

Your own private jet

The growing trend towards private aviation means convenience and time-saving for many, from businesspeople to football enthusiasts -- but catching a ride on a private jet has a hefty pricetag.

By TIMOTHY J. GIBBONS, The Times-Union



**In this file photo, a private jet taxis at the St. Augustine / St. Johns County Airport.
--PETER WILLOTT/The St. Augustine Record**

When SK Logistics first opened its door, it had one helicopter and offered one service -- transporting donated organs to hospitals.

Six years later, the St. Augustine-based company now makes most of its money transporting healthy, wealthy people who want to get somewhere quickly without dealing with the hassles of commercial airports: "Time is money," said Chuck Higgins, who is in charge of marketing for the company, which now has two helicopters and seven jets.

SK still provides medical transportation, as well as other aviation service like aerial photography, but its charter business is "good and growing," Higgins said.

That type of growth is going on around the nation: Private aviation is a booming business, with a variety of new products coming to market, which, in turn, attract new customers. Over the past year, one local charter company said, bookings are up about 25 percent, while experts said the private aviation industry nationwide -- which includes charter jets, fractional jet ownership and jet cards -- is growing by about 15 percent a year. Not bad for a business that requires its customers to pony up hundreds, and often hundreds of thousands, of dollars.



Chris Black refuels a jet at Sheltair in January of this year. Sheltair Aviation Services brought in extra equipment to handle crush of private, corporate and charter jets arriving for the Super Bowl.
BRUCE LIPSKY/The Times-Union

That nationwide growth is buoying Jacksonville's private aviation activity: A combination of growth in the local economy and the wealth of small airports scattered throughout Nassau, Duval and St. Johns counties has led both to local charter companies seeing an increase in business and to national players moving more aggressively into the area.

"The whole First Coast region has major potential for us," said Darren Callahan, director of business development for North Star Aviation Specialists, an Atlanta-based company that has recently expanded its operations in Jacksonville. "It's a great market. I don't think it's really been tapped yet."

Callahan, who went to flight school at Craig Field in Jacksonville, said geographic and demographic trends make the entire region attractive for private aviation operators. His company has also started focusing more attention on Birmingham, Ala., Charleston, S.C., and Savannah, Ga., trying to establish a presence in second- and third-tier markets, those that don't have direct commercial flights to a large number of other cities.

"There's plenty of business and industry there and they're all growing regions," Callahan said. "Jacksonville is getting more non-stop flights, but it's still limited. You always have to go to a hub."

Your own private jet ... card

Part of the growth in private aviation, both nationwide and in Jacksonville, stems from the variety of options available for people who have the desire -- and the money -- to avoid the teeming masses who pack into commercial jets.

Years ago, the only options for those who wanted to fly by themselves was either owning a plane or chartering a flight, much like one could own or rent a car.



A private jets waits to taxi onto the runway at Hobby Airport Monday in Houston, TX, as another jet takes off Monday. Hundreds of private aircraft began departing Houston after the Super Bowl Sunday night.
JON M. FLETCHER/The Times-Union

Now, private jet users can buy part of a jet -- known as fractional ownership -- which provides use of the aircraft for a certain number of hours (usually over 50), or can simply pay for a certain number of hours (usually 25 to 50) by buying a "jet card," which provides the hours purchased without having any long-term obligations attached.

"There are now a number of alternatives to scheduled travel that allow you to use a private jet, but only as your needs dictate," said Mark Kiefer, an aviation industry analyst, with CRA International Inc. in Boston.

Marquis Jet, the leader in the jet card business, recently began a marketing push in Northeast Florida and Southeast Georgia, trying to attract customers from areas like Ponte Vedra Beach and Sea Island.

Part of that push has been the institution of a program that gives 25-hour jet cards to people who purchase select property on Sea Island, the exclusive resort community in Georgia that is about an hour from Jacksonville International Airport.

With the card, the company said, users can fly into the tiny McKinnon St. Simons Island Airport, placing them only minutes away from golfing at a course that the Robb Report -- a lifestyle magazine for the ultra-rich -- deemed the best in the world.

Affiliated with NetJets Inc., a Berkshire Hathaway company that offers fractional jet ownership, Marquis also has a sister company -- Executive Jet Management -- which provides charter services.

Marquis came into being in 2001 (selling its first card to a Florida resident) and focused on athletes and entertainers, people who wanted the luxury of a private jet without the commitment of fractional or full ownership.

Today, said Randy Brandoff, vice president of marketing at Marquis Jet, most of the company's clients are entrepreneurs who don't want to get involved in long-term contracts or who simply don't fly all that often.

The company sees a huge untapped market on the First Coast, Brandoff said. "Jacksonville is one of the markets that we know is a hidden treasure," he said. "Jacksonville has wealthy pockets."

Shorter lines, but higher ticket prices

Deep pockets are required for any type of private aviation. Charter flights can cost from \$500 to \$2,000 per hour, fractional ownership can go from several hundreds of thousands of dollars (for 1/16 of a plane) up to millions of dollars (for a quarter of a jet), and a 25-hour jet card goes for upwards of \$100,000.

In return, flyers get better control of their time and don't have to face the nuisances of commercial airports.

"I think a lot of people got frustrated with the hassles of commercial air travel and the inefficiencies that go along with it," said Jonathan Buff, general manager at Shaltair, a fixed-base operator at Jacksonville International Airport.

Fixed-based operators are the gas stations and convenience stores of airplane travel, providing services such as fuel and cleaning as well as helping with things like providing ground transportation.

The increased security put into place in airports in recent years have prompted many wealthy travelers to look at private aviation, figuring that their time is too valuable to spend hours standing in lines before metal detectors.

"People who could afford to charter but were flying first class decided they didn't want to deal with security issues," said Sean McGill, vice president of Air McGill, a fixed base operator at Fernandina Beach Municipal Airport.

Among the commonly cited benefits of private jets:

- Travelers don't have to deal with the security hassles found in commercial airports. (At some general aviation airports, flyers can actually drive their cars out to the tarmac and load their luggage directly.) Passengers still have to be screened before flying; however, they don't have to stand in line with hundreds of other travelers.
- Trips can involve more than one stop. North Star Aviation has a customer, for example, who will leave Atlanta in the morning, meet with employees in Pensacola and Mobile, Ala., and be back having dinner with his family in the evening. "You simply couldn't do that with a commercial airline," Callahan said.
- Although the cost of a jet is steep, it can break down fairly economically if you're dealing with a group of people who are used to flying first class, the companies say. Private airline companies say that six to eight people on a medium-length flight costs about as much as the equivalent trip on a commercial airliner.

"They can economically justify it now," said Jim Betlyon, president of CharterX, a company that collects pricing and availability information on charter flights nationwide.

Marquis Jet cardholder Randy Trombly says using the private jet helps save time in a variety of ways: When he flies to South Bend, Ind., to watch Notre Dame football games, for example, he can get to the airport just a few minutes before the flight leaves, and then fly directly to South Bend, rather than flying to Chicago and driving the rest of the way.

Returning home to suburban Virginia is also quicker, meaning the family can stay overnight and still make it back in time for Trombly's son's soccer matches. "You couldn't do that flying commercial," he said.

Trombly, who went with the card program because he didn't want the longer and more expensive obligations required by fractional programs, also uses the card to visit his kids in college and to stop by a house he's building in Orlando.

Of course, with only a 25-hour card, Trombly can't always use "the number one luxury" of a private jet.

"We flew commercial down to Orlando in the summer," he said with a laugh. "I got a lot of dirty looks from my family as we were going through security and taking off our shoes."



Rather than owning a jet, many private fliers are opting for fractional ownership and hourly jet-renting. Marquis Jet's "jet car" provides 25 hours of access to planes like this Boeing Business Jet, owned by Marquis' parent company NetJets Inc.

-- Photo from NetJets Inc.

The future of no-fuss flying

If the economy does stay at its current pace -- or improves further -- private aviation should continue to grow, according to both those in the industry and those who study it.

Business travel has rebounded after severely dropping in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, said Kiefer, the CRA International aviation analyst, but executives are loathe to use the low-cost, no-frills airlines that have taken over the market, and are equally unwilling to put up with the lengthy delays involved in going through airports.

"As we have growth in the economy generally, and as airports continue to get more congested, there will continue to be a demand for it," Kiefer said.

The companies that hope to meet that demand are seeing the same thing. "We talk to our competition, we talk to our partners: We're all getting an idea that it's going to get a lot busier," said Callahan, of fractional jet and charter company North Star Aviation.

And at least some of that increased business, he said, will be on the First Coast.

"We're planning on adding more aircraft there," Callahan said. "The company has aggressive growth plans and Jacksonville is part of that."