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The Piper Cruiser

Used aircraft pilot report

by James Gilbert/senior editor

It's a fat Cub with seats for three. In two versions:
the 75-hp Cruiser, cruising at 74 knots,
and the 104-hp Super Cruiser, supercruising at 91 knots.
Both are nice-flying, like all the Cub series.





The Piper Cruiser

This is the 75-hp Cruiser:
the 104-hp Super Cruiser has
enclosed cylinders.

Unlike the Cub, you solo
from the front, and moving the
fuel tank up to the wing
has helped make the Cruiser
one of the roomiest airplanes
of its kind.

THE SECRET OF SUCCESS in the airplane business? Never rest on your laurels. Piper was still at the height of its success with the 65-horse J-3 Cub when it began developing bigger and better things out of the basic Cub airframe. First came the J-4, the side-by-side Cub—a smooth airplane, if you can find one (not many more than a hundred are still flying). Then the J-5 Cruiser, a fat Cub with seats for three, cruising 74 knots on 75 hp, which is not half bad.

Those were the days just before Pearl Harbor, and by the time peace reappeared, the Cruiser had become the J-5C Super Cruiser, with 100 hp, an electrical system and redesigned landing gear. About this time, Piper abandoned the J nomenclature and started the PA series; the Super Cruiser is also known as the PA-12.

The last of the Cruisers was the PA-14 Family Cruiser, with seats for four, 115 hp and a devastating 96-knot cruise. The Super Cruiser is far more abundant than its two brothers, for upwards of a thousand Supers are still active, while less than a hundred PA-14s and maybe 200 75-horse J-5s are still about. They were all, in their day, quite extraordinary value, for you could get a J-5 new for \$1,995 in 1940 and a PA-12 for \$2,995 in 1945.

The Cruiser made its tiny mark on history, too, for in 1947 two PA-12s flew around the world, their two pilots spending four months battling headwinds, ice, desert heat and every possible kind of foulup. But they proved the superior dependability of the Piper airframes: The worst mechanical problem in half a thousand hours of flying 30 percent over gross was a cracked tailwheel.

The flight was also an early demonstration of just how far you can get on a gasoline credit card, for that was just about all the two intrepid aviators had by the time they were ready to set out. They were obliged to freeload freely at official dinners-of-welcome and at military air bases wherever they could.

Where, you may wonder, did the idea for this fantastic trip come from? It came from the younger of the two pilots, 27-year-old Clifford Evans, who was overheard rashly to remark that you could probably fly a Piper Cub round the world. "Prove it," some wise guy said, so he and one George Truman did.

The Cruiser we looked at was a 1940 J-5A, the property of Edgar Fisher, of Red Hook, New York. The airplane was really in retirement when he bought it—completely disassembled—eight months ago. Mr. Fisher paid \$750 for it in this condition, and reckons to have spent \$200 to \$250 on it since, on such little things as replacing a dodgy mag, fitting new shock cords, new control wires, and what he describes as "fixing up the panel a bit."

He told us: "It hadn't been licensed for two years when I got it. The wings had been recovered and then the airplane had been stored. I recovered the tail surfaces, and the fuselage fabric was still good anyway.

"It isn't really a cross-country airplane," he went on. "It cruises about 85 mph, same as a Cub. I don't think it's really a three-place, either. I've never taken it up three-place. I know its climb characteristics, and I feel safer flying it two-place. I would say it's kind of marginal with three. With two and a full tank, you get the feeling you've got a load."

The airplane was certainly certificated as a three-seater, and the specified useful load is fully 630 pounds. The seating arrangement is an odd one: The pilot sits alone in majestic splendor in front, while his two passengers sit side by side in the back. There is dual control in the back, but the second stick is mounted in the center of the fuselage, so it would be kind of hard to use if you were three up. We feel that a mother-and-child type of combination would fit well in this back seat, though we're not so sure that a total of three fat adults would like it for long. There's no doubt at all, on the other hand, that as a two-seater the Cruiser is one of the roomiest going. Really roomy.

It's also really comfortable, we found, as we settled in the back. And the visibility is pretty good, marred only by a great flexible piece of plumbing running from the tank in the right wing (15 gallons) to the engine. The J-3, you remember, has the tank between the panel and the engine, and moving it up to the wing in the J-5 gave the front pilot a good deal more room. Mag switches are overhead on the left, as in a Cub; later, in the Super Cub, they were moved to down around your elbow.

A flick of Mr. Fisher's wrist, and we are in business. It's a rotten day, with a gusty wind of up to 20 knots, all of them coming from an inappropriate direction, too. Fisher taxis out very carefully. Once airborne, that drift really comes on: Your average crab has nothing on us for sideways motion. The door on my right doesn't quite fit, and there's this disconcerting gap around it through which one can see the passing countryside and feel the breeze of our progress. Rate of climb seems very acceptable, though.

The feel of the airplane is that of a big, roomy old J-3. It flies most pleasantly, with light and effective controls. And the J-5 is a stable old bird, except laterally: if a gust drops a wing, you are going to have to pick it up, and you wouldn't want to lose it in cloud, for it spirals just beautifully. No dihedral, you see. Visibility, even from the back, is quite excellent, helped by a windshield that extends back further overhead than in a J-3. (continued)

The Piper Cruiser

Stalls are extremely gentle, even departure stalls. There's good aileron control and almost no trace of wing drop or judder. But be warned, any of the Cub series will spin beautifully if you really go asking for it, like making a nil-air-speed climbing turn on takeoff.

Cruise? Mr. Fisher says he gets 74 knots at 2,000 or maybe 2,100 rpm, and a most modest four gph. "It seems to go about as well there as it does if I push it higher," he told us. "I do think it's more stable in rough air than a J-3," he added.

Heat? Not really. Ventilation? Excessive, we thought, though the J-5 lacks that hinge-up swing-down door that makes flying a J-3 so restful on a very hot day. One advantage of that widened fuselage is that you really have plenty of room for your feet on the rudder bars. And you solo a J-5 from the front, of course. Baggage? Well, it would be unfair to call it a baggage compartment: It's more sort of a baggage box. It's tiny, and you're only allowed a piddling 40 pounds there.

The J-5 is best described as an expanded and improved Cub. The improvements are considerable: more than a superficial glance might make you think. The PA-12 is a hotter ship still: 180 pounds more useful load, a fuel tank half as big again, and 20 more miles in the hour. There are some other differences: The PA-12 introduced the totally enclosed engine, for the J-5's pots still stick out in the breeze, and the PA-12 also has a divided-type landing gear, against the J-3's half-axles and gouty-looking rubber cord springing. The J-5 looks like a Cub, while the PA-12 looks like a Super Cub.

One interesting sidelight on the original value these airplanes represented when new, plus the destructiveness of inflation, is that a good one today will still fetch almost what it cost new. Take Mr. Fisher's airplane, now: It's for sale, and he's asking \$1,650 for it. He frankly admits he bought it with the idea of trying to make a little on it, and why not, pray? "No takers yet," he admitted to us, but added that he was really in no hurry to let it go. "It would be a good buy at that price," he said, and we had to admit we agreed. †

Notice the forward-opening door, unlike the Cub's old swinging panels. The Cruiser retains the Cub's half-axles and rubber cord springing; with the Super Cruiser, Piper went to the divided-type landing gear.



Piper J-5 Cruiser

Manufacturer's specifications	Price today: \$1,000 to 2,000
Engine	75-hp Lycoming
Propeller	fixed-pitch wood
Wing span	35.5 ft.
Length	22.5 ft.
Height	6.9 ft.
Wing area	179 sq. ft.
Wing loading	8.1 lb./sq. ft.
Seats	2-3
Empty weight	830 lbs.
Useful load	620 lbs.
Gross weight	1,450 lbs.
Power loading	18 lbs./hp.
Fuel capacity	25 gals.
Baggage capacity	40 lbs.

Performance	
Rate of climb	450 fpm
Maximum speed	87 kts.
Cruise speed	74 kts.
Range	390 nm
Stall speed	34 kts.

Flight characteristics	
Control response (cruise)	Excellent
Control response (slow flight)	Excellent
Hands-off stability	Fair
Stall recovery	Gentle
Runway handling	Cub-type

Piper PA-12 Super Cruiser

Manufacturer's specifications	Price today: \$1,500 to 3,000
Engine	104-hp Lycoming
Propeller	fixed-pitch wood
Wing span	35.5 ft.
Length	22.9 ft.
Height	6.9 ft.
Wing area	179 sq. ft.
Wing loading	9.76 lb./sq. ft.
Seats	3
Empty weight	950 lbs.
Useful load	800 lbs.
Gross weight	1,750 lbs.
Power loading	16.82 lbs./hp.
Fuel capacity	38 gals.
Baggage capacity	41 lbs.

Performance	
Takeoff distance	640 ft.
Rate of climb	510 fpm
Absolute ceiling	15,500 ft.
Maximum speed	100 kts.
Cruise speed	91 kts.
Range	520 nm
Stall speed	43 kts.
Landing distance	410 ft.