Piper 6X:
Luxury Flying SUV

FORTY YEARS AFTER THE PA32’S INTRODUCTION, THE SIX-SEAT, FIXED-GEAR PIPER 6X CONTINUES TO LIFT YOUR CHOICE OF PEOPLE OR THINGS AND TRANSPORT THEM OVER THE FAR HORIZON
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Follow the evolution of light trucks from the 50s into the new century, and you can’t help but be impressed by the incredible updates in technology. The basic concept hasn’t changed much, but the execution is remarkably more efficient and comfortable than it used to be. Trucks are still utility vehicles, though when you climb aboard some of the new ones, you might think you’re riding in a luxury sedan.

In some respects, Piper’s 6X is the aviation equivalent of the modern pickup. Stripped of its paint and interior, and the basic airplane is recognizable as essentially the same machine it was 40 years ago, the durable Cherokee Six 300. These days, however, the 6X package is a far more sophisticated machine, blessed with better performance and efficiency, an exponential improvement in the state of the avionics art and comfort more reminiscent of the living room than the garage.

The 2007 Piper 6X now offers most of the features of the popular Saratoga II HP. (In fact, retractable gear and the fourth side window are the only significant differences between the two models.) When I flew the 2007 model 6X on these pages, I was struck by the similarities between
Piper’s Weeping Wing deice/anti-ice system subtracts about 80 pounds from payload when fully serviced.
the basic six-seat Piper and a gorgeous Nissan Titan Crew Cab pickup I recently borrowed from an old college buddy, Jerry now owns a Nissan dealership in Texas (like me, he was a music graduate, so naturally, he sells cars and trucks for a living, and I fly and write about airplanes) and flies a Piper Mirage on those rare occasions when he’s not working. But despite a lot full of new Nissans to choose from, he drives a Titan most of the time.

Like the “Big Six,” the Titan features seating for up to six (two rows of three rather than three rows of two), bucket seats in front, 300 hp or more, the ability to haul a huge load and a level of sophistication you might not expect from a truck. Fact is, of course, neither the Titan nor the 6X need define themselves strictly as haulers. Jerry drives his Titan to social events, on business commitments and on family errands, and he says the Titan garners admirers everywhere he goes.

The Piper 6X often engenders the same reaction. Taxi a new 6X up onto a ramp at Teterboro or Boulder, and you’re liable to attract as much attention as a new TBM 850 or Cessna CJS. The Piper is remarkably well finished inside and out, an eminently attractive machine.

The Cherokee PA32 is essentially a Cherokee 180 on steroids, stretched and expanded specifically to accommodate six people or large, heavy objects and transport its payload over the horizon. Cabin

**SPECIFICATIONS**

- Base price: $364,500
- Engine make/model: Lycoming IO-540-K165
- TBO (hrs.): 2,000
- Horsepower at altitude: 300/SL
- Horsepower on takeoff: 300
- Fuel type: 100/100LL
- Propeller type: CDI-3-blade
- Landing gear type: Tri/ Fixed
- Max ramp weight (lbs.): 3015
- Gross weight (lbs.): 3600
- Landing weight (lbs.): 3000
- Empty weight, std. (lbs.): 2222
- Useful load (lbs.): 1344
- Usable fuel (gals.): 102
- Payload (lbs.): 732
- Wingspan: 36 ft. 2 in.
- Overall length: 27 ft. 11 in.
- Height: 9 ft. 6 in.
- Wing area (sq. ft.): 178
- Wing loading (lbs./sq. ft.): 20.3
- Power loading (lbs./hp): 12
- Seating capacity: 6
- Cabin doors: 2/3
- Cabin width (in.): 48.3
- Cabin height (in.): 42

**PERFORMANCE**

- Cruise speed, 75% power (kts.): 148
- Fuel consumption, 75% power (gph): 18.5
- Max range, 55% power (nm): 804
- $V_{so}$ (kts.): 59
- Best rate of climb, SL (fpm): 1050*
- Service ceiling (ft.): 17,200
- Takeoff distance (ft.): 1284
- Takeoff over 50 ft. obstacle (ft.): 2328
- Landing distance (ft.): 911
- Landing over 50 ft. obstacle (ft.): 1822

* Estimated

Source: Piper Aircraft
width is more than 48 inches, as broad as the old Piper Chieftain cabin-class twin, so there’s no need for even a six-pack of Dallas Cowboys linemen to rub elbows. Cabin height is slightly less generous, 42 inches from floor to headliner. Accordingly, seating position is semi-supine to fit six people into a 42-inch-tall cabin.

The six-seat Piper single was introduced in 1965 as the Cherokee Six 260, and it featured an unusual talent. The Six 260 had the ability to carry nearly its own weight in useful load. At 3,400 pounds gross, that first 260 featured an empty weight of 1,706 pounds, so useful load checked in at an amazing 1,694 pounds. This made the big Piper the first single capable of lifting such a huge load. (The Cessna 206 was to surpass the Piper’s record a year later, but for a short time, the Six 260 was the weight-lifting champ.)

Over the next four decades, the Six 260 was to graduate to 300 hp, a 3,600-pound takeoff weight and a variety of other improvements. Today’s Piper 6X features options not available in the ’60s. Piper was one of the pioneers of general aviation’s ultimate luxury—air-conditioning. Plus, it has improved its avionics virtually exponentially. The airplane also accommodates a quick-change interior, adaptable from seats to a large, open, 10-foot-long cargo configuration in minutes.

The 6X offers a feature not found on most other airplanes, a forward baggage compartment that will accept 100 pounds of stuff, a major advantage for those instances when you need to balance an aft CG. (A fringe benefit of a cargo section between the main cabin and the engine is better soundproofing. You can also plan on keeping items warm when stored up front.)

Loading the main cabin couldn’t be much easier. Pilot and copilot board through the conventional right front over-wing door, but the left rear fuselage has twin portals that provide good access to the aft four seats as well as the rear bag-gage compartment. They also open up a huge cavity in the side of the airplane that allows easy cargo access. A great plus is to push out hay bales to starving cattle and excellent pan-and-tilt range for remote-to-air photography, both still and video. If you can’t afford Clay Lacy’s Astrovik or a R57, a Cherokee Six 260’s retractable Saratoga can make a wonderful air-to-air platform. (Back in the days when I was working on the ABC-TV series Wide World of Flying, a Saratoga SP3 was our photo ship of choice, and most of the re-creation photos you see in Plane & Pilot were shot from a 1981 model.)

The panel is relatively conventional now that everyone considers glass instrument displays “conventional.” Practically all electrical switches are overhead, turbine switches are below. Engine start is typically Lycoming 1,000 rpm, and even hot starts don’t usually present any special challenge.

Power-up for takeoff provides better acceleration than you might expect. About 300 pounds of horsepower, the big Six does exactly what its name implies—climb. After a short 600 feet to catch its breath and accelerate to 90 knots, the 6X will climb away from the ground at 1,000 fpm or more. Better yet, there’s still a respectable 600 fpm remaining at a baro-altitude of 6,000 feet. Best-rate climb speed is 90 knots, but you may not reach that 100 or even 110 knots will probably be nearly the same vertical ascent and slightly better efficiency.

Speed is always important in any modern aircraft. Otherwise, we’d probably all be riding bicycles, driving our own cars, and taking the train. Blazingly quick cross-country travel is perhaps less significant, however, in an airplane designed as a personal workhorse.
PIPER ONCE SPONSORED AN AD CAMPAIGN SHOWING A TIME LAPSE OF THREE MEN LOADING AN UPRIGHT PIANO INTO THE BACK OF A PA32.
for what it can carry and where it can go than how fast it can get there. Plan on block speeds of 140 knots in the 6X and normal true airspeeds of 145+ knots at 6,500 to 7,000 feet MSL and midcruise weights. Remove the airplane's slick wheel fairings, incidentally, and you'll lose about six knots of cruise.

Fuel consumption at 75% power is about 18.5 gph, so the big, 102-gallon tanks provide an easy 4.5 hours plus reserve, worth 700 nm. Pull back to 55%, and you can extend that to 800 nm on 14.5 gph. That's Chicago to Dallas or San Diego to Portland. With a service ceiling that's above 17,000 feet, the 6X can top the highest mountain in the Lower 48, though the airplane is happiest in the bottom two miles of sky.

At 3,600 pounds gross, you wouldn't expect the 6X to be quick on ailerons or elevator, but the airplane does better than you might imagine. Controls are still heavy and roll rate is ponderous at best, and you'd best keep the elevator trim moving during approaches, though those characteristics are about what you'd expect of an airplane in this weight class. Perhaps strangely, the 6X flies better when loaded heavy than when loaded light. It also handles landing configuration with more aplomb when the CG is centered or aft. It's possible to run out of up-trim if you have two big people up front, full fuel and a full nose baggage compartment.

Flaps are manual, perhaps appropriate to the airplane's typical utility mission. The flaps have four positions—full-up or 10, 25 or 40 degrees—and you can deploy or stow them as quickly as your right bicep can flex. Extend the flippers full-down, and stall speed drops to 59 knots, allowing short-field approaches as slow as 75 knots, just over 1.2 V_{so}. Pilots in Alaska—and other places where plunking it on and stopping it short is an art form—sometimes use 70 knots with a quick shot of power in the flare to cushion the touchdown. This technique isn't in the book, by the way, so unless you're very familiar with the airplane, leave such tricks to experienced bush pilots.

The Piper 6X won't win any prizes for short-field performance, but like Cessna's Stationair, the utility Piper can use 2,000-foot strips at sea level without stretching the limits. As with most other airplanes, the 6X can sneak into places it may not be able to leap back out of. If you've tested test pilots, such as Piper's Bart Jones, and you do everything right, the airplane will grind to a stop in less than 1,000 feet.

Even utilizing Bart's abilities on takeoff, however, plan on covering at least three feet between power-up and liftoff.

These days, it seems virtually every model of general aviation airplane features some form of flat-panel display. Piper has one-upped the rest of the industry offering your choice of the Avidyne Entegra system or the Garmin G1000 on the PA32 models. The basic Avidyne (without charts, DME or ADF indicator is standard, but Piper has certified the Saratoga/6X family of models with either Avidyne or Garmin glass. You can buy air-conditioning ($15,900) and/or Piper's inadvertent icing protection system ($30,100), a TKS installation, for those occasions with ice (the 6X is approved for flight in known icing.)

In a similar sense, the Nissan Titan offers a GPS-based navigation system, dual-mode air-conditioning, four-wheel drive, quick-change crew-cab interior and a large area for cargo. On the other hand the Titan offers only about half the cruise speed and nothing like the steeps rate of climb.

After two days of driving the Titan around Texas, I had to admit I was whole new generation of truck. Except for the urge to parching higher off the ground than used to in my car, I'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference. Of course, if I had the choice for a trip longer than 100 miles, I'd take the Piper 6X over either my Isuzu or Jerry's Nissan Titan.