We Fly: Piper Seneca V

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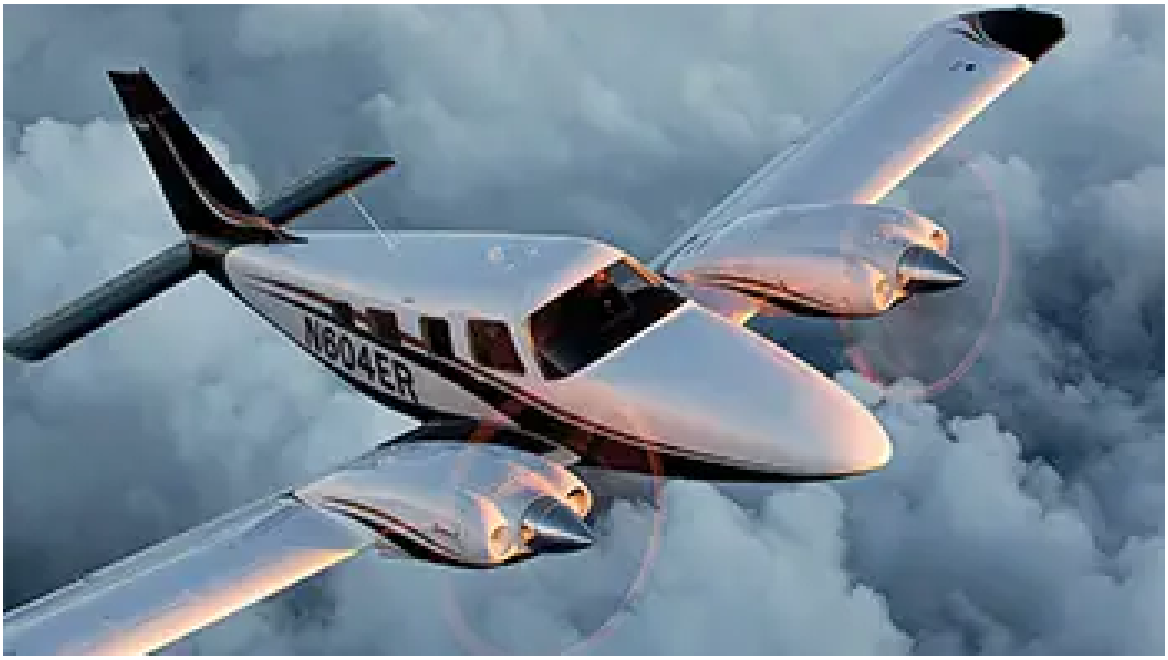

** Piper Seneca V** Jim Raeder

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Anybody in the market for a new light piston twin won't have to spend much time creating a list of potential airplanes to buy. As long as we can agree that the French single-seater Cri Cri and the open cockpit AirCam don't quite cut it as viable options in the quest for a do-it-all twin, there is just a handful of airplanes up for consideration. If your criteria includes bringing along more than three passengers, the list is suddenly winnowed to only two choices. And if you have less than $1 million to spend, you have no choice — you're buying a Piper Seneca V or nothing at all.

That's a sad commentary on the current state of the light piston twin market, but it's not a knock on the Piper Seneca. Just the opposite, the Piper PA-34 is a classic that's still relevant today — perhaps more relevant than ever in a market offering just two six-seat general aviation piston twins, namely the Seneca V and the pricier Beech Baron G58. The Seneca has often been thought of as an also-ran to the Baron, known for its crisp handling and vaultlike build quality. But when you compare them side by side, there's an argument to be made that the Piper Seneca is the smarter choice. It actually has a more comfortable cabin than the Baron, cruises nearly as fast, can carry almost as much, burns less fuel, costs less to maintain and sells for about $300,000 less than the sticker price of a comparable G58.

The Seneca has managed to stay in continuous production for so long by combining a solid airframe with a host of refinements and upgrades inside and out since the first PA-34 rolled out of the Piper factory in 1971. Today's highly evolved Piper Seneca offers what a lot of pilots consider the ideal attributes of a personal airplane: two engines for redundancy in power and systems, respectable performance, stable handling, ice protection, the latest in avionics technology and lots of room in a comfortable cabin.

The latest Piper Seneca V, which is built in Vero Beach, Florida, is the best one yet, thanks to the addition of **Garmin G1000 avionics** up front and smart

improvements inside of what was already one of GA's widest cabins. A lot of airplanes benefit from Garmin technology, but in the Seneca's case, G1000 is precisely what this gracefully aging twin needed. That it took Piper so long to figure this out is surprising considering the manufacturer's emphasis on selling airplanes in the training market, but now that G1000 has arrived in the Seneca V, tire kickers from North America to Brazil and beyond are taking notice.

When Piper introduced the Seneca V in 1997, it represented a major improvement over the Seneca IV — and in the 17 years since then, Piper's top-of-the-line twin has undergone major changes. For starters, it has courted a dizzying number of avionics suitors before finally settling down with G1000. First, there was a package centered around the Bendix/King KLN-90B GPS receiver, which wasn't a bad choice at the time. Later, there was an optional electronic flight information system paired with a Garmin GNS 430/530 combination. Next, Piper offered Avidyne Entegra. And most recently, the Garmin G600 system mated to a pair of GNS430s became the standard avionics package. None of these panels did the Seneca justice, however.

That's all changed with G1000, which looks as if it were tailor-made for the space. The three-display arrangement fits the wide panel almost perfectly. The upgrade from G600 to G1000 makes a difference not only in the size of the displays (6.5 inches versus 10.4 inches) but also in terms of capabilities. When Piper brought G600 to the Seneca, it seemed like a temporary fix — probably because it was. G1000, on the other hand, elevates the Seneca to a more level playing field with the Baron G58, which also features a G1000 panel.

Seneca's standard avionics package also features an Aspen Avionics standby display, something the Baron lacks. This display provides all the

information you'd need to keep flying in just about any weather and eliminates the requirement for electromechanical backups or even a whiskey compass.

Adding the three-display version of G1000 to the Seneca also allowed Piper to get creative with the shape of the glareshield. A flatter design improves the view outside, a change that is especially welcome on approach and during the flare, as I would find out when I flew the Seneca V out of Vero Beach with Piper engineering test pilot John Kronsnoble. The airplane I piloted was actually the avionics certification test mule with a cabin devoid of the usual club leather seats, plush carpeting and other touches. Still, it was no stretch to imagine what a comfortable long-haul airplane this would be once all the engineering test gear in back was replaced with production furnishings. Besides, I didn't really care much about what the cabin looked like — I was too interested with what was new in the panel.

I've been flying G1000-equipped airplanes since G1000 first emerged, so it's tough for me to get really excited about seeing yet another iteration of the ubiquitous Garmin cockpit. But the G1000 in the Seneca just seems so right — the layout of the engine and systems indications is exceptionally well executed, with no overlapping needles anywhere and flap and gear position indications front and center on the MFD. Crew alert messages are easy to read and understand. Among the new features are user-defined holding patterns that can be created at any point in space through a series of menu selections on the MFD. The Seneca's S-Tec 55X autopilot (due for replacement by the Garmin GFC 700 flight control system later this year) will even fly the correct entry for you automatically.

Another welcome upgrade is the selection of the Aspen standby system in lieu of the usual mechanical backups that are normally required in G1000 installations. Together, they provide some exceptional redundancy. There

are G1000 primary and backup batteries, dual alternators and a backup battery in the Aspen display — making the chance of a total electrical failure in the Seneca extremely unlikely. Thanks to the thought that has gone into the avionics design, flying in a degraded avionics mode is really a nonevent, Kronsnoble says. And anyway, not much can go wrong in this airplane without the pilot being warned about it through the G1000 alerting system.

My initial impressions of the latest Seneca were reinforced when I flew it. In truth, this iteration of the PA-34 handles about the same as any other — and that's a good thing. The Seneca is fun to hand fly and rock solid in roll and pitch, thanks to its constant-chord wing, long ailerons and a nicely weighted stabilator at the back. The props connected to the Seneca's 220 hp Continental TSIO-360-RB engines are counter-rotating, meaning there is no critical engine in an engine-out emergency — another advantage over the Baron. Those turbocharged Continentals can produce rated power all the way to 19,500 feet. Even down at 12,000 feet, the Seneca can true at 180 knots on 24 gallons of fuel per hour.

TO THE TEST

Lined up on Vero Beach's Runway 11R, I put the power to the TSIO-360s and rotated in no time. Pitching for the Seneca's best angle airspeed of 83 knots, I retracted the gear once a positive rate was established, and the useable runway slipped away below us. It was a humid day in South Florida, with some scraggly low clouds to maneuver around as we climbed briskly in VFR conditions out over the Atlantic. At 5,500 feet, I found a slice of airspace to execute a series of maneuvers, starting with 50-degree steep turns, power-on and -off stalls, and some brisk climbs and descents. Through it all, power response was smooth and control pressures balanced. The Seneca might not be quite the pilot's airplane that a Baron is, but it's close.

Next, I switched on the autopilot, so Kronsnoble and I could dig deeper into the G1000 system. With some prompting, I was able to program a hold at my current position and let the autopilot fly a smooth teardrop entry into an oval racetrack pattern. I then hit the autopilot disconnect switch on the yoke and hand flew a circuit in the hold. It really couldn't have been easier thanks to the G1000's fight director cues and the Seneca's natural stability keeping us on a precise track. Some pilots prefer a conventional elevator to the Piper's stabilator, but I had no complaints. It felt right.

For our next technology demonstration, Kronsnoble called up the satcom page on the MFD and showed me how to place a telephone call. I dialed the number he gave me using the straightforward G1000 interface, and just like that, the phone was ringing in my headset. Somebody back at the Piper factory picked up and confirmed they heard us loud and clear. They sounded good on our end too. Thanks to the Iridium satellite network's global coverage, calls can be made and received literally anywhere in the world. The same goes for emails and text messages sent using the service. (Keep in mind, though, that outgoing calls cost $1.50 per minute and incoming calls as much as $4 a minute.)

There wasn't any icing for us to sample, but this Seneca was fitted with full and approved deicing equipment. Ice protection is optional, but virtually all Senecas come with it. Another option this Seneca had, which is probably well worth the extra cost in hot climates, is PiperAire air conditioning — it will set you back an additional $22,000, but you'll be glad you sprang for it when the asphalt is scorching.

Piper claims a max speed of just over 200 ktas at the Seneca's 25,000-foot ceiling. I saw cruise speeds at our lower altitude on the day of my test of around 173 ktas. That's still respectable speed, though a bit slower than a turbo Baron. At 2,500 rpm, the airplane was burning around 12.5 gph per

side. Throttling back slowed us to the mid 150s and fuel burn dropped to around 10 gph per side.

Next, we headed back to the airport to try a few circuits in the pattern. Here's where the Seneca shines, in my opinion. Turning final with two notches of flaps (25 degrees) at 90 knots provides a nicely stabilized descent path. Once the runway was ensured on my first try, I selected full flaps and rounded out for a nice landing. For the next try, I flew with two notches of flaps all the way down final, which allows for a nice tail-low touchdown. I found that the reshaped instrument panel affords good visibility in the flare, providing just the right visual cues to ensure consistently smooth arrivals.

TBO 1,800 hours	**CEILING** 25,000 feet
PROPELLERS McCauley three-blade, 76-inch diameter (2)	**MAX RATE OF CLIMB** 1,360 fpm
SEATS 6	**NEVER EXCEED SPEED (V_{NE})** 204 kias
LENGTH 28 feet, 7 inches	**MAX STRUCTURAL CRUISE (V_{NO})** 164 kias
HEIGHT 9 feet, 11 inches	**MAX CRUISE** 200 ktas
WINGSPAN 38 feet, 11 inches	**RANGE (NO WIND, 75% POWER)** 826 nm

Engine-out performance in the Seneca V is respectable, with a single-engine rate of climb at sea level of 253 fpm. That's at a lower speed than some other light twins too, so the single-engine climb gradient is comparatively better. At 8,000 feet and ISA+10, the Seneca V will still climb at better than

143 fpm. Even at 16,000 feet and max gross weight, the airplane will barely manage a climb, providing just the peace of mind pilots who opt for twins expect.

As mentioned earlier, sales in Brazil have been a bright spot for Piper, precisely because of the Seneca's engine-out capability. Flight schools are also taking a closer look at the Seneca, along with Piper's other light twin, the Seminole. It should come as no surprise that there has also been a good deal of renewed interest among personal fliers and even air taxi outfits. Add them all up, and the Seneca V's long list of positive attributes compares favorably against the competition.

Not that the Seneca V has much competition, of course. The Beechcraft G58 Baron, Piper Seminole and Diamond's DA42 are the only other all-weather piston twins in production today, and none of them goes head to head with the Seneca. The Baron is a better performer with a price tag to match. The DA42 and Seminole seat only four, a limitation that eliminates them from consideration for many light twin shoppers. That leaves the Seneca in a market niche all its own.

Piper is doing an admirable job of capitalizing on the dearth of new piston twins in the market by making the Seneca's cabin even more comfortable and convenient with a variety of amenities, including a cooler integrated into the center armrest. An attractive two-tone paint scheme is another nice touch in the modern-looking space. The Seneca's large and comfortable cabin also helps accentuate its big-airplane feel, as always. The fact that buyers are left with few alternatives when shopping for a new light twin shouldn't be a deterrent. For a great many buyers looking for a complete personal airplane with cockpit technology to match, the Seneca V answers the call.

Check out our Piper Seneca photo gallery here.

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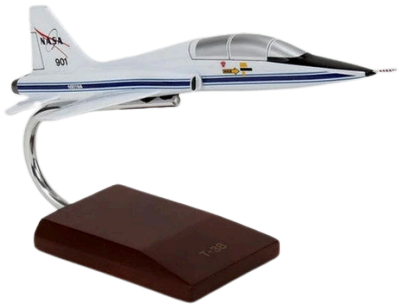
Stephen Pope
WRITER



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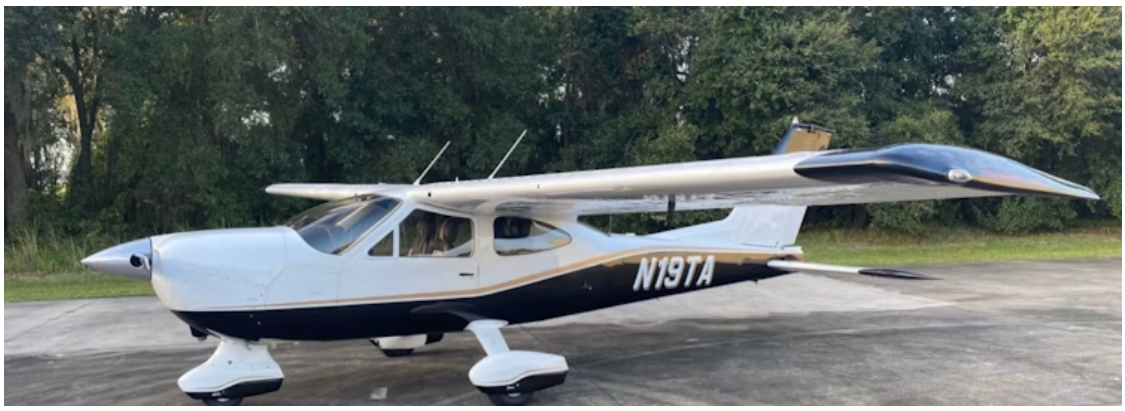

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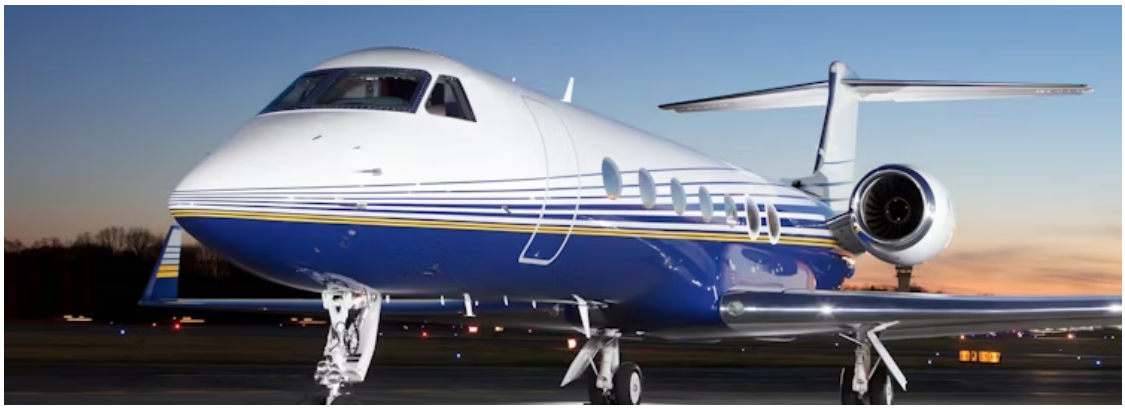

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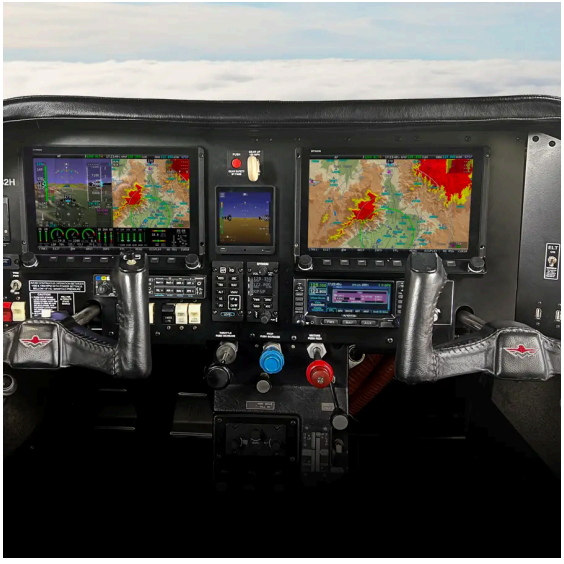

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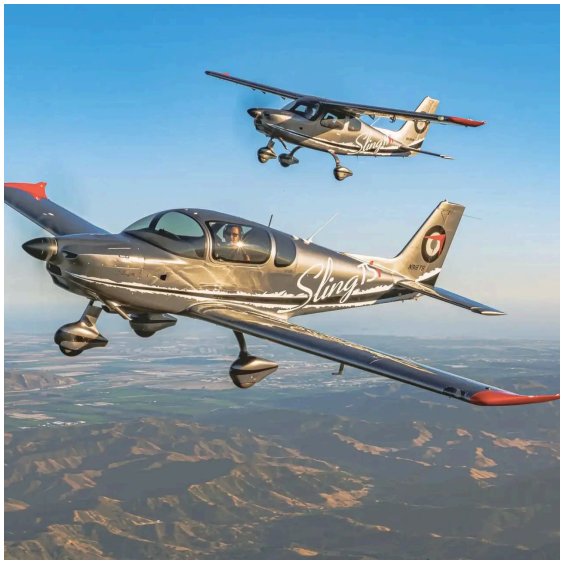

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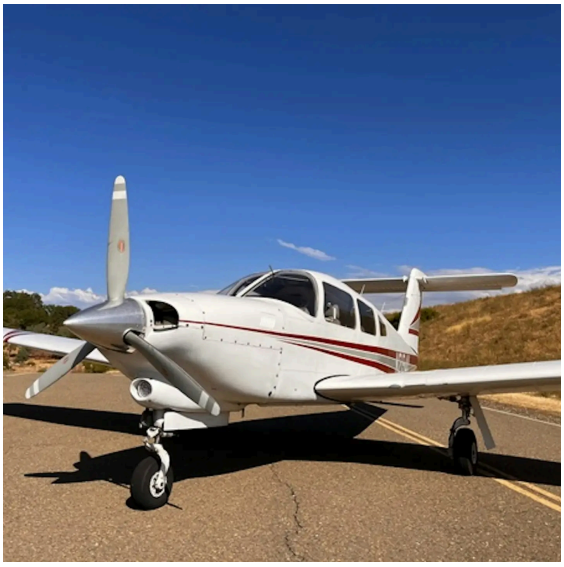

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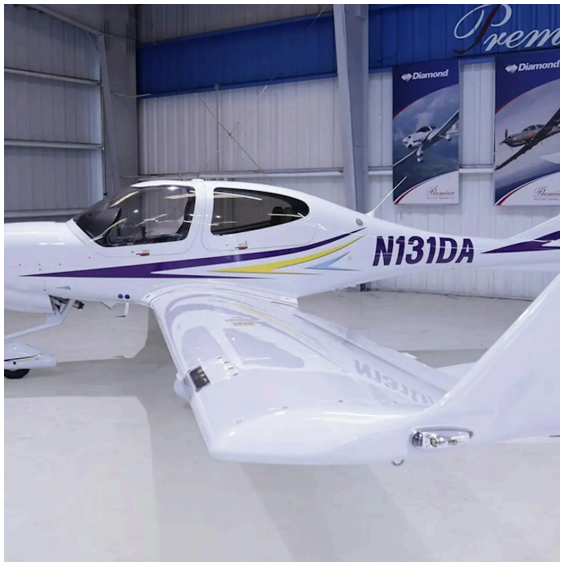

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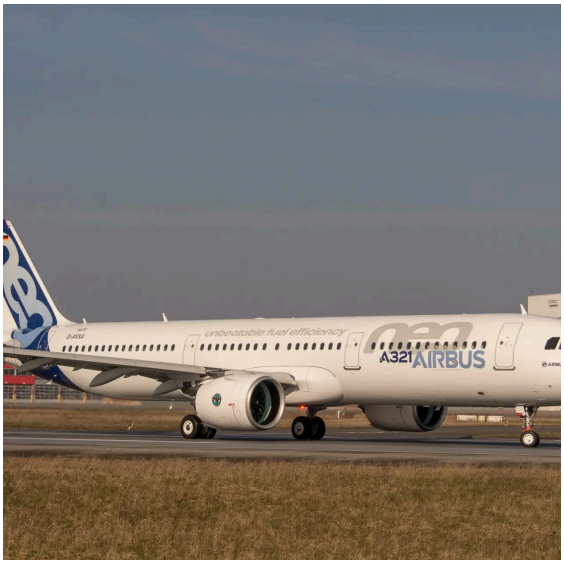

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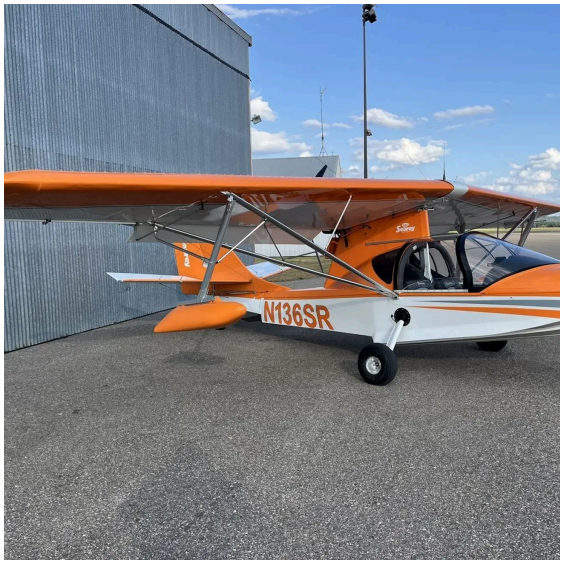

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