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JETSET
NETJETS: THE MEMBERS-ONLY MILE HIGH CLUB

By Rachelle Sparks

Standing in gridlocked lines, stuffing fat bags into skinny plastic compartments and shuffling between strangers to squeeze into tiny, stained cloth seats is hardly an ideal way to start a vacation. Press rewind on the recorder of your mind's eye and imagine plopping onto posh swivel chairs nestled on clean carpet. The surrounding walls are decked out in dark wooden trim and there are no sappy-sweet flight attendants asking if you're OK with sitting in an emergency exit row. There is, however, a smartly dressed pilot poking his head from the tiny cockpit asking if the temperature is just right or if you need anything before takeoff. Now pop the bubble surrounding this image and let the reality of it sink into your mind, because — gasp! — it does exist.



“Back, you know, 10, 20 years ago, when you thought of who was flying privately, you thought of only the ultimate top five movie stars,” said Randy Brandoff, VP of marketing at Marquis Jet. “Now, with all the different companies out there, you realize that flying privately is becoming much more popular.”

NetJets, once dubbed “the 800-pound gorilla of aviation,” is one of those companies, and the Marquis Jet Card is the reason flying their planes has become more popular. This sleek, black credit card-sized piece of plastic provides instant access to the NetJets fleet. Well, instant with the drop of some serious Benjamins. NetJets, a Berkshire Hathaway company, offers fractional ownership starting at \$412,500 — a drop in the bucket for some — which equals 50 hours of flight time a year, at least a two-year commitment and a 1/16 undivided interest.

For others, nearly half a million bucks is a thick piece of bark to take from the money tree — the Marquis Jet Card just makes it a little easier to peel. Before jet cards or fractional ownership options existed, traveling in a private jet was out of most people's reach. But the card has become a handy little stepstool. It provides what Brandoff calls “bite-size access” to the NetJets fleet through 25-hour blocks of flying time starting at \$119,900.

But for those who throw hundreds around like chump change, \$119,900 for a 25-hour card seems pretty petty, especially when compared to the millions of dollars it would take to buy a jet or the cost of buying into a fleet without the card. It's buying a chunk of time rather than a chunk of metal, and the results are the same: convenience, convenience, convenience.

One phone call is all it takes for jet card owners to have a plane at their service. No lines. No delays. No taking off shoes and being herded like cattle through security. It's pure luxury in its most refined form — seeing the world through the windows of flying living rooms — and owners get the best seat in the house (well, aside from the little room in the nose with all the switches and buttons). And that's just the beginning.

Cardholders, who technically own access to the fleet, can turn their money into miles thousands

of feet above the ground, giving “the high life” new meaning. From there, the world looks a little different. No more peering through tiny windows smudged with face grease and snot from little fingers on the flight before. These well-traveled jet-setters are staring through perfectly polished windows cleaned just for them before their arrival, which, by the way, is practically at their doorstep. With roughly 500 commercial airports throughout North America and Europe, and an additional 5,000 private airports, a NetJets plane is always within reach.

“It gives you the opportunity of not having to drive an hour or hour and a half or more to a commercial airport,” Brandoff said. “You actually select the private airport that’s nearest you that’s maybe only minutes away, and go right in and out. It’s the difference of not being beholden to an airline schedule.”

Miles Rogers, director of sports marketing for Marquis, adds, “You can fly right into the Glendale airport if you’re popping in for a football or hockey game and fly right out, and it’s literally a driver away from the tarmac to get to either of those venues.”

Aside from its prompt and practical point of arrival, some people simply adore the idea of owning a flying living room that requires no dusting or polishing. These living rooms, available only on the largest planes, also come equipped with small dining rooms, kitchens, and flight attendants that cook and serve meals on crystal and fine china. Meals on the larger planes, such as the Gulfstream 450, do not come out of boxes or little plastic containers; they are cooked fresh. For those craving food from ground level, “We can get you In-N-Out Burger if you want,” says Rogers.

This luxurious ride in the sky gets you where you need to go — and fast. It’s this zippy service, along with a choice of which plane will be at your disposal, that has made NetJets so attractive. Buying into a fleet that allows owners to play musical planes with a snap of the finger and have instant access to the country only gets better with the option to trade in U.S. flying hours for time in the NetJets European system. With access to every U.S. state and 150 countries throughout the world, lunching in Geneva and dining in Milan is not only desirable, but doable, and this lifestyle is something that not only the wealthy have become accustomed to, but the rich and famous as well.

They may not know it, but anytime a Marquis Jet cardholder plops down in a comfortable seat of a private plane, there’s a good chance a celebrity tush was keeping it warm — Wayne Gretzky, Matt Damon and Shaquille O’Neal, to name a few.

Gretzky, who has been called the greatest hockey player of all time, doesn’t like to fly, so owning a jet card and having access to NetJets is reassuring. “My two biggest fears are speed and height,” says Gretzky, who is a part-owner and head coach of the Phoenix Coyotes. “That’s probably not good when you’re flying 300 or 400 hours a year. I’m not a great flyer. I feel comfortable getting on the plane and talking with the pilot about weather and wind conditions. It makes me feel at ease.”

As a seasoned jet cardholder, Gretzky says he typically flies in the Hawker 800, which has enough seats for him, his wife and their five kids. “There are seven of us in my family, so [flying privately] makes it a lot easier,” he adds.

According to Rogers, it’s not just the opulent lifestyle that Marquis offers that keeps celebrities like Gretzky coming back. “We also do some unique hospitality experiences that our owners love as well. Most recently, we took the Versace mansion at the Super Bowl and had exclusive access for all of our owners throughout the weekend. We had hall of fame football players come have brunch with some of our clients there. It’s not just the planes. It becomes a lifestyle.”

That lifestyle, for some people, is an acquired taste but for others, it’s expected. And while programs like Marquis are catering to both, they’re helping to mold a group of people that belong somewhere in the middle — people who have always dreamed of flying privately and are now able to do so.

"[Flying privately] is becoming extremely popular for a number of reasons," says Miles. "It's becoming talk around the coffee table. It's no longer 'What's your car in the driveway?' it's, 'What's your tail number?'"

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