



Know your airspace

Don't become an infringement statistic

Airspace classification as we know it today was established by the ICAO in 1990. At the time, the international agency defined the 7 classes of airspace every pilot is now familiar with. Air traffic services provided to IFR and VFR flights vary according to the class of airspace, which in turn entails different specifications for aircraft equipment, pilot qualifications and weather minima. The airspace designated Class A, the most restrictive, is for IFR flights only. On the other end of the spectrum, in Class G, outside Controlled Airspace, even kites can fly!

ICAO airspace classification

Classes A, B, C, D are controlled airspace, they are clearly outlined on charts. An ATC clearance is required to enter them. All traffic is known to the air traffic controller who can therefore provide a comprehensive service. In classes A (IFR only) and B (VFR accepted), all flights are separated from each other.

In class C, IFR flights are separated from all other flights, IFR and VFR, and traffic information is provided to VFR flights. In class D, IFR flights are separated from each other, and receive traffic information on VFR flights. VFR flights receive traffic information on all flights.

Class E is also controlled airspace, but ATC clearance and radio contact are required only for IFR flights. As a result, not all VFR flights are known. ATC provides separation between IFR flights and traffic information to all flights when available.

Classes F and G are uncontrolled airspace. It is the place where you want to be if you don't want to bother with communications: neither a radio nor a transponder is required to operate within these areas. Air traffic services, if requested by the pilot, reflect this lack of requirements: it is impossible to know exactly what is going on in uncontrolled airspace. Consequently, no separation is provided, and traffic information can be sketchy.

Airspace infringement

Airspace infringement occurs whenever a pilot enters a controlled airspace or a restricted area (danger, restricted, prohibited, temporary reserved) without the appropriate ATC clearance to do so. Adverse weather, inadequate flight planning, lack of experience are among the factors that can lead to airspace infringement. The consequences can range from a reminder by ATC, to disruption of activities in infringed special use airspace, or even to severe loss of separation which can in turn cause injuries due to avoiding actions or wake turbulence.

Incidentally, it should be noted that unlike IFR flights, a VFR flight cannot infringe Class E airspace since according to ICAO rules it does not need an ATC clearance or a radio contact to enter it.

Airspace classification in Europe

In each country, national civil aviation bodies organize their airspace as they see fit, most of the time implementing only part of the ICAO classes and sometimes changing the specifications to accommodate their needs. France, for example, has organized its airspace with only 5 classes: A, C, D, E and G. States can also establish special use airspace to isolate activities that could be a threat to flight safety, or to protect sensitive sites.

Classification of airspace in different countries can be found in their respective AIPs, more precisely in the ENR 1.4 section. When in doubt, AIPs are the authoritative sources and should be consulted. They are available on line at www.eurocontrol.int/articles/ais-online.

