

Garmin Pilot v. ForeFlight

Background: First and foremost: I'm a big Garmin user. I had two GNS-430s with a GMA 340 (audio panel) and a GTX-327 (transponder.) I have since upgraded to two GTN-650s and a GMA-350. I also 'had' a Garmin 796 for general navigating in planes without a GPS. That thing weighs a ton. I found the menus quite convoluted and required too many steps for basic info entry. I liked it anyway. But, it is waaaay too heavy. That's the problem. Enter the iPad.

When I got my iPad, I did a quick search for an app to use for navigating. The first one that came up was ForeFlight. While in the Philippines in 2011, I ordered ForeFlight just to play with and become familiar. I got a Garmin 796 for Christmas. I used both the iPad/ForeFlight and the Garmin 796 side-by-side for three years. When Bad Elf came out with a plug-in GPS for the iPad, I bought one. The Bad Elf, well, it's OK. It was limited by the tethered connection. When the Bluetooth Garmin GLO came out, I jumped on it. Sold the Bad Elf on eBay.

The GLO is awesome; with one caveat: The on-off switch and charging indicators suck big time. The slightest bump turns the GLO on (i.e., the battery runs down while it's on the shelf) and there is no way to see how much charge there is left. The flashing lights when it's charging never agreed with the instructions that came with it. But, that's another story.

My new panel will include a slide-in slot for an iPad that will make it look like a built-in. In order to do that, I need to remotely mount the GTX-327. I can, I'm told, use the 650s to enter transponder codes. If so, that will make a nice clean panel. However, I'm going to need ADS-B sooner or later; as will just about everyone else. That's the problem.

In order to get the ADS-B-IN stuff on the iPad, I need a driver such as a Stratus with ForeFlight. Or, if I use Garmin Pilot, I can get a Garmin GDL-39 (\$599), GDL-84 (\$4000), or GDL-88 (\$3500). They all do something different. The GDL-39 is ADS-B "In" only so satisfying the ADS-B out is out-of-the-question. The GDL-84 has an internal GPS-WAAS; which I don't need. The GDL-88 doesn't play well with the iPad. I want to drive the iPad with a Garmin product. BUT, Garmin doesn't make anything that satisfies what I want or need. That's the problem.

In the mean time, I wanted to get familiar with Garmin Pilot just in case Garmin comes up with a solution. So, a very good friend of mine arranged for a full-up IFR Garmin Pilot subscription for a year for me to become familiar with it.

I got a chance to use both ForeFlight and Garmin Pilot side-by-side on iPads for a 'driving' trip from Sacramento to Salt Lake City and back over Thanksgiving. Why driving? Things happen SO much slower when driving. Here is what I learned about both.

Note: I'm sure I missed a few things. But, as a basic start, this should give the user an idea what's he's in for.

Entering and Editing the Flight Plan:

ForeFlight: There are a couple of quick ways to enter the flight plan. The quickest way is touch the text box in the upper right hand corner and type in the "From" airport, followed by a space and then the "To" airport. Done. One step.

OR, alternately, there is an icon (note: I hate icons only) in the upper left that opens the flight plan page. Done. One step.

Once entered, you can drag the flight path to airports/way points along the way and Foreflight fills in the airports/waypoints into the Flight Plan.

Total number of steps: 1 (entering the From/To and dragging to additional waypoints is the same. Note: Both letters and numbers are available on the same keyboard to enter the Flight Plan.

Garmin Pilot: At the top-center of the page (with the map showing) is the Flight Plan box. Intuition would say, tap that box to start a flight plan. Nope. Not so. Gotta search for the right button. Try the "Home" button in the upper left. Yep. Then, touch the button for Flight Plan. Two steps.

Once there, enter the "From" airport followed by a space and then enter the "To" airport. EXCEPT, if the airport has numbers is it. Then, you'll need to click on the number icon to bring up the numbers. If both airports have numbers, you'll need to do it twice. One to 4 steps.

Now, once you've entered the flight plan, you'll need to get back to the map. Since you cant touch the background to get there, you need to hit the home button AGAIN. Then hit the Map button. Two steps.

To drag the flight path to airports/waypoints, click the MENU button, then click the "Graphically Edit FPL" button. After you drag to the desired waypoints, you'll need to click "SAVE." Three steps.

Total number of steps: 8 to 11.

Advantage: ForeFlight. Foreflight also gives the length of each leg, time required, and fuel required. Plus trip totals. This is a clear winner in my opinion

Note: at any time when using ForeFlight, simply drag the flight path to a new waypoint and Bingo, new waypoint. If you want to add another waypoint when using Garmin Pilot while enroute, you'll need the aforementioned two steps to open and close the editor.

Viewing or Reviewing the Flight Plan: In flight, you just might want to look at the flight plan.

Or see what the next target is.

ForeFlight: If you want to see the flight plan, click on the Flight Plan icon in the upper left corner and there it is. You can't see it without clicking the Flight Plan icon. However, tapping in the background gets you back to the map. The next waypoint is nowhere to be found. Two steps.

Garmin Pilot: The flight plan is always visible at the top center of the screen. The next waypoint(s) is/are always visible as well.

Advantage: Garmin Pilot.

North up/Track up:

ForeFlight: There is an odd little compass looking thing in the upper right hand corner that selects your reference: Centered (finds the plane when manually zooming around and losing the ground track), Track up, North Up. When touched, another compass arrow shows up to let you know your reference. No ambiguous steps.

Garmin Pilot: You have two choices with Garmin Pilot. There is a compass arrow in the upper right hand corner. This gets you centered or North up. There is also a similar arrow in the lower left hand corner. The one in the lower left hand corner lets you find the plane (Centered), North up or Track up. Why the duplication of buttons and why they don't do the same thing? You'd have to ask the programmer or the guy that approved the program.

Advantage: ForeFlight. Why they can't just leave the compass arrow showing and use the one icon to do everything is beyond me.

Airport information:

ForeFlight: Click the Airports icon in the bottom left and you can find any airport by typing in the identifier in the upper left corner (one step). All of the airport information comes up including weather (the default), Frequencies, Runways, Terminal Area Forecast, Winds, and FBOs. You can save favorite airports and they stay in a panel on the left. To get back to the map, touch the map icon next to Airport icon. Two steps.

Alternately, if you are on the map page, touch an airport and weather for ALL nearby airports comes up (one step). Touch "More" and you can select from "Direct to," "Add to Route," or "Details" (one step). On the bottom of the pop-up window is a selection for ALL, Airports (nearby), NAV (nearby) and Waypoints. To be honest, all I've really ever cared about on this feature is weather and "Info." Info has the Communication Frequencies among a host of other things (one step). Touch the background to get back to the map (one step).

Touching "Details" on the "More" page brings up the "Airport" page like it would if you touched the Airport icon in the lower left.

No ambiguous steps.

Garmin Pilot: At first glance it's impossible to tell just where the airport information is hiding. Try "Home" button. Yep. Click on Airports. Note: If you touch "Map" it will take you to that airport. To get back to Airport info, you need to click Home and Airports again. A minimum of two steps are needed to get airport info plus another step to get back to the map. Three steps total.

To find another airport, touch the text box in the upper left (one step). Instead of entering text directly into that box, another pop-up comes up. Enter your identifier (one step). If your identifier has numbers in it, you need to toggle the keyboard to get numbers (one step). Once entered, pushing Search brings up the airport (one step). To get info, you need to touch the pop-up for your airport (one step). Plus one step to get back to the map. Total of 5 or 6 steps.

If you're on the map you can touch an airport and a ring pops up with a lot of useful information on it. Direct to, airport info, Nav aids, Airways, a button for Graphical editing (I guess in case you want to add it to your route.) and weather; but only weather at that particular airport. No surrounding airport weather.

Advantage: ForeFlight. Garmin Pilot just requires way to many steps to do the same thing. If Foreflight had the pop-up ring??? Would I use that more than just looking for weather, VOR frequencies, and Comm frequencies? Hard to say.

Approach Plates:

ForeFlight: If you want to see approach plates just touch the "Plates" icon on the bottom of the window. Click on the plate you want. You can see NOTAMs also. Two steps.

While you're on this page with your plate showing, you can 1) review previous charts, 2) select an edit to make notes on the chart. One touch erases so you can start over, 3) create a sticky for notes, or 4) rotate the chart.

Garmin Pilot: Home again, home again... Touch the Home button and then the Charts button. Then touch the plate (binder) you want. Then select a plate. Four steps.

Nothing intuitive here. The "Tools" button is the same as on all pages. Menu has the option to "Annotate Chart." The only choice here is a pencil to write on the chart. No preset boxes or circles or dotted lines like ForeFlight. To clear, you'll need to touch clear and then touch the pop-up Clear Annotations button.

Advantage: ForeFlight.

Documents:

ForeFlight: Documents such as Class B, VFR corridors, VFR legends, TAC supplements, are available by touching the Documents button on the bottom of the page. There are literally hundreds of available documents to review.

Garmin Pilot: I must confess that I have a lot of time using ForeFlight and so finding the Docs I need is easy. It should be easy in Garmin Pilot also. I could not find similar documents in Garmin Pilot. I'm sure they are there. But, ????. The only thing remotely similar is New Binder in Charts. In here you need to build your own. I don't have that kind of time.

Advantage: ForeFlight.

Map Setup and overlays:

ForeFlight: The Setting icon in the upper left corner gets you the basic setup items like Route Labels, Extended Centerlines, etc.

The "More..." button on the lower right takes you to all of the setup items and much more.

The overlays for Maps, VFR/IFR, etc, and weather overlays, are in the drop-down menu in the upper left corner. This is similar to the layers in Garmin Pilot.

Garmin Pilot: Once again, to get to the Settings, you need to go Home and click on Settings. There you'll find all of the necessary settings, except one. There is no button to prevent it from going to sleep. That can be annoying.

There is a Layer icon the bottom left corner that gets you to all of the setup possibilities in one simple step: Nice and simple. However. In the Menu there is a "Set Up Map" button. Clicking Set Up Map also opens layer button. What's the point? Is it the same or does it have different features? Ambiguous.

Advantage: Garmin Pilot. The Layers icon does so much in one place that it's hard to fault it. Now if they can only prevent it from going to sleep.

Filing a flight plan:

ForeFlight: Once you've created a Flight Plan you can "Pack" to go. This updates all fuel prices, NOTAMs, METARs, TAFs, Air/Sigmets and TFRs.

Since it's so easy to create a flight plan, enter departure and destination and then drag the route you want, it's a shame that info isn't transferred to the File and Brief page. A real shame. An obvious FAIL.

Garmin Pilot: Time to click your heals together and go to the Home page. Wait. It all makes sense now. Garmin is in KANSAS. Now click on Flight Plan and touch the file and brief button on the bottom. Done. Cool.

Advantage: Garmin Pilot. Just add a button to update info for your route and you have a clear winner.

Side-by-side comparison: Summary

ForeFlight: With the exception of a few icons that are not identified as to their function (sometimes requiring multiple clicks to find what you want), all of the Navigation within ForeFlight is done with single clicks on labels/icons the both the top and bottom of the map. Getting to the map is never more than one touch away. I also like having favorite routes (flight plans) at the click of a button.

Garmin Pilot: There are a few nice features. Overall, however, pilot workload is WAY too high to be useful. Too much attention needs to be taken from flying to go back and forth with button clicks. There is enough room on the map to completely eliminate the need for the Home, Direct, Tools, and Menu buttons. And get rid of the redundant compasses. And fix the "Graphically Edit FPL." There is no reason to have that as a separate feature. Make the save dynamic. Deleting an unwanted waypoint is easy.