

# Slice of the sky

Long the preserve of high society, private aviation is filtering down to a much broader customer base and agents can get involved, too, reports **April Hutchinson**

WHETHER IT'S FLYING the band Razorlight around for live performances, whisking couples or corporates to France for a day trip or shifting 580 sports fans to see the Champions League Final in Athens, there's no doubt private air travel is here to stay.

There is even growing evidence from aircraft brokers, owners and private jet companies that travellers from all walks of life are increasingly turning to this mode of travel. This is either because they are sick of the delays, baggage restrictions and the general oxymoron that is 'scheduled' travel or because they simply want to be able to enjoy the lifestyle that private jet travel represents — no-fuss, no-stress and

full-frills. In short, private air travel has never had it so good.

Buying the one-off use of a private aircraft is also filtering down as a must-have for executive travellers. On paper, it may look expensive, but once you put enough executives on the aircraft, factor in the decreased transport time getting to and from the airport and the unlikelihood of having to pay for overnights at hotels, it starts to make sense.

To get several executives to meetings in three European cities in the same day — free from the traffic and usual delays at security checks on the ground — and still be home for dinner is just not possible on scheduled airlines.

Gavin Copus, passenger sales manager, Air Charter Service — responsible for those 580 fans flying to Athens, Razorlight's trip and increasing numbers of business travellers — says: "CEOs see private air charter as a proper business tool these days and essential for international business. Time is precious to them and they are finding scheduled flights can take too much of that time. Often a group of four people who would normally travel business class realise the economics actually can work out similar to charter."

## THE NUMBERS

The market is much more advanced in the US — 60% of all the world's private jets are based there — and the market continues to grow. Figures from *Elite Traveler*, the magazine for private jet users, show that 400 of the Fortune 500 companies operate their own jets, with fleets ranging from one to 25 aircraft. The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) expects a 300% increase in hours logged by private jets in the next decade.

The European Business Aviation Association (EBAA) says business flights, including those by private jets, represent 6% of air traffic on the Continent and are set to grow. They were up almost 9% in 2005 and the EBAA predicts an extra 1,100 flights a day by 2015. Figures from a Eurocontrol report last year showed

there has been a 50% growth in executive aviation since 1997.

NetJets Europe, the pioneer of the fractional ownership concept and a private jet operator, experienced staggering growth of 30% in UK passengers alone last year.

## HIGH-FRILLS, LOW-COST?

New entrants are appearing on a fairly regular basis. A concept frequently seen in the US is that of 'air taxis' — private jet travel has become so prevalent, it's as easy as calling a cab. The concept is on the way to Europe, too, with Blue Star Jets, a long-running US air taxi operator, recently opening a London office.

In May last year, JetBird announced its ambition to be the 'EasyJet of the private aviation market' and the largest air taxi operator in Europe in the next decade, promising to slash the 'going rate by 50%' while somehow maintaining the comfort and amenities private air travellers are used to.

JetBird will be based in Switzerland, but plans to open a UK office and has ordered a mix of 50 Phenom 100 and 300 aircraft, with an option for a further 50, to turn Europeans into low-cost air taxi users. Paul Geaney, managing director, says: "We will become Europe's largest air taxi operator, taking our first aircraft delivery in 2009 and taking private jet travel to the mass affluent."

The push for high-frills, low-cost is being driven by a new generation of Very Light Jets — these small fuel-efficient four- to six-seat aircraft have ranges of about 1,200 nm (nautical miles) and cost as little as \$1.5 million (£780,000), compared with \$2.4 million (£1.2 million) for the cheapest corporate jets. The FAA predicts VLJs will be popular enough to drive use of privately jets overall by more than 10% a year over the next 12 years.

## PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Away from the corporate world, several companies are evolving beyond the offer of private air travel, creating a lifestyle and

## HEADLINES

### DECEMBER 2006

- ▶ **JEFFERSONS** launches ski breaks and yachts by private jet programme.
- ▶ **CLUB328** announces security chaperone service for VIPs in Veritas International deals.
- ▶ **AIR PARTNER** launches carbon neutral version of its JetCard scheme.

### JANUARY 2007

- ▶ **NETJETS EUROPE** announces 30% growth in UK passengers in 2006.
- ▶ **LUFTHANSA PRIVATE JET** announces 13% increase in flights operated for 2006.
- ▶ **CONTINENTAL AIRLINES** launches eight-minute helicopter shuttle between Newark Liberty International Airport and Wall Street with US Helicopter (approx £81 one-way).
- ▶ **THE FIRST** Very Light Jets delivered to US clients.

### FEBRUARY 2007

- ▶ **VON ESSEN** purchases Battersea Heliport.
- ▶ **DUBAI** announces plans for massive new private jet terminal.

### MARCH 2007

- ▶ **VON ESSEN AVIATION** acquires PremiAir

holiday menu — and they are predominantly happy to work with agents keen to understand the product. Companies like Jeffersons and Avolus are offering the works, from chauffeur pick-ups to lunch in a top Paris restaurant or stay in a five-star hotel, to the chartering of a yacht to go with the plane.

Club328, a Southampton air charter company and operator, started in 2004 and recently announced the addition of a second

yacht to its portfolio, *PowderMonkey*. This will be based in Europe close to key European events — such as the Cannes Film Festival or the Monaco Grand Prix. Part of the move to mould Club328 into a lifestyle product will include offering bolt-on concierge-type services and strengthening the relationship with the Stein Group of Hotels.

Transport company Avolus says it is the 'first ever fully integrated luxury transport provider

in the world.' Clients can book all private travel arrangements in one go, 'be that jet, chauffeured car, helicopter or yacht'. A number of bookings have already come from travel agents and founder Justine Angelli says: "We have had a very big take-up and attracted a range of people, from the super-rich to those who have saved for several years to surprise their 'other half' on a special occasion. Growth has been rapid."

The idea extends to the pre-paid Avolus Card, upon which 'credit' is placed, with no membership or annual fee. The monetary value placed can be anything from £500 and Avolus records all client preferences — from

**"A small number of regular high-spending customers have expressed an interest in private jets."** Gary Boyer, head of contracting, *Classic Collection Holidays*



## WHO USES PRIVATE AIR TRAVEL?

Katherine Gray, account manager, Vantage Point, says private aircraft travel and trips have gained popularity as an incentive and motivational tool.

"We have a number of different elements to our company and Fly For Lunch is one of these," she says. "It continues to be popular and we have a number of bookings a year. For most people attending our trips, this is a unique experience. To have an aircraft waiting just outside the terminal makes you feel extremely special. You get to speak to the pilots and watch them at work!

"There are limited customs and it's an extremely hassle-free experience. What better way to spend a day than have your own private plane and a Michelin-star lunch? People love this concept and it has been used for a number of different mediums. These range from pure corporate hospitality to sales incentives, birthdays and product launches.

"Champagne is our most popular destination, for a group of 18 people. We have also introduced helicopter trips to exclusive lunch venues and Le Manoir has also done very well from this. You have complete flexibility and can build a schedule that suits you."

T: 020 8542 8100. [www.vantagepoint.co.uk/flyforlunch](http://www.vantagepoint.co.uk/flyforlunch)

**"Convenience and privacy are the biggest factors — travel when you want and from where you want, much shorter check-in times, transfer by car virtually to the door of the aircraft, comfort and service on board."** David Atkin, business development manager, Elegant Resorts

favourite type of Champagne to choice of newspaper in flight.

Hotelier Von Essen has its own fleet of helicopters and recently announced plans to acquire PremiAir, the UK's leading helicopter charter company, to create packages for those looking for the ultimate escape. Good news for agents here, too, as Von Essen pays up to 10% commission on hotel bookings and 5% on private air charter bookings.

Von Essen also recently bought London's only commercial heliport — Battersea, which handles about 1,000 flight movements a month. It will be managed by PremiAir and will be the site of Von Essen's new 70-room boutique hotel: that equals great city-country combinations by helicopter.

## TERMINAL STYLE

Farnborough, managed by TAG Aviation, opened a stylish new terminal last May. Designed by top architect REID, it shows how slick a business this is becoming and TAG Aviation's ambition is to make Farnborough the most modern airport dedicated to business aviation in Europe. Harrods Aviation plans to move its Luton FBO (fixed base operation) to a bigger new facility thanks to a spurt in business. Since the opening of the current FBO in June 2003, annual movements have increased by 159%.

Private jet terminals are popping up all over the world but it comes as little surprise that Dubai is about to open one of the biggest and the best. The Executive Flight Centre at the new Dubai World Central International Airport (JXB) will be the world's largest airport when it opens in 2008. The Executive Flight Centre will be able to handle more than 100,000 aircraft movements a year, the Middle East's largest private jet handling operation.

## TREND: GOING GREEN?

With the world struggling to come to terms with the impact of climate change and aviation increasingly under fire, is it right that hundreds of little jets are flying around with sometimes as few as one or two passengers?

Some of the private jet charter companies are getting the point. PremiAir says offsetting is something it will look to offer in the future. "Compared to a car sat in traffic churning out CO<sub>2</sub>, a helicopter can seem more efficient, but in general terms aviation is not the most environmentally friendly of options and we are looking at ways to bring in offsetting," says Robert Taylor-Hunt, head of helicopter charter & aircraft management, PremiAir.

One company listening to the green message is Air Partner, which launched a carbon neutral version of its JetCard last October. Air Partner runs the scheme in partnership with The CarbonNeutral Company, a climate change consultancy, and the Edinburgh Centre for Carbon Management. Taking things a step further is Business Air Centre, which has become the world's first carbon neutral air charter broker. With some of the world's

leading corporations, film companies and record labels on its books, the pressure had increasingly come from HQ corporate and environmental responsibility maxims. It worked with CarbonNeutral to become both a carbon neutral company and offer clients the option to offset.

James Shotton, client development, Business Air Centre, says: "If a record company's artists are saying they will offset the emissions from the making of their latest album, it makes sense for that record label to also offset the cost of travel where they can. More and more clients were talking to us about offsetting, so we looked into it and not only have we turned our own organisation into a CarbonNeutral one, we are offering customers the chance of making their flights CarbonNeutral, too."

"Newer aircraft will be more efficient with less emissions, but aviation generally has to get its house in order. If you are going to talk about doing something green for your customers, you have to be following that belief in your own business. I would like to say 15%-20% of our clients would have offset by the end of the year."



PremiAir is looking at ways to bring in offsetting