

In-Flight Entertainment Systems

BY DALE SMITH

From simple AM/FM receivers to blow-your-socks-off in-cabin video systems, today there's an in-flight entertainment system to match anyone's budget and imagination.

I'm really going to date myself here, but back when I was learning to fly, I thought the neatest thing was to be able to tune the trusty old ADF to an AM radio station and listen to a baseball game while I trudged around in the skies over Florida. I can still remember that crackly signal blaring over the 150's single speaker. And what a mad dash it was to turn down the volume if "Center" called. Stereo was something you were lucky to have in your car. And a headset—well those were reserved for the "pros."

Today, as an entertainment tool at least, the ADF is all but forgotten. And that's a good thing, because it's monaural AM sound has been replaced a seemingly endless assortment of ways to deliver your favorite music and even movies into your airplane in the highest fidelity imaginable.

HiFi while you fly.

I can hear a lot of you "high-timers" saying to yourselves, "I don't want music blaring in my ears while I'm trying to fly. I've got enough to do already." Well, during an instrument approach or under IFR conditions, you undoubtedly do. But what about those severe-clear days when you're flying over the middle of nowhere? Wouldn't it be nice to pass the hours with a little background music? After all, you have a lot to do when you're driving in traffic and you still find time to have the radio on and probably a cell phone glued to your ear.

"A lot of pilots see in-flight entertainment (IFE) as a distraction," explained Jim Kantor, owner of Eastern Avionics. "But the truth is, pilots who have it and use it wisely, actually find it makes the flight more relaxing and enjoyable. Pilots really have much less fatigue after a flight and you can never say enough of the benefit it gives your passengers." Besides, when you get ready to begin your approach, all you have to do is flip a switch and the music is gone.

"With the capabilities of today's stereo audio panels, the pilot can easily bypass the music channel," added Ron Shabbott, avionics manager for Eastern Avionics.



“The co-pilot location and the passengers can listen to whatever they want and it won’t interfere with the pilot’s ATC communications at all.”

In fact, a growing percentage of pilots are opting to install or upgrade their IFE systems because it is such a benefit to their passengers. After all, your friends, kids or even your “significant other” may not share your love of aviating.

Having their favorite music along will really increase their comfort level and will help pass the time. In fact, if you do it right, you may never-again hear the words: “When are we going to get there?”

And while using your passengers’ comfort and entertainment is a good excuse, the truth is once you have a good IFE system in your plane you won’t want to fly without it. I heard the story of a guy who flies his Mooney about 500-hours a year all over the Midwest. His in-dash CD player went down and he immediately called the manufacturer for a “loaner” while his was being fixed. He didn’t want to take another flight without it.

The hardware at the heart of your IFE system.

The one thing that is driving the increase in popularity of in-flight entertainment is how easy it can be added to your cockpit. “What we’re seeing now is a lot of aircraft owners changing out their old switch-style audio panels for the new models with

stereo and full-intercom capabilities,” Shabbott added. “A lot of them have an external input jack that makes it easy to plug in a portable cassette, CD or even MP3 player. And even if the unit doesn’t have the jack, it’s a real simple thing for your installer to add one on your panel or in the glove box.”

Yes, amazing as it sounds, the lowly old audio panel that for years has gotten no respect from the other avionics is now the heart and soul of your in-flight entertainment system.

“The newest thrust is to upgrade to a stereo audio panel that has the built-in intercom,” Kantor explained. “Now you’ll have an all-in-one box that has all the normal audio switching, as well as the switching for a panel mounted AM/FM radio and CD player.

“And the beauty is,” he added, “all of the units have the built-in circuitry that automatically mutes the music whenever an ATC communication comes through the radio.” Isn’t technology great?

Will that be panel-mount or portable?

Your decision to go with a portable music source or a panel-mounted unit may not be as cut and dry as you think. Sure, if you recently finished an avionics upgrade and don’t have the desire or disposable income to go with an installed unit, a portable is the only choice.

But, that’s not the only time a portable may be your best solution. Say you’re an “infrequent” flyer or maybe your panel is already over-stuffed with avionics. Or maybe you’re lucky enough to fly a “classic” and don’t want to ruin the aesthetics of your panel. All of these are good reasons not to choose a panel-mounted box.

And while a portable unit is certainly better than nothing, they do have their limitations. The first one is that it’s portable. Which means you have to remember to bring it along with you every time you fly. And then there’s the need to run a wire to plug the unit into your audio panel. And don’t forget that portables eat batteries like kids eat candy. So you’ll have to remember to bring spares.

Of course, you can plug the player’s adapter into your airplane’s cigarette lighter ... er, auxiliary power outlet, but therein lies another problem—electrical “noise.” If you use the cigarette lighter for power and plug the player into the intercom’s audio jack, you can create an electrical loop and actually hear the CD player’s electric motor running over the audio system. It’s not hazardous, but it can be annoying.

Of course, built-in players eliminate all those problems. They’re always there and ready to entertain you so you’ll end up using it more. Plus, because they have a built-in amplifier, there will be plenty of volume to do your favorite music justice. And built-ins are especially nice if you want to listen to AM or FM radio

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because you won't have any portable antennas to deal with.

The last and, often least considered piece of your in-flight entertainment system, is your headset. It makes no sense to spend the money for a quality stereo intercom and an equally good music source and then try and listen to it through your how-many-year-old mono headset. And even most "stereo" headsets aren't any good for music. They've been specifically designed for reproducing voice over VHF, not music over HiFi. So take your time and "test fly" a variety of quality headsets. Hey, who doesn't like to buy new goodies for the cockpit?

Take a look at this!

As it has throughout its entire evolution, IFE is following the lead set by car entertainment product development and that means the next-generation of on-the-go entertainment goodies including satellite radio, DVD players and MP3 players are now available for your airplane.

With the growing availability and shrinking cost of those tiny LCD video screens, DVD players are beginning to make their way into some upper-end cabin aircraft. But, with a price tag of around \$8,000 for a "basic" DVD IFE system, it's still a bit pricey for the average single-engine owner. And, then again, if you really want the coolest Bonanza or Saratoga on the ramp, maybe a DVD system with individual monitors at each seat and some ultra-cool wireless headphones isn't really out of the picture.

As you read this there are a couple of avionics companies



offering subscription satellite units for installation in your airplane. But the experts suggest you shop wisely for your satellite system. The hardware and programming packages are not interchangeable so check out the available programming package carefully. And don't forget to figure in the monthly subscription fees. You have to pay them whether you use the radio or not. So if you really don't fly a lot, it's probably a better idea to stick with one of the "free" sources.

And, last but not least, if you're one of those music lovers who enjoys creating your own music collections on the new digital MP3 format, there's reason for you to celebrate too. You not only have the ability to plug your MP3 portable player into a panel jack, you can now also buy a panel-mounted MP3 player for real "digital" music on the go.

So there you have it my airborne audiophile friend. When it comes to what you can do to create your ideal in-flight entertainment system, the sky is literally the limit. Or as Kantor put it, "Just like your car or home entertainment system, what you put in your airplane is only limited by your imagination—or better yet, your wallet." ■