

Twin Comanche Vs. Bonanza – Two for One



Those of you that have visited my website lately may have noticed that our tagline has changed in that we've added "Twin Comanches" to the end of "We Love Bonanzas and Barons." Why you may ask? Because, the Twin Comanche (TC) has officially joined the ranks of airplanes I now provide buyer representation services for... and for good reason.

Let me start by saying that of all the different airplanes I've owned and flown over the years, none compare to the Bonanza or Baron. When it comes to their flight characteristics... you won't find a more beautifully flying aircraft and that has always been the strong point of the airplane. For me as a broker and buyer's representative, it's an airplane built without compromise. Please don't accuse me of being a "Bonanza snob" when I say, based on personal experience, I think it's the best single engine airplane ever built. It's just one person's opinion; but they are, in fact, "incomparable" to use Larry Ball's words!



That said, while the TC may not fly like a Bonanza or it's big brother, the B55 Baron, it's an extraordinary airplane albeit for different reasons. Like the Bonanza, it's a safe high-performance airplane... stable, well built, roomy, highly reliable and dependable that, like any twin, provides the added safety margin of an extra engine. But the Twin Comanche has three features that make it especially appealing to those of us that fly the Bonanza... it has a second engine for added safety, it will outperform the Bonanza on almost every level, and it does so for essentially the same ownership and operating budget.

Put another way, you can essentially own, operate, maintain, hangar and insure a TC for the same operating budget as an IO-520 powered V35B or F33A Bonanza; you can move up to the safety of a twin with more performance while maintaining the economies associated with a high performance single.

Performance

All models of the normally-aspirated Twin Comanche have a gross weight of 3,600 lbs., 200 pounds (6%) higher than the gross weight of the short body Bonanzas yet despite a 35HP (12%) increase in total horsepower in the TC, the airplanes share the same published cruise speed of 172 knots. But the TC has 55 lbs. (4%) more useful load, carries 16 gallons (22%) more fuel, and has a range of 785 nm, 68 more miles (9%) than the Bonanzas. A Twin Comanche will take-off and land on 6% and 8% less runway respectively (940 ft / 700 ft) than a Bonanza but climbs out at 1,460 fpm, an almost 300 fpm (25%) increase in climb performance. But unlike the Bonanza, if you lose an engine in a TC, it will maintain a single-engine service ceiling of 5,800 ft MSL at gross weight. As much as I love the Bo, it can't do that if you lose "an" engine.

Comfort

While ingress and egress can prove a tiny bit more challenging in the TC, dimensionally, the airplane is more comfortable than the Bonanza. At forty-four (44) inches in cabin width, its two (2) inches wider than the Bonanza... and its a big two inches. And while at first glance, the cabin height of the Bonanza at 50 inches appears to provide more headroom, the Bo pilot sits atop the main wing spar. This design decision

affords excellent forward visibility but even with a cabin height four (4) inches less, the Twin Comanche provides more net headroom than the Bonanza.

Seating & Baggage

Early model PA-30's were 4-place airplanes with two individual pilot and copilot seats and a two-place divan in the rear of the airplane. A bulkhead behind the divan separated the cabin from the 250 lb. capacity baggage compartment which initially was accessed from the right side of the aircraft.

With the introduction of the B Model in 1966, Piper added a third side window and opened access to the baggage compartment from the cabin by eliminating the intermediate bulkhead. Two individual rear seats with armrests replaced the divan and the external 19" x 21" baggage access door was moved to the left side of the aircraft. With the Sportsman edition of the TC, Piper added an additional two seats in the baggage compartment but, like the Bonanza, the Twin Comanche is definitely not a 6 place aircraft and even the youngest passengers will find the baggage compartment seats less than comfortable on the shortest of flights.

Economy

Notwithstanding a 12% increase in total horsepower (320 vs. 285), owners of the "Twinkie" routinely report hourly fuel consumptions of 13 – 16 GPH *total*. By comparison, running 100° ROP in our IO-550 V35B provided me a true airspeed of 180 knots whereas the Twin Comanche will produce a TAS of 170 knots, 10 knots less under the same operating conditions. But where the V35B religiously burned 16.5 GPH, the Twin Comanche burns exactly 1.5 GPH less at 15 GPH. If you equalize the fuel burn per mile covered, the rate goes to 16.5 GPH or identically the same as the IO-550 Bonanza. But that's only part of the story when it comes to operating economy.

The TC is powered by two (2) Lycoming IO-320B1A engines rated at 160HP with a 2,000-hour TBO. Unlike the 1,700 hour TBO TCM IO-520 and IO-550 engines that power a Bonanza, the IO-320 is rated as one of the best and most reliable aircraft engines ever produced. In a May 9, 2013 article published online by AvWeb titled "Bulletproof Engines: Are There Any?", the very first line of the article reads, "Yes, say engine overhaulers, and Lycoming's four-cylinder models own the category." Truer words were never put to paper.

As I share with all my Bonanza clients, if you operate a big bore TCM engine like the IO-520 or 550, its best to budget for a top overhaul during the rated TBO of the engine. Having consistently operated these engines at 65%-75% output power, it's not uncommon to replace cylinders on the engines to get them to TBO. Conversely, the engines on my previous B model Twin Comanche were overhauled at 2,900 TT but only because the owner "felt it was time." As stated in the AvWeb article, it's not uncommon for these engines to go double their rated life, 4,000 hours, before overhaul.

If one compares the published cost to overhaul two (2) Lycoming IO-320B engines versus one (1) TCM IO-520BB engine (airpowerinc.com) and all three engines make it to TBO without any cylinder replacements, the hourly engine reserve costs on the Twin Comanche will cost \$2.00 more per hour (9%) than a Bonanza... about the cost of half a gallon of 100LL. But add just a couple of cylinders along the road to TBO for the IO-520/IO-550 powered Bonanza or run the IO-320 engines to 2,200 before they're overhauled (which is easily done) and the hourly engine reserve costs for both airplanes equalize.

Acquisition Costs

If you average the difference in book values between the TC and Bonanzas produced between 1963 and 1972, the period when the Twin Comanche was produced, the book value of the TC, on paper, runs about \$11,300 or 18% higher than the Bonanza. But the actual sale prices of the TC are lower than published values and higher than published for the Bonanzas. The last TC I sold in December 2019 (1966 B model, 3200TT, 325 SMOH) sold for \$82,000 which is about the same as a Bonanza of the same vintage.

The Add-Ons

While it's true you have an extra prop on the TC, it's a two-bladed propeller and less expensive to overhaul than the three-bladed props typically found on Bonanzas these days. And yes, you have two extra cylinders to worry about on the TC, eight (8) total versus six (6) on a Bonanza. But if you look closely at the cost of those cylinders (airpower.com), those eight cylinders cost less than the six on the Bonanza (\$1203-IO320 vs. \$1783-IO520, \$1831-IO550).

If you're a new multi-engine pilot, your initial insurance will be higher than normal. Consider the additional cost "tuition" because once you get 100 in type, I assure you it will decrease significantly. If you're looking to acquire a multi-engine rating, and you want to get it in the Twin Comanche you purchase... don't, because your insurance will be very expensive. That said, I have my 1972 PA-39 insured for \$115,000 and my premium was \$2400 in 2019 and went up to \$2420 in 2020. I can't speak for the rest of my colleagues but personally, I think that's reasonable and essentially the same rate I've paid for Bonanzas I've owned of similar value.

The Bottom Line

Please know that I make these comments based on over 2,500 flight hours experience in the four (4) variants made of Twin Comanche and over 5,000 hours in the eight (8) models of the 33 and 35 series Bonanzas I've had... so it's an honest and qualified comparison based solely on personal experience. The airplane, like any, has its own quirks and personality but, at least for me, my Twin Comanches have cost equal or less to own and operate than the Bonanzas I've owned and never once have I had a single issue with a cylinder on any Lycoming engine. I definitely cannot make that claim about the IO-520 or IO-550 cylinders.

So, in closing, if you were to ask me "What's the bottom line on the Piper Twin Comanche?" I would tell you just that... it's the bottom line! The airplane gives you two for the price of one and it does so with more horsepower, better performance, more comfort and virtually identical fuel consumption. It's a wonderful light twin that feels like a Navajo in flight and if you own and maintain a Bonanza, I assure you that you'll spend little if any more owning and flying a Twin Comanche... and possibly less.



About the author... Randy Africano has had his head in the clouds for the past 49 years. An ATP pilot with over 13,000 safe flight hours, Africano has owned and operated 85 piston and turbine aircraft over the past 44 years... from his first airplane, a 1955 Piper Tri-Pacer to a Cessna Citation 550. His company, AircraftAssociates.com, specializes in providing personalized, turnkey aircraft acquisition and brokerage services to corporate and private clients. Africano and his wife Diane live in Chicago.