



Some Thoughts on Transitioning to the Sonex

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Having spent the summer giving transition training to Sonex builders, potential builders, and buyers, I have found that there are some universal truths in the world of Sonex. I hope you will find the following musings to be both illuminating and entertaining. (NOTE: These comments apply equally to Sonex, Waiex, and Xenos airplanes, so I'll just use the term "Sonex" universally.)

Truth #1 – Nobody goes away disappointed! I have flown with high time pilots, low time pilots, builders who are preparing to fly their completed airplanes, pilots who have just purchased a flying Sonex design, and potential customers who are contemplating what airplane they might want to build. In every single case the pilot has a big smile at the conclusion of their training. Not one single person has found the airplane to be less than they expected.

Truth #2 – This *ain't* your father's Cessna (or Piper, or Beechcraft, etc.) Pilots whose sole experience has been in general aviation aircraft have found the Sonex to be a whole new world in control feel. It takes a while to get comfortable with flying the airplane with JUST the fingertips. You don't have to hold on tight when the control pressures are light and the airplane is responsive. This is probably the steepest learning curve I've run into. Pilots who have flown light-sport aircraft, or have experience in other homebuilt designs are better prepared to get in tune with the Sonex' responsive handling.

Truth #3 – This thing is LOW to the ground! Everybody has a tendency to flare too high at first. The Sonex designs sit quite a bit closer to the ground than a typical GA airplane, and they respond to control inputs more promptly than most GA airplanes, so pilots need to learn to fly the airplane down closer to the runway before starting their flare, lest they want to run out of energy before they run out of altitude. (We all know the result of that situation!)

Truth #4 – Speed control is king! As a follow on to the previous truth, a good landing will follow if the pilot flares at the proper height above the ground AND at the proper speed. Just a couple of extra MPH of airspeed will result in a prolonged float before touchdown. And as we all know, the longer you float down the runway the longer you have to screw up what could have been a good landing. With proper speed you will get a nice round-out, flare and touchdown in short order. Most pilots tend to fly their final approach too fast. Slow the dang'd thing down!!



Truth #5 – That long, sloping windshield and long glare shield make for an interesting sight picture. This is a multifaceted truth. First, since the Sonex is a side-by-side airplane and the pilot is sitting off center, the sight picture for a left turn is much different than for a right turn. This is of course true of any side-by-side airplane, but the unique windshield of the Sonex seems to accentuate this difference. As a result, every pilot I've flown with has a tendency to lose altitude in left turns and gain altitude in right turns when sitting in the left seat. (This is reversed when the pilot is sitting in the right seat.) It takes a while to get used to the very different location of the horizon in the windshield for left turns versus right turns. Also, the unique sight picture messes up your landings too. The airplane tapers from your shoulders to the nose, and the two “break” lines in the glare shield also taper toward the front. This gives pilots a false signal as to what “straight ahead” is, which results in pilots trying to land the airplane with the nose cocked off to the left when sitting in the left seat (or off to the right when sitting in the right seat). Pilots need to really study what “straight ahead” looks like when taxiing out for takeoff so that they know how to align the airplane with the runway at touchdown.

Truth #6 – This is an “attitude” airplane. Once the pilot gets the right sight picture in their mind for level flight and level turns, the instrument panel becomes largely unnecessary and possibly a distraction. When I find pilots spending too much time looking at the panel I'll simply cover it up. In every case the pilot will end up being smoother when flying the airplane by looking outside. The airplane “talks” to you. What you see, what you hear, and what you feel will tell you everything you need to know about what the airplane is doing. The panel is mostly just for a quick check every once in a while and an engine monitor. Look outside!!

Truth #7 – The difference between a Sonex and a Waix is the shape of the tail. That's IT! There is no discernible difference in performance, handling, or stability. When you're sitting in the cockpit flying the airplane you can't tell which tail is on the back. They all fly the same. It's ALL about the look!

Truth #8 – No matter how hard you push on both rudder pedals, the brakes don't work! Years ago there were quite a few airplanes that had hand brakes, but most “modern” pilots haven't had any experience with them. It takes the pilot a little while to quite pushing on the pedals and reach for the brake handle to get the plane slowed or stopped. It's a good idea not to put yourself in a situation where immediate braking will be necessary until the hand brake has become second nature.



Truth #9 (the ultimate truth) – There's no replacement for experience! By all means, before you fly a Sonex yourself get some time in one. Take advantage of our factory transition training, get together with other transition training LODA holders around the country, or get some stick time with another Sonex owner. This will be time well spent and will prepare you to fly your new airplane.

Be safe!