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Talking travel with an insider of the personal jet industry

by Jerry Guo Aug 11th 2008 @ 9:00AM



Bob Knebel is vice president of sales for Flexjet, a subsidiary of the jet-maker Bombardier which sells shares of private jets to frequent fliers. This is a relatively new trend in the marketplace. He's here to give a glimpse into what actually goes on in the world of ultra jet-setters.

For owners of private jets, is the airport process totally different from what we commoners have to bear? Can you go straight onto the tarmac and lift off?

First, and foremost, it is important to know that security at general aviation airports is taken as seriously as it is at the larger commercial airports ... and always has been. That said, a passenger will go through a brief identification/security screening process by the Fixed Base Operator (the base of operations for business jets transiting through this airport), and then again with the crew flying your aircraft. The entire process is personal, and much quicker than that at a commercial airport. And, yes, depending on the particular airport policies, in many instances you may drive your car on to the ramp, making the job of loading your luggage directly on to your aircraft just that much easier.

I've seen quite a bit of advertising for private jet vacations. Is this something you're seeing--hopscotch trips through Eastern Europe or South Asia by jet, for instance?

Flexjet recently launched a new advertising campaign and through our research we found most of our customers use their private jet primarily as a business tool and not so much a glamorous perk. It's an investment in productivity and their most valuable asset: time. Certainly some will use their private jet to accomplish a special vacation trip that would not otherwise be possible within their time constraints, or through areas which might offer less-than-reliable commercial travel options.

Tell us a bit about the Flexjet 25 program. Does this make private jet travel accessible to previous first-class travelers? For what kind of crowd has fractional jet ownership become affordable?

Flexjet 25 jet cards offer the highest form of pain relief for travelers who have spent countless hours waiting at the airport for delayed or canceled flights. They give travelers a way to sample private aviation without assuming ownership of a plane, and offer an excellent opportunity for those interested in fractional ownership as a way to test out private aviation without the commitment. (Although, I must say, after flying private few go back to commercial travel.)

Additionally, what is unique about the Flexjet 25 Jet Card program is that it allows customers to purchase flying hours in 25-, 30- and 35-hour increments in our Bombardier Learjet 40 XR, Learjet 45 XR, Learjet 60 XR, Challenger 300 or Challenger 604 aircraft. Here are some additional key benefits:

If you could "borrow" one of the Flexjet jets, what would be your ideal around-the-world itinerary?

I would travel to the world's most difficult to reach destinations, places which offer unique learning experiences and opportunities to create life-long memories for my family.

Do Flexjet jets come with a service staff? Do fliers still have to go through those annoying safety demonstrations? Are the flight attendants at least prettier?

All of our flight crews are selected not only for their excellent experience and strict adherence to safe operating procedures, but also for their "servant's heart". Our largest aircraft, the Challenger 605, includes a flight attendant as a full-time member of the crew. They are the most professional, in terms of both appearance and demeanor, in the sky. Safety demonstrations are required by the Federal Aviation Administration, and we do our best to make sure they are brief, and delivered in a respectful manner.

What are the three emerging markets you're seeing for luxury travel?

Entrepreneurs who have recently sold their company.

Highly compensated executives who no longer have access to the corporate fleet for their personal travel.

Business owners looking for a safe and reliable means for creating more time with family.

For the uninitiated, would you go over the different models you guys offer? Is there a type of flier that goes with each jet?

Bombardier Aerospace, the world leader in business aviation, designs, manufactures, maintains and operates every aircraft in the Flexjet fleet including the Bombardier Learjet 40 XR, Learjet 45 XR, Learjet 60 XR; and long-range Bombardier Challenger 300 and Challenger 604 and 605 jets.

How much is the growth in private jet ownership? Are our skies going to be absolutely clogged with these air taxis in 10 years?

Despite the current economy, the fractional ownership industry is growing and, according to data from the Federal Aviation Administration, demand for Flexjet's fractional shares is growing faster than it is for the industry as a whole. In 2003, we had 10% of the total fractional aircraft market and by 2007 that number has grown to 20%. This year Flexjet has experienced growth in revenue and flight hours of more than 15% over last year and we have seen even more significant growth in orders in that period.

As for the potential for the air taxi market clogging the skies, we believe this is not likely. Business aircraft tend to utilize smaller airports, which do not have the saturation problem found at larger commercial airports. In addition, today's business jets are equipped with sophisticated navigation equipment which enables them to fly more directly to their destinations. And, finally, the air taxi market is still an emerging concept, and the overall acceptance of the concept by potential customers is yet to be proven.

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