

Memories of a



an Adventure

Five AOPA staff members tackle a Citabria

BY AOPA STAFF

Looking for a little adventure? Then American Champion has just the airplane for you—its a Citabria (that's "airbatic" spelled backward) 7GCAA, also known as an Adventure. This past summer, AOPA staff pilots had a chance to spend some time with the airplane the manufacturer calls "a personal toy." And whether they were neophytes with no tailwheel experience or taildragger aficionados, they all agreed that the Adventure lived up to its name.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL P. COLLINS

Thomas B. Haines

After more than 25 years of flying in dozens of different models, who would think such a perky, innocent-looking little airplane could be so challenging? Oh sure, I've flown tailwheel airplanes before—even before April 15, 1991 when the regulations changed. Anyone who hadn't logged any tailwheel time prior to that point must get a special tailwheel endorsement. I had flown several tailwheel airplanes prior to that, including the rough-and-tumble Pezetel Wilga, a knock-kneed Polish-built radial-engined behemoth—a face only a mother could love.

Nonetheless, as a product of 1970s flight training when the Cessna 150 and 152 ruled the training ramp, tailwheel flying was relatively foreign to me. I was checked out in a Piper Cub years ago, but never really mastered the airplane—or even flew it solo. Last summer I was determined to not just fly, but fly with authority the American Champion Adventure at our dis-



posal. For such a feat I turned to longtime flying coach Craig Brown, the CFII who suffered through my instrument rating with me back during the George Bush I era and signed me off for the Cub. Craig is a member of AOPA's Technical Assistance staff when he isn't churning up the pattern here at Frederick Municipal Airport with student pilots.

For me, the most difficult challenge was getting used to not flaring during wheel landings—or at least not flaring in the traditional manner. After decades of gently pulling back, it was tough to think “push forward” as the Adventure touched down on its main wheels. You might say we bounced a few (dozen) times. Finally, I learned to set it on the main wheels, and then with the right application of power I could drive it down the runway on two wheels, lifting off again at the far end. Seeing how maneuverable the airplane was in that configuration boosted my confidence.

To help me establish the attitude for a three-point landing I mastered the technique of setting the airplane up in the proper attitude just over the runway and then using power to

keep it there as we flew low over the runway, again adding power and going around.

After that, managing the touchdowns came rather quickly. My confidence did not. I wasn't sure I would ever feel ready to fly it myself.

One afternoon during our regular lunchtime flight, I struggled with the airplane through several landings. Craig seemed awfully quiet in the back, except to say after the last one that it was time to quit. He had to get back to work. As I taxied back in, Craig commented, “You just made six safe landings and I didn't touch anything or say a word. Go take it around a few times yourself.”

Feeling very much like a student pilot about to solo, I dropped the instructor off on the ramp and taxied back out. The moment of truth—just me and my favorite David Clarks about to take on the tailwheel demon. Three successful landings later I rolled back onto the ramp to discover that Craig had watched the first one and then gone to lunch.

Fly with authority? Perhaps not, but nothing bent, broken, or scraped. Close enough.

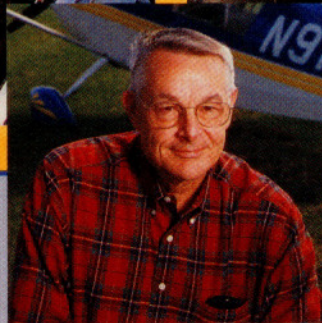
The moment of truth—just me and my favorite David Clarks about to take on the tailwheel demon.



The view from the Citabria can't be beat—its picture-window cockpit and greenhouse roof are great for sightseeing flights.



Granted the cockpit isn't large, but the panoramic windows make the airplane feel roomy. Backseat passengers need to watch that stick during takeoff.



Alton K. Marsh

Six hundred miles in a Citabria is a lot, but the view is great. It was my job (boy, some job) last summer to pick the aircraft up at the American Champion factory located on a farm (what better place to grow taildraggers?) in Rochester, Wisconsin, and bring it to AOPA headquarters in Frederick, Maryland. There was a stiff crosswind blowing as I lifted off at 3 p.m.

Ceilings were low most of the way, but the Citabria is not an aircraft one takes to the flight levels. It is flown from the front seat and, as the astronauts have said in past decades, that view is tremendous. Of course, those astronauts were looking at the whole world while the Citabria pilot is looking at the grass blades from which that world is made. There's a picture window at your left shoulder that opens in flight, another at your right, a panoramic window in front, and if that isn't enough, a greenhouse roof.

Weather limited the cruising altitude to 2,200 feet, and from there I watched the distant buildings of downtown Chicago come into view, giving wide berth to its busy airspace with the help of the Garmin GNC 250XL GPS/com with moving map. The Citabria is very stable and once in trim, I sat like a polite kindergartener, hands folded in my lap. I averaged 117 knots for much of the trip—the winds were with me.

But the weather wasn't. Ohio appeared to be full of trouble, and I pleaded with a flight watch briefer for a second,

better opinion until finally he said, "It doesn't look like you're crossing Ohio today." So it was time to land at Fort Wayne, Indiana, shelter the Citabria in a hangar, and call for the free hotel shuttle to the Hilton Garden Inn. That night new storms from the northwest blossomed into Indiana, reinforcing my decision to hangar the Citabria. Lightweight deck furniture from the hotel pool was scattered in the street that night.

Ceilings were still low the next morning, forcing a landing short of my destination of Parkersburg, West Virginia, and a cell phone consultation with AOPA Pilot weather expert Tom Horne. The airport I chose, just one mile from the Ohio River, was touted by the locals to be "the one where all the flight instructors bring their students for crosswind practice." I wasn't disappointed, and the Citabria handled the crosswinds well. I was following a nasty rain system by hours, and everywhere I landed I heard, "You're lucky you weren't here last night." Flight service station briefers suggested a jog to the north before continuing to Frederick, and it worked like a charm as weather parted along my path, finally disappearing altogether and allowing a final run at a tailwind-aided 130 knots under blue skies. I was home in time for lunch. Not a bad little cross-country airplane, although with two largish men aboard you need to limit the fuel load and carry only the baggage that will fit in your pocket.



Grass, asphalt, whatever. The Adventure is happy anywhere you take it.

Julie K. Boatman

My first taste of conventional-gear flying—or more important, landing—took place right after I received my private certificate. My instructor, Don Nelson, piled all 17 years of me into a Piper Super Cub, and we lifted off, headed for the grass strip at nearby Amana, Iowa.

The turf at Amana is nearly 100 feet wide, and that's a good thing. Grass is forgiving to start with, and having some space to correct my excursions from a controlled touchdown proved important. At one point we were headed for the shrubs, but at no time were we in danger of meeting them.

I should have soloed then, when I was young and fearless, but the bug didn't bite—an instrument rating was more alluring, as I imagined a glorious corporate piloting career ahead of me. Since that time, I had dipped my toe into conventional waters on several occasions: a trip on a fall afternoon in a Super Cub with a beau, an early morning sashay around the pattern in a Piper J-3, a spin or two in an Aeronca Champ. Then the foray into Luscombe-land that continues as I search for the right airplane to buy. But solo one? Not yet. I have friends who have wrapped them up, and I approach the whole deal with caution.

The Adventure leased by AOPA for the summer of 2003 offered an opportunity to fly a new tailwheel airplane, in the midst of my Luscombe study. I hesitated. To those who have flown both the Luscombe and an Adventure, there is a glaring difference. My first lesson was a fast taxi in the wind, great practice in handling for any new tailwheel pilot. As I taxied down the ramp in the Citabria, the rudder needed my assertive attention—with the foot-force to match from my little legs. And these days pilots are accustomed to stiff rudder pedals; students know the litany of “more rudder, more rudder, more rudder” from the right seat in response to uncoordinated flight or the takeoff roll.

If you stomp on the rudder in a Luscombe, you'll end up twisting around the fencepost—*no wood, no nails, no glue,*

as old Luscombe ads proclaim, but looking for all the world like you could use some of each.

So I flew the Citabria an hour here, an hour there, with an instructor. The handling came pretty easily, the view from the blue-and-yellow airplane's windows so pleasant as the summer waned. After a couple of hours my instructor had me ready to solo, but again I demurred. I needed more work on my wheel landings, I said. He said they were fine, but I didn't know it. As an instructor, you know when you don't know something, when you're only doing it right by rote.

So I went up again, and again, with another instructor-friend, but I was hesitant to kick him out. The landings were smooth, a touch here, a touch there, over and over. But as the daylight faded on our last flight he said, I was fine to solo if I wanted.

I said no. Why was I chicken?

A little more than a year ago, a good friend ground looped a tailwheel airplane after a succession of flights that day. Afterward, I agonized with him over everything that happened, as he rehashed every step of the flight as it went from good to bad to ugly. If landing accidents are fender benders, this was a doozy, although no one was really hurt.

I shouldn't let this color my thinking, eat at my confidence, but it does. If a pilot with good stick-and-rudder skill and more hours than I can come to grief, then my number is out there somewhere.

Someday I'll have a tailwheel airplane of my own, and I'll face that dragon solo. But the airplane will be mine, and the consequences mine alone to face.



Nathan A. Ferguson

You have to love an airplane that can be turned by simply sticking your arm out the window. I learned this one day while lazily following the Shenandoah River upstream over Virginia.

I had forgotten just how beautiful the Shenandoah Valley is when viewed from a different perspective. Instead of Adventure, the airplane, perhaps, could be called *Rediscover*, not only for sightseeing but also for bringing people back to aviation whether they haven't flown in a while or want to learn about the art of tailwheel flying. Our airplane, in fact, gave more rides than the Orient Express.

Everywhere I went people were attracted by its shiny new paint and nostalgic looks. Some thought it was a restored airplane at first, completely unaware that they are still being manufactured, while veteran Citabria captains would walk up and marvel at the aft baggage door, a new option.

This baggage door would come into play after the juice got drained from the battery one day because of a loose alternator belt and fitting. Not to be pointing fingers, Al Marsh, but someone on our staff misplaced the baggage door key before I took off. (This should teach him.) Because the battery is located behind a panel in the baggage compartment, it's hard to get at unless you have the key. The mechanic thought he'd have a wrestling match on his hands to get the door off and contemplated slithering through the cabin and sitting on the rear seat back. The idea was abandoned after the mechanic and I both imagined his big feet ripping through the floor by exceeding the 100-pound weight limitation. Anyway, he was able to get the door off with little fuss and charge the battery. I was soon on my way back to Maryland for permanent repairs.

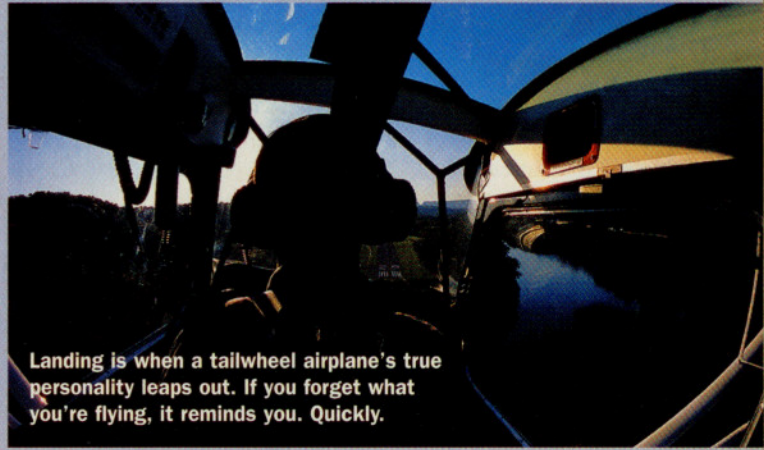
I later ferried the airplane to the dealer, Rare Aircraft in Owatonna, Minnesota, in November when the lease ran out. While some people might argue that a super-simple fabric airplane



isn't exactly the best long cross-country machine, I'd beg to differ. The range might be limited and there are no fancy avionics other than a panel-mount GPS, but it's pure fun if you build a few days into your schedule and enjoy the countryside or follow major landforms. The airplane is equally happy on grass or asphalt, and you know you can land it safely almost anywhere if need be.

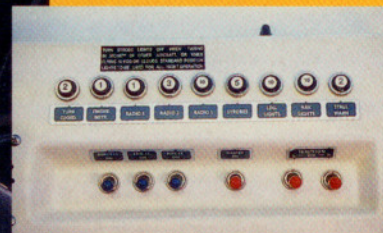
After following the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, I stopped in Hannibal, Missouri, to wait out a big cold front that brought snow to the Great Lakes area and to pay homage to Mark Twain, of course. Hannibal is also the hometown of Bill Lear, of Learjet fame, but you'll be hard-pressed to find anything major honoring the aviation pioneer. Some locals are trying to change that.

After I touched down in chilly Minnesota with the heater only on slightly to make things nice and toasty, I was sorry to see the little airplane go. But I was told that it was going to a good home in Georgia. That new-Citabria smell is now a pleasant memory.



Landing is when a tailwheel airplane's true personality leaps out. If you forget what you're flying, it reminds you. Quickly.

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The instrument panel comes with everything you need for VFR flight. The Garmin GPS is simple to use. The electrical panel is above the pilot's head and on the left.

Machteld A. Smith

Winds were brisk and gusting from the south as I gingerly pulled the Citabria out of its cozy protective shelter. My instructor explained once again the importance of anticipating the aircraft's propensity to turn into the wind and the need to counteract that tendency with generous rudder. The preflight mastered, I climbed into the cockpit. It was picture perfect: fantastic view outside the front and sides, even overhead, and a lovely simple panel with few gauges or knobs to worry about. I was ready. As I fired up the engine my instructor observed that next time I might benefit from pillows below and behind me to improve my visibility and reach of the rudder pedals. I made a mental note.

Taxiing behind the row of hangars was manageable since the structures blocked the wind. But as soon as the little airplane ventured into open space I had to fight with all my might to keep it from turning opposite of my desired taxi route. "Get that rudder in all the way," was only one of innumerable reminders from the rear seat. I made a second mental note: Ditch the brick shoes and don ballerina slippers to feel and dance on the rudder pedals. After I semisuccessfully maneuvered the airplane for what seemed an eternity on every taxiway available, it was time for the high-speed taxi demonstration on the runway. That proved to be an exciting glimpse of what the takeoff roll would be like. My feet, legs, and hips took three days to recover from this lesson.

Takeoffs were thrilling as we accelerated down the runway; stick forward and into the wind, tail coming up, stick back, and the airplane leaped into the sky. It almost felt like a little rocket as the Citabria just peeled off the surface and pointed up high. Years ago I had a brief introduction to a Piper J-3 and later an



Extra 300, so most of the maneuvers seemed familiar enough using the stick. The Citabria's wall-mounted throttle and trim control on the left still caused some grief.

As expected, I needed time to comfortably control my landings. Thanks to the repeated mantra from the rear seat, rudders and feet were now solidly welded, and I kept things fairly straight during rollout. It reminded me of seaplane flying. In fact, I noticed many similarities between the two, except for wheel landings of course; forward stick in a floatplane turns the cabin into an aquarium. Ah, the dreaded wheel landing! A totally unnerving maneuver disputing everything I had just learned. I plainly did not like it. OK, so this technique was to improve landing stability in windy conditions. But in reality whenever I moved the stick forward I experienced a slight panicky feeling that the prop would hit the runway, or worse, that the airplane would just plow straight into the ground. Eventually, my anxiety subsided and the wheel landings began to feel better, even good.

While we were bouncing through abbreviated patterns, I was able to enjoy this little aircraft until I had to guide it down. My instructor had the glider pilot habit of closing the throttle pretty much anywhere in the pattern, getting my attention quickly. Big wings and no flaps rendered the Citabria one big coasting butterfly. I desperately needed to master forward slips in order to descend! At times I was wrestling a hungry crocodile instead of performing a ballet with this beautiful butterfly.

After observing the runway from many angles, including flying parallel and level with the approach lighting system, I finally was able to get mind over matter and, with additional coaching and reinforcement from the rear seat, it eventually all came

together, not just one day, but several days in a row. That was when I proudly joined the ranks of "real" pilots. **ACPA**

i Links to additional information about the American Champion Adventure may be found on AOPA Online (www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml). Keyword search: American Champion.

SPECSHEET

American Champion Adventure 7GCAA

Base price: \$84,900

Price as tested: \$97,965

Specifications

Powerplant	Lycoming O-320-B2B, 160 hp at 2,700 rpm
Recommended TBO	2,000 hr
Propeller	Sensenich 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	10.6 lb/sq ft
Power loading	10.9 lb/hp
Seats	2 tandem
Cabin length	7 ft
Cabin width	2 ft 4 in
Cabin height	4 ft
Standard empty weight	1,110 lb
Empty weight, as tested	1,204 lb
Max gross weight	1,750 lb
Max useful load	540 lb
Max useful load, as tested	546 lb
Max payload w/full fuel	330 lb
Max payload w/full fuel, as tested	336 lb
Fuel capacity, std	36 gal (35 gal usable)
	216 lb (210 lb 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	130 mph
Cruise speed/range w/45-min rsv, (fuel consumption), 7,000 ft @ 75% power, best economy	134 mph/435 sm (8.5 gph)
Landing distance over 50-ft obstacle	755 ft
Landing distance, ground roll	400 ft

Limiting and Recommended Airspeeds

V _X (best angle of climb)	58 mph
V _Y (best rate of climb)	77 mph
V _A (design maneuvering)	120 mph
V _{NO} (max structural cruising)	120 mph
V _{NE} (never exceed)	162 mph
V _{S1} (stall, clean)	52 mph

For more information, contact American Champion Aircraft, Post Office Box 37,



32032 Washington Avenue, Highway D, Rochester, Wisconsin 53167; telephone 262/534-6315.

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.