

How I Flew a Gulfstream G200 Around Manhattan



A LEVEL D FLIGHT SIMULATOR is a sizeable white pod, about 20 feet long by 10 feet wide, supported by six huge hydraulic legs. From the outside, it looks rather like one of the Imperial walkers that totter around in *The Empire Strikes Back*, zapping Luke Skywalker and his rebel friends. Step inside, however, and you are suddenly in the cockpit of a modern jet, surrounded by rows of dials and phalanxes of switches. The lighting is subdued and the atmosphere is hushed. It is indistinguishable from an actual airplane, and even the view through the windshield — in this case, I found myself staring down a taxiway at LaGuardia Airport in New York — is extraordinarily convincing.

I lowered myself awkwardly into the cramped pilot's seat, trying not to nudge or tread on anything important, and strapped myself in. Leaning over my right shoulder, my instructor then explained that we were going to spend the next hour playing with the world's most expensive video game, all \$30 million of it, or flying a Gulfstream G200 nine-seat midsize jet, depending on the degree to which my disbelief had been suspended and my imagination engaged. I suddenly became aware that my palms were feeling slightly clammy and that my stomach was registering the disagreeable flutters of nervous tension. Telling myself that I was still sitting inside a large hangar 25 feet off the ground at most made no difference whatever. The instructor leaned across, flicked a couple of switches, and somewhere behind me, two jet engines began to whine.

The point about Level D simulators, the most advanced of their kind, is that pilots can be taught and certified to fly a particular aircraft without ever leaving the ground. In fact, the simulator is much better than the real thing, as it can replicate the most horrible failures and mishaps that in actual flight would almost certainly prove fatal. The machine I was about to launch from LaGuardia is one of seven owned by FlightSafety International at its training center adjacent to the principal NetJets servicing facility in Columbus, Ohio. Both enterprises are owned by Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway company. In the United States, NetJets employs around 3,000 pilots to fly its fleet of about 800 planes, all of whom are required to spend time on the simulator twice a year, to hone and update their flying skills.

After inadvertently trashing a couple of lights on the way to the main runway, I managed to position my Gulfstream astride its central white line. There, after some last-minute coaching, I eased forward the throttles, the engines screamed to a crescendo, and I felt myself being pinned back by the sudden surge of acceleration. My fear of plowing through the main terminal building proved entirely unfounded, and pulling back on the stick, I peered out of my side window and was gratified to see the streets of Queens being replaced by the tranquil waters of Flushing Bay. After a couple of minutes, I was instructed to turn to port, which I managed to do without stalling, and then to level out at 2,500 feet. The Palisades in New Jersey appeared through the windshield, and the instructor flicked on the autopilot so that I could relax and enjoy the view. Flying down the Hudson, I was almost sure I could see the front door of a brownstone on 61st Street where I lived nearly 20 years ago. Fortunately, our low-level flyby produced no panic among the office workers downtown, so we continued on to the Statue of Liberty, buzzed Newark airport and then finally headed for home over the Verrazano Bridge before lining up with the landing lights back at LaGuardia. Unfortunately, after a bumpy but adequate touchdown, I lost control halfway down the runway and came to a shuddering halt in front of one of the hangars. Both my hands and legs continued to shake for some minutes, and my heart benefited from a thorough aerobic workout.



For some years now, Andrew Harper has enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with Marquis Jet, and several hundred Harper members have signed up for the privilege of its 12.5- and 25-hour cards. (NetJets operates the airplanes for fractional share owners, and Marquis Jet sells access to the fleet by the hour, effectively a kind of sublease.) This was the first occasion, however, I had had the opportunity to visit the main servicing facility.

Even if you are aware of the raw statistics, the scale of the operation is still extremely impressive. In a vast hangar, its floor polished to a sheen worthy of an operating theater, a cross-section of the fleet was being serviced and, in some cases, partially disassembled. NetJets operates 15 aircraft types globally, from the seven-seat Cessna Citation Ultra with a range of 1,280 miles (fully laden) to the Gulfstream G550 GV, which can carry 14 people 7,220 miles at around 530 mph. (The fastest plane is the Citation X, which will fly you from New York to Los Angeles nonstop, at a cruising speed close to 600 mph.)



Nearby, teams of controllers grappled with the complexities of organizing 800 aircraft flying a route network that varied minute by minute. (Their skill ensures that Marquis Jet/Andrew Harper cardholders need provide only 10 hours' notice of their travel plans.) Another group checked that departing planes had been supplied with the precise requirements of each passenger ("If they say 'orange juice,' they mean orange juice, not grapefruit.") And finally, the NetJets meteorologists labored to ensure their clients' safety and tranquility. ("Our people don't like turbulence," one weather expert informed me. "In fact, we've got one lady who will fly 1,000 miles out of her way rather than be bounced around. At certain times of year, getting her over the Rockies can be quite a challenge.")

In the midst of a recession, private jet travel tends not to enjoy an especially favorable press. But a day with NetJets in Columbus served to remind me that the people who service the planes are regular aviation mechanics with mortgages and college fees to pay. And witnessing the astonishing complexity and professionalism of the operation, I could only reflect that even the best-run and most remarkable companies can suffer in an economic downturn through absolutely no fault of their own. Whoever said life was fair?

To find out more about the Marquis Jet/Andrew Harper alliance, call the dedicated Harper member number at (866) 538-1300, or visit www.MarquisJet.com/Harper.