Adventure Makes Three

The Citabrias are back, thank goodness

BY ALTON K. MARSH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

There will be as many reactions to this photo as there are AOPA members—that's 342,000 reactions. For some members, it will evoke memories of learning to fly in a Champ. Of course, this is not really the 65-horsepower 7AC tandem-seater that taught them to fly. This is the new 160-hp Adventure, the third and final airplane in the restarted Citabria (*airbatic* spelled backward) line made by American Champion Aircraft in Rochester, Wisconsin. ■ If you're a nosewheel pilot, don't let tailwheel rumors keep you away from a tame and friendly line of aircraft. Let's address your concerns right now. While all conventional-gear

aircraft want to swap ends while charging down the runway, Champion aircraft are better behaved than most. It takes only 10 hours to transition to a tailwheel airplane, so it can't be all that difficult, can it? Ah, yes, crosswinds, you say. But during flight testing, Citabrias have demonstrated the ability to handle a 17-knot crosswind. Larry Tague, American Champion's East Coast distributor in Sanford, Florida, says that he has landed in far stronger winds.

Playing is the Citabria's primary purpose in life. Like all Citabrias, the Adventure can perform positive-G aerobatics. You may not want to see the world upside down, but it is nice to know that the airplane can handle the stress. And who knows? You may one day want to hire an instructor and get unusual-attitude training—just in case. What makes the aircraft fun, as any pilot checked out in higher-performance aircraft will tell you, is its simplicity; the pilot work load is low.

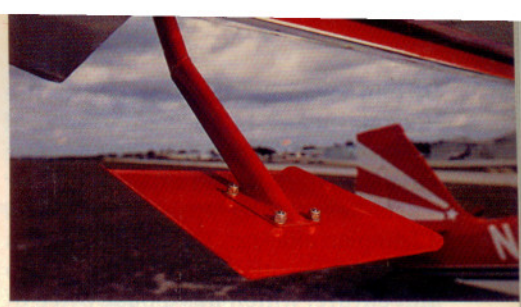
Yes, it has a complicated name: American Champion Citabria Adventure 7GCAA. After the Citabria line first started at Champion Aircraft in 1964, pilots at airports all over the country began talking funny about the various models: "Geecee beecee ecee eyey." Like that.

After Bellanca Aircraft bought the rights to Champion's line, it continued the alphabet soup. But then Jerry Mehlhaff, president of American Champion Aircraft, acquired the rights to the Champ/Citabria/Scout/Decathlon line of aircraft in 1988, and he thought it was time for a change. So he has now restarted production on three of the four Citabrias and named them Aurora, Adventure, and Explorer. The fourth, the Citabria 7KCAB with inverted fuel and oil systems for sustained inverted flight, will not be placed in production by American Cham-

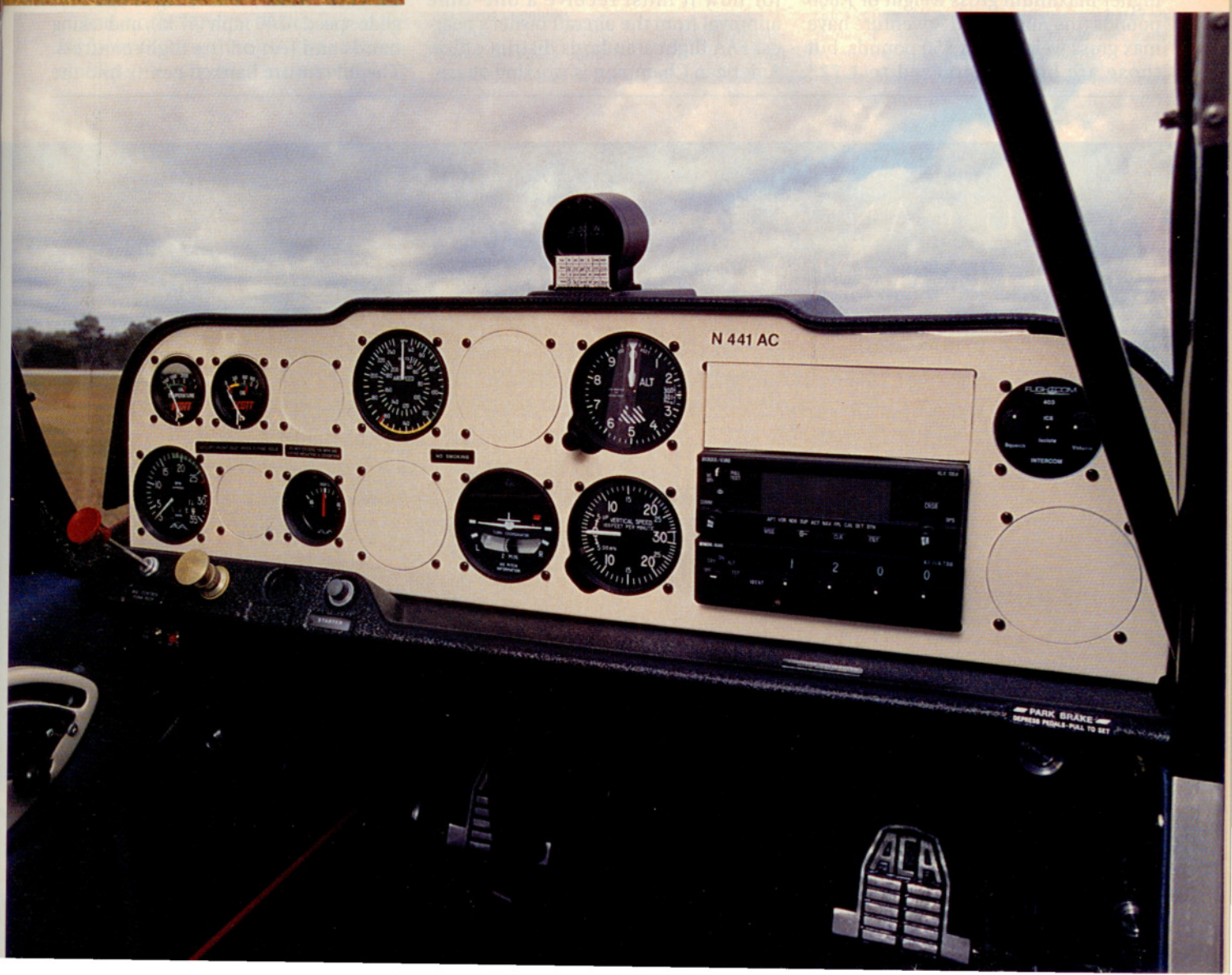
pion. While we're on the history of the company, it should be noted that the marque was started in the 1920s by Aeronautical Corporation of America, Aeronca for short, with 30- and 40-hp C–2 and C–3 two-seat designs. They evolved into the 7AC, known to most as the Champ, that served as a trainer to thousands of new pilots.

Does the age of the design mean that it is old technology? Hardly. The steel-tube fuselage is powder-coated to protect against corrosion, and American Champion has added a metal wing spar that eliminates problems with the previous wood designs. The resulting greater rigidity, the company says, adds to the climb rate. The aircraft seems reluctant to come down when the flight is over.

During a test flight from Leesburg, Florida, I needed to make forward slips on most approaches in order to lose altitude; the airplane likes to fly. Rereading my previous reports on the Explorer (see "Born again: Airbatic Rerolpxe," October 1994 *Pilot*) and Aurora (see "Citabria Lite: The Mystical Aurora," November 1995 *Pilot*), I found that I had had experienced a similar problem. However, greater power reductions on downwind when abeam the point of intended touchdown, and an hour of practice, cure the problem. Landings are a matter of learning the correct attitude for three-point landings by looking not only at the position of the nose on the horizon, but also at the angle between the flat-bottomed wing and the horizon. It will take the tailwheel-current pilot about two tries to get it right. Gordon Oldham III, the owner of the aircraft pictured here, says that the Adventure is easy to wheel-land as well.



It is not only easy to land, but it is easy to buy and to operate. Pricewise, the Adventure falls in the middle of the



Citabria family. The low end is the Citabria Aurora 7ECA with a base price of $59,900, up $8,000 since 1995. (Engine prices, materials, and especially labor costs keep going up, say American Champion officials.) The 118-hp Aurora's airframe is identical to that of the 160-hp Adventure, which has a base price of $66,900. At the top of the line is the 160-hp Explorer, with a wing that is one foot longer than that of the Aurora or Adventure; it is the only Citabria to have flaps. The base price is $69,900, up $11,000 since *Pilot's* 1994 article was written.

Here's a quick overview of the three aircraft. The Aurora is an entry-level aircraft that is economical by virtue of its low fuel consumption and its 2,400-hour-TBO engine, the Lycoming O-235. Flight schools have snapped up the Aurora for unusual-attitude training. The Adventure is the fastest of the three Citabrias and, because of the power, performs aerobatics with surprising agility. The Explorer is considered more of a utility aircraft because of its short-field capability—thanks to flaps, its higher maximum gross weight of 1,800 pounds (the Aurora and Adventure have max gross weights of 1,650 pounds, but those are being increased to 1,725 pounds), and its higher useful load. The Explorer, like the Aurora and Adventure, can be put on floats.

A base price, of course, provides only a day/VFR aircraft. Add only $10,000 in options to any of the three models and suddenly you have an economical and *well-equipped* day or night personal aircraft.

That's what Oldham did; he is a Leesburg, Florida, car dealer. Here's the whole list, just to show that you get a lot for your money. Oldham added a turn coordinator, a vertical speed indicator, an AlliedSignal Bendix/King KLX135A GPS/com with moving map, a KT76A transponder with encoder, a Flightcom 403 intercom, push-to-talk switches on the control sticks, navigation lights, a landing light, wingtip strobes, cabin lights, a bullet spinner, main gear fairings, a three-color paint scheme, aileron spades (which provide lighter control forces), and a rear-seat heater. When he was finished, his aircraft still cost just $77,000. An IFR-certified GPS may be ordered and installed by the factory, but for now it must receive a one-time approval from the aircraft owner's nearest FAA flight standards district office. American Champion is working on getting IFR approval from the FAA for several of its aircraft.

Oldham, who jokes that he was a student pilot for 19 years (he quit flying after he soloed in 1977 but returned to get his certificate in 1996), is typical of the average Adventure customer. He considers himself a VFR, fair-weather pilot with absolutely no desire to look at the world upside down from his aerobatic-capable steed. Oldham has a need for modest speed, from time to time visiting both coasts of Florida from centrally located Leesburg (northwest of Orlando); the Adventure nicely fills the role. He says he flight plans for 105 knots at 2,350 rpm. The factory claims he could expect almost 120 kt at 2,450 to 2,500 rpm.

He bought a lot of safety with the purchase of an Adventure, too. Tague, the dealer who sold the aircraft to Oldham, likes to demonstrate one method for the low-time VFR pilot to escape an inadvertent encounter with IMC conditions. In addition to the traditional 180-degree turn, Tague demonstrated retarding the throttle to idle, trimming to the best glide speed of 66 mph (57 kt), and taking hands and feet off the flight controls. The Adventure banked gently into the

wind, stopped the turn, and assumed a comfortable descent rate. Engineers call that excellent directional stability, also known as weathercock stability. Tague also demonstrated full stalls with only a 20-foot loss of altitude, which I was able to duplicate, and a loss of only 420 feet in a one-turn spin. In other aircraft, loss of 1,000 feet is more common.

Takeoffs were equally impressive. Tague suggests lifting the tail only slightly to allow the aircraft to fly itself off the ground. The Adventure was fully loaded, yet climbed at 1,200 fpm. It would appear that the aircraft could qualify for a gross weight increase, and a request to the FAA is pending. A jump in gross weight will help the aircraft's weak point, which is a payload with full fuel of only 250 pounds. Obviously, when flying with two people, most owners will fly with half-full tanks.

Still, the Adventure and the entire Citabria line offer too much to be ignored, even by nosewheel pilots. With light aircraft prices matching those of a house, here's a group of new aircraft that cost only half a house.

And, home buyers, these aircraft are far more exciting than hardwood floors or deep-pile carpets. (Come to think of it, even the *base-price* Citabrias come equipped with deep-pile carpets.) □

Links to all Web sites referenced in this issue can be found on AOPA Online (www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml). E-mail the author at alton.marsh@aopa.org

American Champion Citabria Adventure 7GCAA
Base price: $66,900
Price as tested: $77,165

Specifications

Powerplant	Lycoming O-320-B2B 160 hp at 2,700 rpm
Recommended TBO	2,000 hr
Propeller	Sensenich 74DM6S8-1 fixed-pitch, 73-in dia
Length	22 ft 8 in
Height	7 ft 8 in
Wingspan	33 ft 5 in
Wing area	165 sq ft
Wing loading	10 lb/sq ft
Power loading	10.3 lb/hp
Seats	2 tandem
Cabin length	7 ft
Cabin width	2 ft 4 in
Cabin height	4 ft
Empty weight, as tested	1,190 lb
Useful load, as tested	459 lb
Payload w/full fuel, as tested	250 lb
Max gross weight	1,650 lb
Fuel capacity, std	36 gal (35 gal usable)
Baggage capacity	100 lb

Performance

Aerobatic capability	+5, -2 G
Roll rate	90 deg/sec
Takeoff distance, ground roll	375 ft
Takeoff distance over 50-ft obstacle	630 ft
Max demonstrated crosswind component	17 kt
Rate of climb, sea level	1,280 fpm
Max level speed, sea level	120 KTAS
Cruise speed/endurance w/45-min res, std fuel (fuel consumption) @ 75% power, 3,000 ft, best economy	109 KTAS/3.1 hr (9 gph)
Service ceiling	17,000 ft
Landing distance over 50-ft obstacle	755 ft
Landing distance, ground roll	400 ft

Limiting and Recommended Airspeeds

V_X (best angle of climb)	54 KIAS
V_Y (best rate of climb)	60 KIAS
V_A (design maneuvering)	104 KIAS
V_{NO} (max structural cruising)	104 KIAS
V_{NE} (never exceed)	140 KIAS
V_{S1} (stall, clean)	44 KIAS

For more information, contact American Champion Aircraft, Post Office Box 37, 32032 Washington Avenue, Highway D, Rochester, Wisconsin 53167; telephone 414/534-6315. The East Coast distributor is Larry Tague, telephone 800/276-6661 or 407/322-3662; or visit the Web site (www.wingsonline.com/donair.cfm).

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.