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After Work

By Christopher Palmeri

Over the Maddening Crowds

With commercial service getting more expensive and time-consuming, maybe it's time to start navigating the options for private air travel.

You're fed up with higher fares, declining service, and long security lines. Why not fly private? The business has been on a steady climb in recent years, and the latest round of restrictions on carry-on items and stepped-up security for commercial flights should provide even more lift. As real estate investor and King Air 200 owner Andrew Segal says, when flying private "you don't have to take your shoes off until you get on the plane." And of course, you take aboard all the lotions and potions you like. But sorting out the various plans can be almost as tedious as inching your way toward the metal detector. So here's a brief overview of the options.

AIR TAXIS Startups such as Linear Air and DayJet offer charters on preset routes. (Think of the air taxi as a hybrid that combines features of both charter and scheduled service.) By focusing on a few markets and filling empty seats with other passengers, these companies can offer the cheapest rates. Linear, for example, flies from New Jersey's Teterboro Airport to Martha's Vineyard for \$415 each way.

Bottom line: A good choice for relatively short, infrequent hops.

CHARTERS Traditionally the most common and economical method, charters are available from hundreds of operators, from Web-based brokers (JetTrip.com, OneSky.com) to independent aircraft owners (twcaviation.com). Hiring a seven-passenger jet can start at \$2,000 an hour, but extras such as fuel surcharges, overnight crew accommodations, and catering can add hundreds more to the tab.

If the plane has to fly back empty to its home airport, the cost can double. Quality is not consistent, because many charter providers subcontract flights to other operators. Aviation attorney Ladd Sanger recommends choosing a charter operator that employs its own pilots, trains them frequently, and does repair work at manufacturer-authorized service centers.

Bottom line: Works best for people who fly fewer than 25 hours per year.

JET CARDS For \$100,000 you can get a card for 25 hours of flight time from Sentient Jet (sentient.com). For competitor Marquis Jet (marquisjet.com), the cost is \$116,000 for the same hours. You don't have to negotiate a rate for each flight, and there are no additional charges for empty return trips. Marquis uses aircraft and pilots provided by fractional-ownership company NetJets, giving it access to some 600 planes.

Bottom line: A good choice for folks who will use it 25 to 50 hours per year.

FRACTIONAL OWNERSHIP The granddaddy of the business, NetJets, charges \$406,000 for a one-sixteenth interest in a seven-seat Hawker 400XP, plus \$6,800 a month in maintenance fees and \$1,600 per hour of flight time. Tax write-offs and resale values can help reduce those costs. Manufacturers such as Cessna, Bombardier, and Raytheon offer similar plans.

Bottom line: Should appeal to people who fly 50 or more hours per year and don't want to bother with the maintenance.

OUTRIGHT OWNERSHIP Nothing says you've arrived like owning your own jet. But even an entry-level model, such as the new four-passenger Eclipse 500, costs \$1.5 million to buy, \$12,000 per month to keep, and \$400 an hour to fly. Leasing the plane to charter operators can offset some of the expenses.

Bottom line: This makes sense only for those who fly 100 hours or more per year. But, hey, what price status?

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