

TOURING BY TRIKE

A lot of student trike pilots have ambitions to do a big flight once they get their licence. It is a great incentive when you are struggling with mastering circuits to dream of touring round the country in your own plane. Once qualified though, most people only fly an hour or two from home with maybe an occasional weekend trip to somewhere a bit further away. Whilst there is absolutely nothing wrong with this, Australia is a perfect country for bigger flights. Huge distances are possible without worrying about international borders or language barriers. Even the longest expedition can be broken down into a succession of 2 or 3 hour flights so why not extend your horizons and plan a long distance trip ?

If you can persuade someone to provide ground support for your flight then you are sorted. An air-conditioned vehicle with a cold beer & jerry cans of fuel waiting when you land at the end of a superb days flying. Unfortunately it rarely works out that way ! Spouses may not see the attraction in driving round the country on their own all day whilst you enjoy yourself. Other pilots would obviously rather be flying themselves so having support often isn't an option. Doing a trip unsupported deters a lot of pilots but it isn't as difficult as you might think. Like so much else in aviation, it does requires preparation though, "proper planning prevents p*ss poor performance" !

The first big "worry" is how to pack everything you think you might need into one small trike. If your camping gear is typical Aussi stuff then the answer is that you can't ! Most of the camping gear sold here is designed to be transported in a 4x4 – it's massive and far too heavy to carry in a trike. Avoid the camping "supermarkets" and search specialist outdoor shops for more suitable equipment. Unfortunately "less costs more", (like women's fashion apparently), and compact, lightweight kit is not cheap. It is more economical than buying a Cessna to cart everything about in though !

The same principle applies to the tool kit - forget about taking those car tools ! There are all kinds of small and multi-function tools which are more suitable for stowage in a trike. Motorcycle shops can be a good source of suitable screwdrivers and spanners (sockets & drives tend to be heavier so avoid unless it is absolutely essential). Work out which sizes and shapes you actually need then check they fit on the plane. There is probably no point in carrying enough tools to do a major rebuild – if your crankshaft fails you will have to leave the plane & retrieve later by trailer. Several planes of the same type traveling together make it possible to share spares but, even then, it is not feasible to carry enough parts for every conceivable breakdown. If something major does fail or get broken, it usually tends to be something you hadn't thought of anyway !

If you are preparing for a trip of (say) 25 hours flying, consider all the maintenance you would typically do in that amount of local flying – for example changing plugs, cleaning filters & jets, fixing stone damage to the prop and minor electrical woes. Spark plugs (for 2 strokes), exhaust springs and rubber mounts plus general things like adhesive, bolts, locking wire and tape are all essentials. Obviously do any necessary maintenance before you depart. Punctures should certainly be planned for, especially if you are landing at a lot of unsealed airfields. Bicycle stores sell compact hand pumps and puncture repair kits and maybe take a spare inner tube. You could consider an aerosol puncture fixing foam or, if you believe that prevention is better than cure, mountain bikers use a puncture preventative liquid inside the tyres.

Everything else on your packing list should also be considered for size, weight and "stowability" . If you use a Mr Funnel (and if not you should do – they really do filter out water as well as solids) buy the smallest size for the trike. Stuff sacks are available in camping shops and can be used to compress sleeping bags and clothing for reduced bulk. Different models of trike have different storage possibilities but, with a bit of thought and some clever packing, all of them have more space than you might imagine. You might be able to make a few improvements - for example the Quantum has underseat storage bins but you can't fit much more than a packet of fags & a mobile in there. The same space can be used much more flexibly without the bins.

Personally I wouldn't recommend storing things inside the wing as it risks affecting the handling both in the air and on the ground. I also prefer not using saddlebags or panniers but it might be unavoidable especially if you are flying dual. If you do have to use them, try to obtain a brand with carry straps so that they can also be used as a rucksack. They are not recommended on some trikes (such as the XT912) as they reduce cooling to the engine but there are alternative products such as combined stone-net / storage bags.

Have a practice run at packing well before your departure date and constantly consider the safety of what you are doing. It should be quite obvious that exceeding the planes MAUW is both illegal and dangerous. Make sure nothing can work loose or fallout. Besides the risk of foreign objects going through the prop, flapping items are a distraction and loose clothing could catch fire on the exhaust. Don't overload the weight limits of storage bags and, if you are stowing a lot of gear in odd places ensure that you have not adversely affected the centre of gravity (something trike pilots rarely have to worry about). Check that you have "full and free movement" of the controls (including the steering) and that your luggage isn't stressing any electrical or throttle cables. It's worth checking the fully loaded aircraft especially if you don't often operate at maximum take off weight.

The question I am most frequently asked (by pilots) about the trips I have done is "how did you manage to get fuel". I suspect that worrying about this is probably the biggest impediment to people doing unsupported trips. The good news is that, in Australia, you generally only have to worry about finding fuel rather than the quality of it. You should take fuel wherever and whenever you can so the easiest solution is, where possible, to plan your route via airfields that have a fuel pump. Most, if not all, trike engines can be run quite satisfactorily on avgas. Refer to the engine manual to make sure and to check if there are any special maintenance requirements when using avgas (or other leaded fuel). For example, the oil change interval is reduced on the Rotax 912 and two strokes might require more frequent plug inspections or changes. Confirm the pump operating hours in ERSA as callout fees can be prohibitively expensive. Quite a few airfields have automatic pumps operated by swipe card. You might consider getting one but each type obviously only works at one brand of pumps.

If you are refueling a premix two stroke from a pump, it is best to mix the oil and fuel in a jerry can before putting it into the tank. It is possible to do it directly but you have to be absolutely certain that the oil has mixed completely if you want to avoid difficulty starting or worse. After you have topped up the planes tank refill the jerry can as well. Allow plenty of time for each refueling stop even at an airfield with avgas. In my experience it always takes the best part of an hour and this goes up exponentially with the number of planes. In fact, allowing yourself plenty of time is an excellent philosophy for all aspects for the trip. If you are in a rush to get somewhere either drive or fly Qantas.

Obviously many airfields with avgas also have RPT traffic. That is absolutely no reason to avoid landing there and trikes have as much right to fly into an MBZ as anything else ! It is bad enough that in Australia, (unlike a lot of other countries), we are not allowed in controlled airspace without voluntarily excluding ourselves from other large airports as well. Before you take off, thoroughly review the airport details in the current ERSA for any local procedures. Always report your position accurately (and succinctly) and make every effort to fit in with other traffic. Many of these airports aren't actually as busy as some smaller airfields but, if you aren't confident, try to arrange a flight into one with a competent instructor or an experienced pilot who does regularly use them. It is to be hoped that, once the dust settles on the requirements and issuing of ASIC's, security restrictions won't be a further impediment to recreational pilots landing at regional airports.

Even if there is no fuel bowser, a lot of Australian airfields have the phone number of the local taxi firm displayed. If its not, then the excellent AOPA airfield guide should contain it. Provided the airfield isn't 50km from town it shouldn't be too expensive to get a taxi to go to the nearest servo & back (especially if there are several of you). The AOPA guide usually lists the local pub too -

try calling them and asking if they will pick you up for you to eat there (take the jerry cans and fill them up whilst you are on the way). If all else fails, you will have to resort to thumbing a lift and hoping that the locals take pity on a pedestrian carrying a jerry can. You can get a lot of exercise flying a microlight ! The majority of private airfields are PPR so you should phone first. Mention what you are doing and, as well as making sure the strip is serviceable, you might even have somebody there to meet you.

On occasion in Africa we taxied the trikes (without wings) into town to get fuel but I suspect this would get the wrong sort of attention in Australia so I wouldn't recommend it (unless you want a contest between CASA & police over who gets to prosecute you first) ! Landing on roads is also probably not a good idea but, in some areas it might be possible to land in a paddock near to a servo. With any off-airfield landing you need to be very confident that it's completely safe to land AND take off again. Prematurely ending your trip by trashing the trike on a termite mound, wombat hole or other hazard is not a good plan. If in doubt – don't do it !

Everywhere you land will be an experience, a few might be bad but the vast majority will be fantastic. Almost everybody has been friendly wherever I have landed in Australia (especially in rural areas) and this is one of the great joys of touring. Trikes don't have a high profile and most people will be really curious having never seen one before. Offering them a quick flight is a great way of breaking the ice and, although they usually decline, they are more likely to offer you some assistance too. Either way they will get their monies worth telling their mates in the pub about you so don't feel too awkward about asking for a lift.

Even other pilots rarely know much about trikes (and usually have a lot of misconceptions) so this is your chance to show them that they are safe aircraft flown by responsible pilots. Other trikers may well wish to use the same airfield in the future so please remember that you are an ambassador for all microlights and try to leave a favourable impression wherever you visit. This includes resisting the urge to show off in front of an audience when you depart and paying the landing fee where necessary. When there is nobody around leave it in the honesty box if there is one. What goes around might come around so please be helpful to any itinerant aviators that arrive at your airfield (especially if it's me) !

Trike touring is usually easier, and much more fun, when done with a group. It is also much safer to travel with at least one other plane. If possible, agree a speed you can all fly at and stick to it. Fly together but navigate individually – this means each plane carries the appropriate (and current) charts. If you do lose sight of each other, at least try to meet up again before arriving at the destination. You don't need to look like the Roulettes but it causes far less disruption to arrive in formation rather than appearing from all over the sky at different heights. Our low speed makes it relatively easy to provide enough separation in the circuit for multiple trikes to land within a few minutes and this is more professional than blocking the airfield for half an hour.

I haven't discussed how to plan or navigate a cross-country safely and accurately as you should have learnt this when you obtained your cross-country endorsement. If you didn't, or you would benefit from some revision, please go and talk to an experienced instructor. Hopefully this article has convinced a few pilots that, although you do need to be more self sufficient, touring without ground support is quite feasible. Give it a go - you will gain more experience in 10 or 20 hours on a cross-country trip than in 100 hours of local flying.