



Will private jets become the new normal in luxury travel?

Clean, luxurious and time-efficient, the 'new normal' in elite travelling is not as expensive as you'd think

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After weeks in isolation many of us are desperate to get away. But it's not just Health Secretary Matt Hancock saying we're unlikely to be travelling abroad this summer that has dampened our spirits, it's also the realisation that commercial airlines face a long slog to get back up and running, and once they're operational, just how safe will they be?

Michael O’Leary, Ryanair’s CEO, says that on his flights you’ll be putting up your hand to go to the loo, and everyone will be masked. If these sound like inadequate measures to you, you are not alone. Large hub airports with planes coming in from all over the world and crowded commercial flights are a coronavirus-transmission nightmare.

There is of course an alternative and it’s one a surprising number of people are going to start considering. Especially when they do the maths and realise that as a means of getting to Europe and back, its not as eye-wateringly expensive as you might think.

“As things open up, anyone who can afford to will fly by private jet because they are much more safe and secure,” says Steve Varsano, Founder and CEO of The Jet Business, which sells corporate aircrafts from a showroom on Hyde Park Corner.



A bedroom on a Lineage 1000 private jet belonging to AirX | CREDIT: Helmut Harringer

They will elect to fly privately because, as Varsano explains: “The idea of social distancing on commercial flights is the most idiotic thing in the world. Even if there's no one next to you, when you recline your seat there's going to be the person in the row behind you two inches from your head breathing on you. And then there's the recirculated air that goes round and round in the plane. And the airports themselves are just as bad.”

To give you an idea of price, AirX, one of Europe's largest private jet operators, says chartering a Citation X, one of the fastest private jets out there, which comfortably

carries 8 passengers, to take you to Malaga, will cost around £30,000 return in high season, regardless of how many passengers there are. So if there's 8 of you, that's £3,750 per person, which is about four times the cost of Business.

According to research carried out by Austrian light jet charter operator GlobeAir, there are 700 touch points for potentially passing on contagion on your average commercial flight, as opposed to about 20 when using private aviation. This is not something lost on risk-averse travellers or the people who cater for them.

AirX is now spending an extra £50,000 a month cleaning its fleet. “We have an extensive new deep cleaning process,” says the company's head of marketing, James Collins. “There’s this disinfectant called Bacoban which is the best product for cleaning aircrafts. So now, rather than a sexy picture selling a private jet, clued up clients just want to know their aircraft is being cleaned with Bacoban.”



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| CREDIT: Helmut Harringer

As some who are now flirting with the idea of a private jet trip point out, this is nothing to do with showing off, or one-upmanship. It’s simply a question of getting to your holiday without getting ill.

“I’d always regarded the use of private jets in Europe as a pointless extravagance for most of us,” says one private-jet ditherer. “Europe is small and its transport networks are pretty efficient: I once raced an American billionaire from Brussels to London – he on his PJ, me on the Eurostar. I was well onto my second cocktail at his Mayfair hotel by the time he arrived.

But Covid-19 changes all that and this summer produces a quandary for travellers such as this: ‘Our annual investment in our summer house is high and gets paid whether or not we travel. All our holidays this year so far have been cancelled – February half-term thanks to Storm Dennis, Easter skiing and May half-term in Italy thanks to the virus. Might we roll all those refunds into a PJ return to our summer house? We just might.’

In the Caribbean, which relies heavily on tourism and where numbers of people infected by the virus have been relatively low, people are definitely thinking outside the box. “We’ve been approached by a few hotels in the Caribbean who are interested in chartering our biggest private jets (A340s) to bring their guests over to them,” says James Collins of AirX.



A King Air B200 available through 2Excel Aviation

"On these aircrafts, seats are in clusters of two and every one is like First Class. They each carry 100 people and are spacious enough to allow everyone to maintain social distancing. And private terminal to private terminal is a massive selling point. All that should work

out at about £5-6,000 per person." This is little more than a First Class return flight to Barbados in July.

Then there's the practical matter of how long it will take commercial airlines to get back on their feet after all this and indeed how many of them will have survived the lockdown at all. "Eighty per cent of airline jets are currently grounded and in storage," says Varsano.

"I estimate that 20% of airlines will go bankrupt so the number of flights is going to be much less and there's going to be limited flexibility around timetables. If a company needs to get people around, it's going to have to use a corporate plane."

Or even if your trip is not strictly business-related but feels essential... As one New York socialite explains: "The money that normally you might spend on what, restaurants? Clothes? Taxis? Now you will spend it flying private for the chance to get to the sun," she muses. "I know a family who holed up in Florida for the pandemic who now want out as it's getting hot. They are looking into flying back to the Hamptons via Net Jets (a US leader in on-demand private jet charters), which is something I don't think they would have considered before."

Smaller turbo-prop planes such as the eight-passenger King Air B200, are also likely to see an uptick in interest. With more efficient fuel burn and the ability to get into smaller, cheaper, more under-the-radar European airports, they can offer better value while still delivering the 'private jet' experience. So they might fly out of Shoreham in Sussex, say, and into Cannes Mandelieu or Sion Airport not far from Zermatt in Switzerland, each of which cost about £16,000 for the round trip, or £2,000 per person. For those in the know who can afford it, these will form part of a 'new normal' way of elite travelling.
