

The Interior

The interior of the showroom's luxury jet features polished burl-wood tables and genuine mink fur blankets.



The Broker

Steve Varsano, American, 61, sells private aircraft to big businesses and the world's super-rich.

Park Lane's Private Jet Boutique

Steve Varsano sells private planes in the world's only jet store – and is currently making a fortune. Donald Trump's election has helped him

If you pass by London's most expensive address, on Park Lane, you can't help but rub your eyes in disbelief. In one of the shop windows directly opposite Hyde Park is an airplane. Well, part of it. You can actually enter the fuselage of a real jet and sink deep into a luxury armchair upholstered in cream leather.

This is where Steve Varsano receives his clientele. The 61-year-old has his black-grey hair gelled backwards and his eyes are a stinging blue. He looks like a banker from the eighties movie "Wall Street". He wears a dark Ralph Lauren suit and a watch from the Swiss luxury manufacturer De Grisogono, which can display three different time zones, a present from his girlfriend. Some people only dream of owning their own jet. But for Steve Varsano this dream is a daily reality as customers come to him to buy private aircraft worth millions of dollars. Of American origin, he truly embodies the ultimate broker. For the past 6 years he has been running the only private jet store in the world.

Trump has made private jets great again

Business is buzzing. This is not only due to the good economy, but also to the political environment: Ever since Donald Trump was elected US President, Steve Varsano's phone has been ringing incessantly. He has even decided to move his original boutique to a showroom double the size. "Donald Trump is the mascot for private jets," says the entrepreneur, who somewhat surprisingly grew up in the simplest of circumstances in New Jersey.

During the election campaign Trump showed no shame in flying even to regional airports in his own private Boeing 757. As one of his first official acts, the Republican president decreed that the value of private aircraft, despite their longevity, depreciates fully upon purchase and can thus be deducted from taxes. This has given The Jet Business substantial tailwind. In addition,

Trump's cabinet possesses more private jets than any in US history: Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin owns a Dassault Falcon, the Small Business Commissioner Linda McMahon flies a Bombardier Global, and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos' Family owns a fleet of twelve large private jets.

Varsano had the idea for The Jet Business during the global financial crisis, when the economy almost came to a standstill: "The usual way to sell aircraft, on the phone, I felt, was completely



A Unique Showroom Varsano's Clients get to enter a real private jet fuselage in the middle of London

outdated," he explains. His idea: to exhibit the aircraft in a store, allowing clients to experience them. The risk was enormous – rent on Park Lane costs £750,000 a year.

Although the business climate was anything but friendly, in 2012 he opened his exclusive sales outlet. Demand for private aircraft collapsed after the financial crisis. This was partly due to President Barack Obama who, just after his election in 2008, mocked the bosses of the three US car companies Chrysler, GM, and Ford for Travelling by private jet from Detroit to Washington to request a taxpayer funded aid package. This was disastrous for Varsano's business: "Public opinion ensured that some

people were not buying a jet, even though it made sense for them to do so. People always look at the man at the top and are outraged at how much money he earns. They forget that he is responsible for creating and sustaining thousands of jobs. That is why he gets a jet and they do not."

In a desperate move, Varsano even had T-shirts printed for a trade convention with the words: "Stop apologizing for your success. Buy a jet." Today though, the US economy is booming again, and private jets are becoming increasingly popular. According to a study by JP Morgan, prices have begun rising slightly in response to increased demand. On average, a used jet currently costs around eight million euros.

It's an elite target market

There are 22,000 private planes worldwide, but most of them are small aircraft operated by amateur pilots. Only 7,000 belong to the elite. Most are medium in size, and only offer about as much space as the inside of a Mercedes Viano. Only 200 of the jets are the size of Trump's private aircraft. Half of these are used by heads of state and the other half is owned by companies.

In the course of his career as an aircraft dealer, Varsano has sold about 300 private jets amounting to a total value of about \$4 billion in brokered aircraft deals. The most expensive jets he sells cost between \$70 million and \$90 million, and the cheapest options start at around half a million dollars. For fun, the entrepreneur has kept count of how many billionaires he has received since he opened his store in London: 117. The pool of people who can afford a jet from Varsano is growing steadily: an estimated 230,000 people worldwide have a net worth of \$30 million or more.

Even if a customer comes to the Jet Business unannounced, Varsano is ready to deliver him a maestro's sales pitch. The interested party is held back for a few moments at the reception - ►

until Varsano has found the visitor's current jet in his database and projected its photo onto the jet sized monitor wall in his showroom. The customer is then guided, with the help of an app, towards the perfect aircraft for their needs. How far can the jet fly without being refuelled? How many passengers can fit inside? Algorithms determine the appropriate aircraft and the app displays cross sections and interior layouts of the jets real size on the screen.

Varsano discovered his passion for flying at age 14. A friend's big brother invited him to attend one of his flying lessons. He sat behind as a passenger. So far, he had only flown on a commercial flight between New York and Miami for a big vacation: "What an experience! It's like the difference between a bus and a four-seater Ferrari!" Varsano wiped floors, cleared tables, washed dishes, carried newspapers - whatever a 14-year-old could do to earn the fees for flight school. "I was not given anything,



Speaking within The Jet Business Steve Varsano and FOCUS journalist Nele Husmann

my family had no money. I hitchhiked to my flying lessons." Later, he studied at the Embry-Riddle Flight University to become a pilot. It was observing his classmates here, most of whom came from extremely wealthy families, that made him realise that he wanted to fly in the back of a private jet - not in the

cockpit. After graduating, he worked as a lobbyist for the aerospace industry in Washington. He earned so little that he also had to work overnight a night club. The first person he met that sold aircraft was a guest at this club. Varsano convinced him to hire him and pay him on commission.

It took him eight months to obtain his first aircraft sale. His first customer in 1981 was a Venezuelan who bought a plane for three million dollars - 60 million in today's money. "I flew to the customer on the plane. A boy from the street flying in a jet. Incredible. It's like a drug" recounts Varsano. Till today, however the aircraft broker has avoided getting his own jet, opting for charter when he travels. But now he is thinking of becoming a customer of himself: "Everyone knows that the jet that Varsano buys has got to be the best." ■

NELE HUSMANN

Who's who of private jets: 5 aircraft and their influential owners



Donald Trump
President of the USA

His jet has been nicknamed "Trump Force One", although he prefers to call it "T-Bird." Donald Trump bought his Boeing 757 in 2011 when he was still only a real estate entrepreneur. Asking price: \$100 million. It is capable of carrying 43 passengers in a fully converted, gold-plated Cabin. As President though, Trump now flies mostly on the real Air Force One.



Herbert Diess
Volkswagen Group CEO

Volkswagen has an entire subsidiary to manage its aircraft fleet: Lion Air Services. It possesses seven Falcon 7X and 8X jets made by French manufacturer Dassault. In an effort to make the company look more modest, Diess's predecessor Matthias Müller sold the Group's Airbus A319.



Oliver Bäte
Allianz CEO

Travelling with the company's Dassault Falcon 2000 LX got Allianz boss Oliver Bäte in trouble. In 2016, he flew in it from Munich to Frankfurt to talk about climate change at a Green-Party event. As a result, Bates decided to share the company's next jet, a Falcon 900EX, with firm's departmental heads.

Sergey Brin/Larry Page
President/CEO Alphabet

The two inventors are connected to eight private jets through the holding company Blue City. These include a custom-made Boeing 767 and a fighter jet. The rebuilding of the 767 caused an argument between Brin and Page as they could not agree whether it should be kitted out with hammocks or king-sized beds.



Sven Väth
Artist

For his world tour, German star-DJ Sven Väth travels the globe on a private aircraft. His Learjet 31A from the Canadian manufacturer Bombardier is known for its extravagant livery.