and the view are unlike most airplanes. It's a laid-

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back, spacious atmosphere. To me it was very satisfying, and when I got into my nine-year-old Cessna to fly away it was indeed like going from something new to something old. It has been held that styling has been neglected in U.S.-built airplanes; if this is indeed a factor in sales, the Tobago and its partners should do well. The gull-wing doors on the airplane work well for entry and exit, and as any Aerospatiale salesman will demonstrate when he taxies by on a warm day, they are neat opened, with your elbow on the sill and the 180-hp fan cooling the cabin.

The Tobago indicated about 120 knots at a moderate cruise setting on a warm and humid day as we toured over to a lake near Aerospatiale's Grand Prairie, Texas, base. A private strip on an island in the lake was used for photography, and it gave a good chance to test the Tobago somewhere other than on acres of pavement. The useful length of the strip is 2,200 feet, and the airplane did just fine going in and coming out. The approach was over a hill, and a bit of slipping aided in making the approach path steeper. The arrival was my first at this strip, and the first in a Tobago in over a year, but the airplane was friendly every bit of the way. A really soft touchdown, though, was elusive on the landings that I made in the airplane.

On the way back to Grand Prairie, some thundershowers were forming and a little detour was required. There was turbulence, and the Tobago handled it quite well. The wing loading of the aircraft is higher than average for a light airplane at 19.8 pounds per square foot compared with 15 for a Piper Archer, for example. The Archer's stalling speed is three knots lower.

It is easy to fly accurate approaches in the Tobago because there's a lot of drag with full flaps. The good visibility makes you feel better about being able to see and avoid other traffic, and in total the Tobago is a pleasant airplane enroute or in the pattern.

The instrument panel is a special part of any airplane because it is what the pilot looks at the most. In the Tobago, it is highly styled with some nice touches. The switches are push for On and push the breaker for Off. The panel is designed to please service technicians as well as pilots: It can be removed for access to instruments, and there are two panels forward that can also be removed for access. There are some vertical gauges on the panel, fuel gauges for example, that do not seem to work as well as they might.

Although the retractable Trinidad is the airplane that has gotten the most attention in the United States, the Tobago is actually the world-wide best seller in this line of airplanes. Almost 400 have been sold since the airplane was certified nine years ago. The airplane was first offered in this country in 1986, and promises to be a key player as Aerospatiale expands its effort in the U.S. market.

A two-place, 160-hp version of the Tampico trainer, using the same airframe, will be offered this year at $62,900, and Aerospatiale is exploring ways other than an outright buy to make the airplane available to flight schools.

Aerospatiale General Aviation is a U.S. corporation that is responsible for the aircraft. It is located with Aerospatiale Helicopters at Grand Prairie, Texas, and receives the airplanes from France in big boxes. They are flown first at the factory in Tarbes, France, and then shipped; the total cost of getting one to Texas, reassembling it, and doing the test flying after assembly is $6,000. This, and the rise in value of the franc relative to the dollar, has forced the first dollar price increase in the airplanes since 1986. The basic list price of a Tobago is now $79,000.

With a Lycoming engine, King radios, and a lot of other parts that are common to other personal airplanes, the Tobago should find a friendly hand in almost any shop. For specialized service, Aerospatiale plans to have 30 service centers appointed within the next two years. Aviall handles parts distribution and has a complete stock. Aerospatiale is also actively recruiting and appointing distributors for the aircraft.

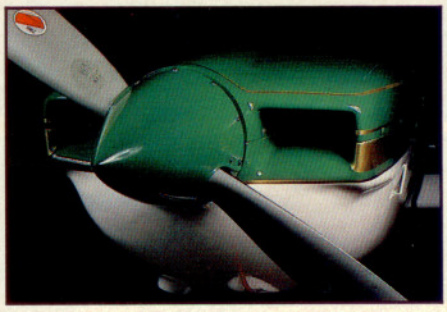
As with other airplanes, the Aerospatiale models are finding a home in training fleets. Twenty-eight Trinidads were recently sold to China's flying college, and eight were sold to a training establishment in India.

There is a continuing effort to upgrade

the Aerospatiale airplanes, and a TKS deicing system was recently approved for the Trinidad. Wind-tunnel tests have been done on a Porsche PFM-powered version of the Trinidad, but this is not currently an active project.

The division of Aerospatiale that builds the Tampico, Tobago, and Trinidad—Socata—has built more than 16,000 airplanes, including the four-place, twin-jet Paris, marketed in the 1950s in the U.S. by Beech. The STOL Rallye, of which 3,600 have been built, is a Socata project, as is the Epsilon trainer used by the French air force. The company is a partner with Mooney in the development of the TBM-700 turboprop, and Aerospatiale is currently involved in civil and military helicopters, the Airbus, the ATR-42, the ATR-72, and the Exocet missile. Concorde was a joint development with British Aircraft Corporation.

There always has been and always will be a world-wide market for airplanes of all sizes, but the U.S. market has always been the biggest. The demand here ebbs and flows, and the value of money fluctuates, but the increased effort of Aerospatiale in this market signals the arrival of a new player as business and personal flying start to grow again. And the airplanes, with their distinctive personality, do add a new element to the competition. □



Aerospatiale General Aviation TB 10 Tobago
Price as tested: $101,940

Specifications

Powerplant(s)	Textron Lycoming O-360-A1AD 180 hp
Recommended TBO	2,000 hr
Propeller(s)	Hartzell, two-blade constant speed
Length	25 ft
Height	10 ft 6 in
Wingspan	32 ft
Wing area	128.1 sq ft
Wing loading	19.8 lb/sq ft
Power loading	14.1 lb/hp
Seats	4-5
Cabin length	8 ft 3.5 in
Cabin width	4 ft 2.25 in
Cabin height	3 ft 8 in
Empty weight, as tested	1,632 lb
Gross weight	2,535 lb
Useful load, as tested	903 lb
Fuel capacity, std	55.5 gal (54 gal usable) 333 lb (324 lb usable)
Oil capacity	2 gal
Baggage capacity	100 lb

Performance

Takeoff distance, ground roll	1,066 ft
Takeoff distance over 50-ft obst	1,657 ft
Rate of climb, sea level	790 fpm
Max level speed, sea level	133 kt
Cruise speed/endurance w/45-min rsv, std fuel (fuel consumption)	
@ 75% power, best economy	127 kt/4.9 hr (56.7 pph/9.5 gph)
@ 65% power, best economy	117 kt/5.6 hr (49.1 pph/8.2 gph)
Service ceiling	13,000 ft
Landing distance over 50-ft obst	1,395 ft
Landing distance, ground roll	623 ft

Limiting and Recommended Airspeeds

Vx (best angle of climb)	65 KIAS
Vy (best rate of climb)	73 KIAS
Va (design maneuvering)	122 KIAS
Vfe (max flap extended)	95 KIAS
Vno (max structural cruising)	128 KIAS
Vne (never exceed)	165 KIAS
Vr (rotation)	65 KIAS
Vs1 (stall, clean)	60 KIAS
Vso (stall, landing configuration)	52 KIAS

All specifications are based on manufacturer's calculations. All performance figures are based on standard day, standard atmosphere, sea level, gross weight conditions unless otherwise noted. □