



ARE AUTOPILOTS OPTIONAL?

Light, relatively low-performance singles, even when equipped for IFR, usually don't come with an autopilot, nor do they really need one. Hand-flying, say, a Skyhawk for three or four hours on instruments isn't nearly as fatiguing as flying a Bonanza, Mooney, Cirrus or Centurion for the same length of time. There are two basic reasons.

First, a high-performance airplane generally is less stable. A moment's inattention easily can result in a dropped wing, sometimes quickly followed by a tightening spiral and steep descent. High-performance airplanes also can be sensitive in the pitch axis, especially if they're loaded with an aft center of gravity. Both characteristics can require much more attention when hand-flying in instrument conditions.

Slower airplanes are both more stable and more forgiving. Drop a wing in a Skyhawk at cruise while flying hands-off and not much heading change will result; often, slight pressure on the opposite rudder pedal will level things out quite nicely.

Secondly, flying a faster airplane means things happen faster, too. Setting up for an approach or just maintaining situational awareness at higher groundspeeds diverts attention from simple straight-and-level. Without an autopilot or someone to hold things steady while you configure your iPad and the panel, things can get quite busy. High-workload situations can result in missing important checklist items or failing to properly brief the arrival and approach, among other risks.