

THE £1M FLIGHT

This week a new generation of cheaper private planes went on sale - they seat six, are as fast as a 737 and end the misery of airport chaos. But can the 'bargain jets' really transform travel?



Marcus Dunk

JANE HOWELL believes she's found the perfect cure for the airport blues. It's about 50 feet long, cruises at around 400 miles an hour and means she'll never have to stand at a check-in desk again - as long as she sticks to Europe.

Of course, it has set her back a few quid - £1.3 million to be precise - but she believes it's the best money she has ever spent.

For Jane is the first Briton to have bought one of the most coveted toys around - a Cessna Citation Mustang, a plush six-seater jet that's set to transform international travel.

It has leather seats that feel more like sofas with the sort of leg-room you'd get in your living room, plus you can pack as much luggage as you like.

Almost as fast as a 737, it can get you from London to Seville, Lisbon, Rome or Budapest on a single tank of fuel and the insurance is only about £10,000 a year. But for Jane, the Cessna's real beauty is that it provides the answer to the hellish prospect of regular air travel on commercial airlines, complete with interminable queues and endless delays.

Private jet travel has been the preserve of the super-rich for years - no wonder when the jets themselves can cost up to £30 million. But now this new breed of "cut-price" planes have landed and while you still need to be a millionaire, they're within reach of far more people, like Jane Howell.

"I fly it myself between my homes in London, Salzburg and Portofino in Italy," she says. "When Cessna announced the Citation Mustang, I saw it as the perfect opportunity for me to move up from my turboprop aircraft to a jet," adds the 47-year-old, who made her fortune through an office interior design business.

"The big advantage of a light jet is that it is much faster than a turboprop and gets you through the bad weather much more quickly.

"What's more, I don't get stuck in packed departure lounges, waiting ages for announcements. The older I get, the more frustrating I find all the uncertainty of commercial flights. And the Mustang is one of the quietest and most fuel-efficient jets, so the environmental impact is minimal. Everyone has to make their own decision on how they want to live and mine is that I am going to fly my own jet."

Kate Sarsfield, business aviation expert at Flight International Magazine, says: "There has been a boom in private jet travel here over the past 10 years. It's no longer an ultra-exclusive club and we're seeing more people using them not only for business but for holidays and leisure as well.

"If you've ever flown on one and experienced how stress and hassle-free it is, you realise that it's a different world from normal flying. It's no wonder that those who can afford it are seeing it as a preferable option."

Of course, one person's affordability is another's pipe dream and with this new generation of cheaper jets coming at an average of around £1 million, it's clear that EasyJet doesn't have too much to worry about quite yet.

"No, they're not the cheapest of aircraft," says Sarsfield, "but in the case

of the Cessna Citation Mustang, it's a well-priced aircraft for what you get and is definitely more affordable than a lot of other jets out there."

A sleek, light jet that comes with its own toilet (a big plus, apparently, in the world of small jets) the beautiful Mustang (named Product of the Year by the influential Aviation Consumer website) is proving itself very popular. Of all the jets being bought by European operators, the Mustang makes up around one-third of the orders, with about 350 on their way.

Capable of flying at nearly 400mph at 41,000ft, the Mustang cruises above most other commercial airlines. Such altitude also enables it to bypass adverse weather conditions.

While an increasing number of individuals are buying and flying these jets, demand for hiring private planes is also exploding.

"We've seen recent growth of 25 to 30 per cent," says Justine Angelli, CEO and co-founder of Avolus, one of the UK's leading luxury aviation providers. "We've seen big growth among Russians and also in Ireland and we're now split fairly evenly between corporate clients and individuals who simply like the luxury and convenience of private travel."

"We have lawyers and businessmen and their families who are going on holidays who don't want to be bothered by airport queues and who like the ease and comfort of departing from smaller airports. Private jet travel is no longer just for the super-rich."

WHAT makes private jets even more attractive to many is the chance to team up with others to cut the cost. "We have a fractional ownership scheme where people can come together and partially own an aircraft," says Angelli.

And as well as the very wealthy chartering a plane, it is becoming increasingly popular for families and friends to share the cost of hiring one for holidays or one-off outings. To charter a jet to take you and six friends to France to watch a match during the Rugby World Cup will set you back between £6,000 and £8,000, with pilot included. "You can order whatever food you want and, if you are late, the plane's not going to take off without you," says Angelli. "Considering the cost of flying business class, it is quite reasonable."

Many small airports across Europe are seeing a dramatic increase in private jet traffic. But Flight International's Sarsfield says: "To say that there will be an explosion in growth is something of an exaggeration. It's not like our skies are going to be blackened by all these jets taking up all the airspace. But we will certainly see more growth in private jet travel."

Such growth, however, means that the exclusivity that was once attached to private jets is quickly becoming a thing of the past.

Sarsfield adds: "With increasing ownership, fractional ownership and charter, private travel has become more run-of-the-mill. Of course, it is still expensive and most of the public are not jumping on private jets but it does have a much wider audience than it once had."



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T OF FANTASY



CLEVER INVESTMENT: Entrepreneur Jane Howell files her Cessna Citation Mustang between her three homes to avoid the increasing uncertainty and frustration of taking commercial flights

Picture: THE TIMES



CESSNA CITATION MUSTANG

- ONE OR TWO PILOTS
- FOUR TO FIVE PASSENGERS
- CRUISE SPEED: 400MPH
- RANGE: 1,300MILES
- SERVICE CEILING: 41,000FT
- BEYOND THE £1.3MILLION PRICE TAG, THERE ARE OTHER COSTS TO CONSIDER...
- PARKING: £500 TO £5,000 A MONTH
- INSURANCE: £10,000 PER YEAR
- FUEL: £150 PER FLYING HOUR
- MAINTENANCE: £150 PER FLYING HOUR
- LANDING FEE: £100
- AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL FEE FOR EACH FLIGHT: £100

STYLISH: Now a growing number of people are opting to escape airport chaos and travel in comfort on a private jet