

ON THE ROAD/Joe Sharkey

How to Justify a Part-Time Private Jet

How big an extravagance is a corporate jet? This is a risky question to raise here; many business travelers hate the very idea of corporate jets, and let me know about it every time I mention the subject. The image of some swaggering tycoon using the company jet to fly his mistress and her poodle to join him in Palm Springs has a tenacious hold on their imaginations.

Nevertheless, private aviation is gaining business converts. Here, for example, is how Richard Thalheimer, the founder and chairman of Sharper Image, the specialty retailer, works the numbers for the time he and his colleagues spend in a company jet: a Cessna Citation Excel that seats seven and has a range of 2,175 miles.

"It might cost a smidgeon more than it would to fly commercial," he said, "but when you've got an executive on board who's earning \$100,000, along with a senior vice president of merchandising who's earning \$250,000 and another executive who's earning \$750,000 and me who's earning almost \$1 million, you put us all on an airplane together and calculate what it costs to have us all lose a day flying commercial, the numbers start to make sense."

Now, for most of us working stiffs lugging our carry-ons and laptops through airports and hoping for that mileage upgrade to first class on a coach ticket, spending \$144,900 for 25 hours of flight time on a private jet, which is what Mr. Thalheimer's company puts out for its use of the Citation Excel, would seem excessive. But a growing number of harried corporate executives and wealthy professionals have no such reservations.

They have several options. They can spend a fortune to buy their own corporate jet (or jets).

They can buy fractional ownership in a plane, with flight hours allocated accordingly. They can charter private jets.

But another and increasingly popular alternative is also available: purchasing time cards that provide a certain number of flight hours on a jet, without the burden of ownership. The costs for this are closer to ground level.

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Consider Wendy Nichamin, a lawyer, and her husband, an ophthalmologist, who live in northwestern Pennsylvania about 120 miles from the Pittsburgh airport. Both travel frequently on business, and air service in Pittsburgh has become more difficult as the dominant carrier there, US Airways, which is struggling through bankruptcy, has cut its schedule sharply.

"To travel anywhere commercial-

The \$299,000 stocking stuffer for the frequent flier on your list.

ly, it's a whole day, no matter where we're going," Ms. Nichamin said. "There are all these instances where either of us flying has to take a whole day on a trip that would take four or five hours by car. But, of course, you can't get any work done in a car."

So she and her husband bought 25 hours of flight time (price: \$109,900) on a Cessna Citation V Ultra, a seven-seat jet.

Like Mr. Thalheimer, they bought their time through a company called Marquis Jet, which sells flight time on corporate jets in 25-hour increments.

That's pretty expensive flying for just two people, though the couple's two teenage sons often come along. And Ms. Nichamin says she and her husband use their hours judiciously.

"We find it makes the most sense

on trips of three hours or less," she said. "When we go to the West Coast, on the other hand, we fly commercial, because it's a whole day regardless, and you can't really justify the numbers."

Several other aviation companies sell flight hours on private jets, but Marquis's distinction is that it has an alliance with NetJets, the world's leading supplier of fractional-share jet ownership.

NetJets has a fleet of more than 500 corporate aircraft. Marquis buys fractional shares in 11 models of NetJets planes — it won't say exactly how many — and then sells time on those jets.

Even with the comparatively high cost, the private-jet habit is spreading from the wealthy elite to the merely well-to-do.

"What's happening now is private aviation is becoming mainstream," said Ken Austin, the marketing director at Marquis. "You don't have to be superrich to afford to buy a Marquis Jet card and access the NetJets fleet."

The top-selling Marquis product is a 25-hour card on the Gulfstream IV-SP, a jet that seats 13 and has a range of about 4,600 miles. For those interested in an impressive stocking stuffer, 25 hours on that will cost \$299,900.

The hours are measured from the moment the wheels come up to the moment they touch down, plus an additional six minutes each for takeoff and landing.

Marquis is about to introduce a new product, M Club. For an extra \$125,000, holders of Marquis cards will be eligible to upgrade, based on availability, to the NetJets fleet of Boeing Business Jets, commonly called B.B.J.'s.

The B.B.J. is basically a Boeing 737 — which typically holds up to 200 passengers as a commercial airliner — reconfigured into a luxury business jet that carries 18 and has a bedroom aft with a queen-size bed and a walk-in shower.

"We've sold 15 or 16 of these memberships already, without promoting it," Mr. Austin said. "Some people are using it for special occasions, like for family travel. One of our owners is flying from here to South Africa and everywhere in between and taking the whole family."

He added: "I don't consider we're providing a luxury product anymore. To many people, it's a necessity."