



For some travelers, it's the only way to fly

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Lionel Andre's plane to Bedford, Mass., was departing at 6 p.m. If he left from Newark Liberty International, he would have to arrive at the airport by 4:30 p.m. to make his flight. But leaving from Teterboro Airport, he arrived 10 minutes before takeoff.

Baggage checks? Metal detectors? No need. Andre flashed his driver's license and moved past a security guard on his way to an eight-seat Linear Air plane. His one-way fare was \$270.

"It's unlike anything you've ever done before – just being able to walk right up to the plane," said Andre, a computer software consultant. "It's phenomenal."

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, the smaller, lighter air taxi and charter planes have attracted growing numbers of travelers who are fed up with the security checks at the major airports.

However, critics view them as an end run around the nation's heightened security standards and believe the federal government should regulate air charter security the same way it handles commercial flights.

"Showing your ID is a far cry from being searched for explosives," said Charles Slepian, a Manhattan security consultant.

These jets -- otherwise known as on-demand flights or planes for hire -- make up nearly 30 percent of the planes flying into and out of Teterboro Airport. The rest are private jets.

Nationally, some air charter operators say business has more than doubled since 9/11, contributing to a steady rise in air traffic at general aviation airports.

Flights at Naples Municipal Airport in Florida, for instance, have increased more than 40 percent since 2003, though the number of Teterboro flights has leveled off recently. Still, on any given day, Teterboro rivals the number of flights at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

No hassles

Entrepreneurs have seized on the desire for a no-hassle flying experience, setting up flights throughout the country, touching down at small airports and landing strips. A key to their service is offering privacy to their clients; that often means private or valet parking.

"We provide electric golf carts from the parking area to the ramp," said Ted Soliday, executive director of the Naples airport.

Typical customers -- corporate executives, entertainers and the wealthy -- can pay as much as \$2,000 to

\$7,000 to charter a plane. But a group of four to eight business travelers can also share the space and split the costs.

"A group of four might go down to Hilton Head and play golf for the weekend," said Ken Forester, chief executive of Meridian Air Charter and the Million Air terminal at Teterboro.

Linear, on the other hand, provides a service more like a commercial airline. Passengers pay per seat, booking their flight aboard a Cessna Caravan turboprop on the company's Web site.

Since its start in 2004, the company has expanded its fleet from one plane to four. Per-seat charter service is suspended temporarily at Teterboro, but Linear hopes to add 30 "very light jets" by year's end.

At the Million Air terminal, as many as eight air taxi or charter planes take off a day. But you'd never know it: Passengers leaving their planes typically walk directly to their cars.

The white jets are unmarked -- except for the tail number and, in some cases, a stripe. When the plane is ready to take off, it goes. Delays are almost non-existent.

"It's phenomenal," Andre said. "There's no comparison."

Comfort is a big deal, too. Some flights include a "galley" that provides full-course meals.

On St. Patrick's Day, corned beef and cabbage was offered at Teterboro's Jet Aviation terminal as a smiling pianist played Irish tunes like "Toora Looa Looa." The charter services say they still present themselves as the luxury choice -- even as they try to expand their customer base.

"When you have \$10 million or \$12 million, you're used to the finer things in life," said Robert Seidel, senior vice president and general manager of Jet Aviation, which helps broker charter flights.

TSA guidelines

Security is rarely -- if ever -- a hassle.

Screening passengers at all of the nation's 19,000 general aviation airports would be impossible, federal officials say. Instead, security is regulated by charter operators and local law enforcement.

The Transportation Security Administration provides guidelines for planes smaller than 12,500 pounds. But they are not mandatory, said spokeswoman Ann Davis.

"It is more important that the owners and operators, based on their intimate knowledge of their planes, would know what's needed for security," she said.

However, the agency has placed screeners at the Wall Street heliport in the last two weeks as a convenience to well-heeled fliers taking a helicopter to Kennedy International, where they can skip security and board their flight directly.

Typically, passengers display photo identification in order to board a flight. Some terminals -- such as those at Teterboro -- are gated; others require a fingerprint. At the Naples airport, customers can park in ungated lots.

Some, like Meridian, check names against a TSA no-fly list. Linear does not.

"We're not required to do anything," said Bill Herp, president of Linear, adding that his company and other charters "do more than what's required by the TSA."

Bags, for instance, are "positively matched" with passengers, Herp said. And Linear accepts only credit cards, not cash, for payment.

Before departure, the typical charter matches passenger identification with a manifest that includes their name, weight and personal requests for the flight.

Baggage isn't usually screened, or checked. Passengers don't pass through metal detectors.

"We make sure the baggage goes with the people, but we don't look inside the bag," Forester said. "If the TSA said it wanted to go through and check all the bags, that would be all right."

Inside the terminal, the customer gives the plane's tail number to the check-in desk or security guard before boarding.

"I would trust a small airline more," Andre said. "They get to see you, they get to chat with you, as opposed to some dude behind an X-ray machine."

Though the planes are much smaller than a commercial airliner, they could still carry explosives that can inflict a lot of damage, security experts say.

"I generally think the terrorists do something new each time," said Bruce Schneier, a security technology consultant and author. "It is a big hole in the system."

Most charter operators have agreed to provide some level of security at airports. But the approach is inconsistent, Slepian, the security consultant, noted. Some provide a high level of monitoring, whereas others don't.

"If we can put the TSA at the Wall Street heliport, we should be able to put them at Teterboro," Slepian said.

Traffic and noise

Public officials have cracked down on the proliferation of air charters at Teterboro.

Three years ago, Rep. Steve Rothman, D-Fair Lawn, ushered through Congress a ban on Teterboro air charter services with more than four weekly scheduled flights.

He's also fought to reduce air traffic and noise at Teterboro, which many believe is too close for comfort in one of New Jersey's most densely populated areas.

Rothman, however, argued that it's up to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates the airport, to make sure the airport is safe and secure. He believes security should be as strict at Teterboro as it is at Newark.

"These are all steps that the Port Authority should be taking," Rothman said. "The Port Authority should be doing more."

The bi-state agency, which operates Teterboro Airport, argues that charter services follow the law.

But the agency is limited in what it can do, said spokesman Marc Lavorgna. He said the agency is working

with different industry groups in trying to reduce the number of all flights at Teterboro.

"We don't feel like we have any habitual offenders at the airport," Lavorgna said. "Otherwise they wouldn't be operating at the airport."

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