

“Fuelishness” Can Be Costly!

Finding frugal fuel is the key to flying for less. by Dave Higdon

For years, road warriors interested in driving as frugally as possible helped support a niche market for Diesel-powered automobiles. The lower cost of the kerosene derivative and higher mileage delivered by the little Diesel engines made for a money-saving combination.

Throughout those years, airlines, business aircraft operators and truckers helped support a market for kerosene derivatives large enough to make the fuel less expensive at the pump – something seldom missed by pilots of gas-powered piston planes. But those days seem over – at least, if we can trust the signs at today’s service stations and FBOs as accurate indications.

As everyone no doubt has noticed, for some time the cost of crude oil has been on a steady, upward trend. In a very few years, the price of crude has just about tripled. And the price continued its climb to heretofore breathless heights, first surpassing \$90 per barrel, then beyond the psychologically devastating \$100 mark.

By early April, forecasts of \$120-a-barrel crude were common, spurring dire predictions of auto gas soaring beyond \$4 a gallon by the time families would normally be climbing into their cars and heading off on vacation. Of course, what befalls cars and trucks always ripples through to aviation fuels where the price-increase gradient hasn’t been as steep – but it has still sloped upward enough to threaten the financial viability of airlines and the utility of business and personal aircraft.

In March, Diesel fuel for road vehicles, according to the Automobile Association of America, jumped from a national average of \$3.38 per gallon to \$3.91 and auto gas surged from under \$3.17 per gallon to nearly \$3.30. According to a variety of sources, AvGas and Jet A have followed in near lockstep, exceeding \$5 per gallon for jet fuel and AvGas at some airports, while the aviation gasoline national average hovers just below in the \$4.80 per gallon range. These numbers represent national average ranges, reported in

early April by a variety of on-line sources.

One source not only reported the above average prices, it also reported highs exceeding \$8.00 per gallon for both types of fuel. Nonetheless, despite such painfully elevated pump prices, operators of aircraft of all fuel types can find fuel at more-attractive prices if they’re willing to make habit practices long undertaken by aviation’s most-frugal flyers.

The lows found in the same check of internet sources indicated locations where Jet A fetches a bargain-basement \$3.12 and 100LL AvGas fetches a nostalgic \$3.47. And the availability of aviation fuels at early 21st-century prices is enough to prompt the savvy operator to take action to benefit from the savings available. Operators also avail themselves of fuel cards and fuel-purchase programs which offer tangible financial benefits to participants.

FUEL-FINDING

For many years, services have existed to help pilots partake of the lowest available prices for fuel when they fly. For many operators, the savings available in those days lacked significant appeal. The reasons expressed were widespread. For some, it was the trouble of planning a flight with a built-in deviation from the most-direct route. For others, the need to make an additional stop proved a major barrier. By the time they added up the extra time and fuel of an extra landing, taxiing in, shutting down, starting up, taxiing out, taking off and another climb out the potential savings were negated – unless the savings were really up there or the opportunity was inordinately convenient.

For example, a CitationJet operator acquaintance typically flies round trips within the jet’s ability to tanker, so he seldom tops-off at the destination airport. On the return flight, he stops about 15 miles from his base airport to take advantage of a fuel-price difference of 40 cents per gallon.

On longer legs he uses a service to look for an airport with lower prices and similarly convenient – and if it works, he’ll make the extra stop. As he noted, prices at the larger



airports he visits can be upwards of a dollar or more higher than the sleepy country airport where he now buys his Jet A. And he uses a fuel-program card for all his fuel purchases, which can cut his fuel costs another five to 10 cents per gallon. That was years ago, though...

Today, his practice saves him about \$1.60 per gallon of Jet A. He does the same thing for his piston single and saves a bit less because of the higher prices for 100LL at the lower-price airport – but the savings are still in the range of \$1.15 per gallon.

Some of the services that make easy work of finding and planning for a frugal fuel stop are similar to AirNav.com (www.airnav.com). This simple-looking internet service not only provides a running update on national and regional fuel prices – including their highs and lows – but it also offers tools to help pilots check FBO fuel prices and to plan a flight with information on fuel prices at airports along the way.

AOPA, to which thousands of business-turbine pilots belong, also offers fuel-price information as part of an on-line airport directory available in the Members Only section of its website (www.aopa.org). Whatever source you use to seek out below-average fuel prices, backing up the info with a phone call can help avoid an unhappy experience. >

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