

Posh air service taxis into Nashua's airport

By ASHLEY SMITH Staff Writer

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Private jets have a certain, well, champagne and caviar image. They're for corporate high rollers and celebrities, right?

Passengers lounge in plush leather seats, with cucumbers over their eyes, while a personal concierge pours their drinks and serves snacks on . . . actual plates?

Ticket price: \$12,000.

For the rest of us, it's cramped in coach after being questioned about a suspicious 4-ounce shampoo bottle and paying \$6 for a pillow.

Ticket price: \$250.

There's a company not too far away that claims to be bridging the gap between these dichotomies – the expense of private air travel and the headache of commercial.

Linear Air, based in Concord, Mass., is now promoting its "air taxi" service to and from Nashua's Boire Field airport.

"It's a premium experience for a price that's a lot less expensive than other premium experiences," William Herp, Linear chief executive officer, said. The rate is \$1,795 an hour when the plane is occupied, and the jets hold three passengers. Herp said the average flight is around \$5,000 round trip from one Northeast point to another, while typical private jet service is at least double that.

Recently, Linear took three business travelers on a day trip to and from the Boston area to Canada for \$6,500. The travelers' alternative on a commercial flight was \$1,300 per person, plus overnight expenses because a flight back was not available the same day, Herp said.

Linear's jets go pretty much anywhere in the eastern United States. But there's one down side to the longer flights: The plane offers amenities like drinks, snacks, air-conditioning, and seats designed by BMW, but no bathroom.

"No potty," Herp said.

Nashua's airport is one of many in the Northeast where Linear is promoting its services, capitalizing on the public frustration surrounding commercial airlines, which are struggling amid rising fuel prices and fewer travelers.

Air taxis specialize in shorter distances than commercial flights and use smaller aircraft. They're typically available on short notice.

The industry has been celebrated by some in recent years as a viable alternative to commercial flights. However, as the economy has taken a downturn this year, the industry has, too.

However, Herp said Linear has largely avoided that, bringing in record revenues the last two months.

According to Nashua airport director Royce Rankin, it's not unheard of for air taxi flights to go in and out of Nashua. The monthly tower report usually logs around five, he said, but some are as pricey as \$7,800 per hour.

Linear can afford to charge less because it uses fuel-efficient Eclipse jets, certified by the Federal Aviation Administration in 2006.

However, the FAA supervisors came under fire last week for allegedly pressuring subordinates to approve the Eclipse prematurely, according to a New York Times report. The FAA insists the plane is safe and no one was pressured.

Eclipse jets are not designed for cross-country trips, Herp said, because that would require at least one fuel stop. For that kind of trip, a commercial airline is more competitive, he said.

"The range of these jets is not suited for more than 600 to 800 miles," Herp said.



Linear Air, based in Concord, Mass., uses Eclipse jets