

Microlight 'airportheid'



Microlight pilots increasingly feel they are being shut out of controlled airspace. Instructor and examiner Deepak Mahajan has some advice

Every country in the world views microlight aircraft as flying machines with cloth wings equipped with an unreliable engine being manhandled by a daredevil and not by a pilot. Now how the heck did we get such a poor and long-lasting reputation, despite the fact that since the last two decades, microlight aircraft have flown around the world and over Mt Everest setting world records of all kinds – speed runs, fuel economy, lowest emission rates, furthest range on a thankful...?

bans them from operating in controlled airspace. I can say from personal experience that this is a phenomenon that has evolved from the interactions of earlier generations of microlight aircraft and their pilots. What are the reasons for this?

Above: the carbon fibre Flight Design CTSW is one of the worlds most popular microlights
Lower left: instructor and examiner Deepak Mahajan at work in a modern microlight
Below: Cockpit of a modern high-performance microlight, the Pipistrel Virus

The pilot training requirements in the UK for microlight class is a minimum of 25 flying hours; in Spain it is a minimum of 10 hours; in Italy 12 hours; in France 20 hours; in Germany it is 30 hours and Switzerland simply does not have a license issued to microlight pilots. Some countries around the world have adopted the UK microlight syllabus system in its entirety; others have adapted existing PPL criteria or evolved their own requirements with varying levels of success. Sometimes this training regime is simply not robust



As soon as you announce on the radio that you are a microlight wishing to land at an airport or fly into a controlled area or zone, the response from Air Traffic Control is one of surprise and more often than not, a denial of permission. Why should it be so, this "airportheid"? – a term I have coined to describe this separation of microlight aircraft from airspace and airports. Why are microlights not welcome in controlled airspace or at airports? There is nothing in the ANO that prohibits or





A line-up of capable aircraft – NT is a Flight Design CTSW



Pipistrel takes off – speed and rate of climb far exceeds that of older spamcans

enough to equip new pilots flying modern microlight aircraft to fly through controlled airspace. And this shows up in a reluctance to fly anywhere near controlled airspace or cross international boundaries.

Training on microlight aircraft is usually carried out from little airstrips on farmland and not from airports. The radio is not generally used by the student pilot.

The theory and ground school is kept relevant to microlight type flying and does not have a scope as complete as the 'full' license. However, modern microlight aircraft are capable of flying faster, further and higher (darn that Olympic theme again!) than the ubiquitous Charlie 152.

Thus we have to educate and convince those who control our airspace that we have sufficient knowledge, practice and airmanship to competently and safely operate in airspace in and around civil and military airports which may contain a mix of commercial airliners as well as business jets and other GA traffic. How can we do that? Simple answer really! We must educate ourselves by reading the information in the flight guides and understanding how the airspace around the airport is used and operated. Call up the ATC watch manager and ask for a briefing before entering her zone or area; ask what she expects of you and how she could fit you in amongst other air traffic in her area at the time you wish to cross or land at her airport. Yes, it is "her" area or

zone or airport as she controls the air traffic within!

UK microlight pilots are not required to learn how to use the radio in flight (whilst German microlight pilots are required to do so) during their flight training and are thus at a huge disadvantage from the outset in communicating their requirements to ATC. Many microlight instructors do not use the radio, and when their students get licenses and fly away from home base, they are not prepared to use the radio or do so in an incorrect manner, speaking a non-standard aviation language, without the knowledge of what to expect as a response from ATC. A bit like going into a Parisian restaurant and ordering a five course meal in French and being surprised at what is actually served!

What ATC expect from pilots is clear and correct communications. Imagine their workload; viewing a two-dimensional radar screen, with speed information but working out the time in their heads, fitting in GA, commercial and military traffic in a sequence which is known in advance, while a pilot may come along rambling on the radio wanting a zone transit. I must add here that not all microlight pilots ramble on the radio, and that many an "old-timer" GA pilot 'umms' and 'ahhs', taking up precious few seconds during a busy period on the radio.

Prepare a crib sheet with your

Left: a picture taken by the author from a microlight over east London
Right: a route Deepak regularly flies with his students, overhead Biggin and overhead Gatwick

dialogue; know what response to expect. It is always the same set of information exchanged between pilot and ATC; Who, Where, What, When, Where to. This kind of formal verbal communication should become as easy as talking hands-free on the phone whilst driving a car. In fact you are more at risk multi-tasking on a busy road than in busy airspace, simply due to the number and proximity of other motor vehicles.

You must have an alternate plan or route in case your request is denied and you must be prepared to stay outside controlled airspace and have an alternate airport or airfield to land at. You must know the types of

service offered inside a zone as compared to outside a control zone.

Once the ATC knows that she can trust you to follow her instructions precisely (hey, it's just like 'her indoors'; you can't fool her, she has radar vision!), she will allow you to fly in her airspace. You must be able to hold height, heading and speed as agreed for the duration of the transit. Be prepared to orbit if instructed for the passage of other aircraft. It becomes a simple matter of following instructions precisely and if you can do that, you will be allowed a transit or landing at a controlled airport without any hassles.

Why would I want to write about this topic now? Because we are going to see more controlled airspace appear over our heads all over Britain and the world in the very near future due to the increase in various kinds of air traffic, including unmanned drones, sport aircraft and commercial aircraft. The first response of those in power is to exclude smaller aircraft so their workload is reduced, just as it happened during the Oly..... no, not that memory again!

So plan, prepare and get out there and fly wherever you want to fly, don't let the zones get you down. ■

