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My Other Vehicle Is a Gulfstream

Even the merely rich can afford private flights.

By GUY TREBAY



WHETHER the joys of summer are riper for plutocrats than for the rest of us is always open to question. Would watermelon taste sweeter if you had a billion in the bank? Let me spit out this seed, check my bank balance and get back to you. As vacation season reaches its peak this month and millions of Americans jam the highways and skies seeking a precious portion of leisure, there is at least one way in which it becomes clear that the very rich are indeed very different from the rest of us.

That difference can be described in two simple words, almost magical to those who partake: flying private.

Just two decades ago, private aviation was exclusively the province of a global super-elite. That was before airline deregulation and 9/11 turned commercial air travel into the noisy, cramped, humiliating nightmare it is today. It was before the tech boom and hedge funds threw off bumper crops of multimillionaires. It was before innovations in the private aviation industry made it possible, first, for the ultrawealthy to use the time-share model known as fractional share ownership to enter the big leagues of private jet travel and, more recently, for the merely rich to buy

into jet-sharing plans that are the deep-pocketed equivalents of a MetroCard.

“When I was young it was quite rare,” said a society decorator in his early 50’s. “Maybe you knew one older gentleman with a great deal of money who had his own jet.”

Nowadays, private air travel has become so mainstream, relatively, that among the decorator’s numerous young and well-heeled clients is a couple in their 30’s whose Cessna Citation X encountered instrument problems in this mountain resort town not long ago, forcing the couple and their sons to board an airborne cattle-car to Denver. There, the clients’ children, 4 and 6 — never having experienced a commercial airport — sat on the floor of the vast and bewildering concourse and wailed. And who among us, truly, has not at some point experienced a similar urge?

“Seven years ago, I was traveling a lot and I just got sick of the hassles,” said Gavin Polone, a former Hollywood agent and now a producer whose credits include the cable television show “Curb Your Enthusiasm” and “My Super Ex-Girlfriend.”

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For Mr. Polone, the moment marking his decision to defect from the ranks of airborne hoi polloi was a trip he took from New York to Los Angeles. "I was in first class and there was a woman in business with a baby that screamed for five hours," he said. "And that did it."

Trans-Atlantic flights are now the only occasions on which Mr. Polone submits to commercial air travel's many indignities. "In North America, I only fly privately," he explained. "For me what's important is excluding myself from people who might bum me out."

Even at an elevation of 8,000 feet, in the bright light and thin air of a resort where A-frame fixer-uppers change hands for seven figures, avoiding bumper people and situations takes work. Thus Aspen has become one of the places most often cited — Nantucket, Mass.; Sea Island, Ga.; Sun Valley, Idaho; and Jackson, Wyo., are several others — on lists of the top American destinations for people who long ago left behind the sad pretzel mix and microwave cookies of in-flight snack service, and the weary attentions of airline employees who so often wear the expression of doomed souls working off a karmic debt.

"We're always operating at the edge of full capacity," said Chad Farischon, the general manager of Trajen FBO Network, which operates the private jetport a short drive from the modest commercial airport at Aspen.

During peak times like winter break and again in August — a period when billionaires and Nobel laureates, destined for either the rigorous hiking trails of Maroon Bells or the equally strenuous Aspen Institute cocktail party circuit, descend in droves on the onetime mining town — so many aircraft vie for parking spots at Aspen airport that the overrun has to be shunted to nearby Rifle or Vail. "Jan. 2 this year, we had 150 aircraft that didn't get in," Mr. Farischon said.

By aircraft Mr. Farischon is referring not to self-piloted two-seaters but to multimillion-dollar machines like an Embraer Lineage 1000, a Citation X, or a Gulfstream IV or Gulfstream V, respectively the aeronautic versions of a Lexus or Mercedes-Benz. At least one of each was parked, chevron-fashion, on the tarmac one quiet recent Monday, as was a Boeing 727 retrofitted for private use.



As much as 80 percent of private air travel is now undertaken for leisure rather than business, say some in the industry. While private aircraft sales have risen lately, according to Dan Hubbard, the spokesman for the National Business Aviation Association, those increases must be measured against a years-long slump. "It's not that there are so many more planes being sold," Mr. Hubbard said. "It's that there are more options" for private flying to suit evolving consumer demand.

From the number of tan, fit people ambling through the clublike lounge at Aspen's private airport — wearing Chanel jeans and Franck Muller watches and accompanied by their dogs and children — the assertion is easy to credit. In contrast to the harried atmosphere of a commercial airport, here all is calm and clubby. Even the dreaded check-in procedure amounts to little more than identifying one's pilot from among the various uniformed personnel slouched in overstuffed chairs.

"No one checks anything," remarked Richard Edwards, an art dealer whose Baldwin Gallery in downtown Aspen and members-only Caribou Club are fixed points on a circuit of the

celebrated and monied. Despite his ready access to friends' jets, Mr. Edwards tends to prefer commercial; he likes the anonymity.

Still, he has enough experience of private air travel to know that, among a certain segment of locals, the sense of entitlement to private air travel includes an expectation that interiors will be appointed with burled walnut fittings and seats of calf leather; that the in-flight entertainment will consist of a recent movie shown on a flat-screen TV, and not a seat-back viewing of "Scooby-Doo," and that the usual eternities spent in limbo on the tarmac will shrink to a 10-minute interval between buckling one's seat belt and reaching 34,000 feet.

"The Aspen resident is a very discerning client," said Ricky Sitomer, the chief executive of Blue Star Jets, which sells access to a private fleet. To get an idea of exactly how discerning, Mr. Sitomer produced a note from the butler of one Blue Star client, whose on-board meal requirements were detailed to an extent (Grey Goose vodka frozen two hours before flight; ice cubes made with Fiji water; filet mignon of precise cut and dimension; and Froot Loops, Lucky Charms and Cinnamon Toast Crunch for the kids) that would make the most demanding rock-star diva blanch.

The rise of private aviation is generally thought to have begun with the purchase by Warren E. Buffett, the Omaha investor, of NetJets in 1998. Under the NetJets scheme of fractional-share ownership, buyers purchase, say, a 16th of a Hawker 400XP for about \$400,000, or the same fraction of a Gulfstream 550 for roughly five times that amount, and then negotiate, much as time-share holders in a condominium might, for use of the plane. Then as now, fractional-share owners tended to be either large corporations or the ultrarich.

But as a certain group of Americans became richer and air travel became generally unpleasant, an appetite also developed for the fine perks of private air travel among what in the industry are termed "high net worth individuals," people who are merely, rather than obscenely, rich.

To accommodate this new market, a passel of companies were formed like Bombardier Skyjet, CitationShares, Sentient Jet, Le Bas International and Marquis Jet, an affiliate of NetJets, each pitching its own version of a surprisingly simple concept: sell access to a private jet without the necessity of buying one. The companies sell "jet cards," not much different from buying a Starbucks card.

"You call up and say you want to fly from X place to X place," explained Mr. Hubbard of the National Business Aviation Association. "They provide the equipment, swipe your card," and the hours disappear until one fills the card up again. For \$299,000. That is the cost of a representative 25-hour Marquis Jet card with ready access to a Gulfstream IV-SP, a jet that seats 13 and has a 4,600-mile flight range. That is enough for a trans-Atlantic flight, although a great many consumers use their hours to reach the dinky airports that are convenient to nothing except, as it happens, the finest golf course in the country.

"The sweet spot in private air travel is the entrepreneur," said Ken Austin, the Marquis Jet senior vice president for marketing. "There is a generation of younger people in their 30's and 40's who have a high disposable income, and they use it." Mr. Austin refers to these people as "the disposers."

For disposers who used Marquis cards to fly to Nantucket one recent Friday, the sticker shock of a \$9,000 round-trip price tag was apparently offset by the startlingly short time between wheels-up and the glorious moment when the jet hatch door opened to admit a salt-scented maritime breeze. "If you ever tried getting to Nantucket flying commercial, you know the stress alone could take years off your life," Mr. Austin said.

When David Brodie, the owner of an audiovisual production company, and his wife recently decided to celebrate their wedding anniversary in Nantucket, he used his Marquis Jet card to book a flight. "We were on the plane at 12," said Mr. Brodie, who lives in Fort Lauderdale. "And we were in our hotel in Nantucket at a quarter to three."

Whereas the wealthy of an earlier era may have preferred fiscal conservatism when it came to air travel — flying economy class as Mr. Buffett purportedly did for years — disposers apparently have as few qualms about circulating wealth as they do about the more disquieting aspects of private jet travel, grotesque fuel consumption being one.

"You don't have to be as rich as you and I once thought" to become a private aviation flier, said Alan Antokal, a seasoned jet card user. Mr. Antokal, a New England entrepreneur, manages his aviation cards as cautiously as he did the millwork and pottery businesses he sold for millions in 1998. "If today I'm going to go down to Florida, I can get on JetBlue for a hundred bucks," he said. "That's not necessarily what one does with 25 hours" of private-jet access.

"You do things that are lifestyle," explained Mr. Antokal, a passionate Boston Red Sox fan who flew to New York from Boston for a playoff game two years ago on a last-minute whim. "I went online and found tickets for me and my wife," he said. "I called Marquis and said, I want a plane for 3 o'clock and a plane to take me home." It was a thrilling ballgame for Mr. Antokal, and an expensive one. For seven hours in New York, he spent close to \$40,000. "Like the MasterCard commercial says, it's priceless," he said.

For Bob Beson, a Michigan entrepreneur who sold his call center business for \$80 million in 1999, the habit of flying private is

variously practical, addictive and "spoiling to the highest degree." When Mr. Beson's son turned 21 last year, he used a jet card to book a birthday flight to Las Vegas to celebrate. Mr. Beson, the product of what he called a lower-middle-income background in a Midwestern farming town, occasionally wonders, he conceded, whether he has succumbed to the "lifestyle of the rich and famous."

"Sometimes when I'm writing the check" to Marquis for \$250,000, he explained, "I question myself." But then he drives his car to the tarmac, boards the plane and "I don't think about it anymore."