

DEBUT CHARTERS

The pandemic has inspired a new generation of first-time private jet users to shun commercial airlines in favour of more exclusive and Covid-secure journeys by air

BY MARISA CANNON



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The impact of Covid-19 on free movement has been well-documented, with travel blighted by international bans, rigorous quarantine policies and the grounding of commercial flights across the globe. For high-net-worth individuals, private aviation represented not just a preferred mode of travel but a necessity for those stranded abroad, as well as those conscious of preventable contact and touch points.

As a result, many private jet firms have seen tremendous growth and a new set of first-time customers. A spokesperson for LunaJets tells Globetrender: "In May 2021, a third of our flights were booked by new clients. It's usually closer to 10%."

Why are they turning to private jets? Victor founder Clive Jackson says: "High-net-worth individuals, many of whom have considered flying privately before but may have seen it as an extravagance, are now booking because they are concerned that airlines

might cancel their flight at the last minute or, worse still, that they will have to isolate following the flight because another passenger tests positive for Covid. Being able to control their environment, as you can on a chartered aircraft, yacht or villa, has never been more valuable." So far, Victor says it has seen a 46% year-on-year increase in new members for 2021.

Air Partner has also seen interest soar, with a 321% surge in enquiries from UK travellers when travel restrictions lifted during the summer of 2020. "A significant proportion of these enquiries were from first-time leisure clients who recognised the safety, convenience and flexibility of private flying," says Kevin MacNaughton, Air Partner's managing director charter.

Managing director of Sentinel Aviation, Roland Dangerfield, notes that enquiries from new customers jumped 150% after it was announced that international travel

[from the UK] could restart in May.

Other insights come from Rajat Khurana, chief commercial officer at private jet provider XO, who has also seen triple-digit growth, with a 298% year-on-year increase in purchases of the group's flexible deposit memberships in Q1 2021, and younger demographics the driving force. He says: "Millennials now represent 25% of first-time charter purchasers, which bodes well for the future. They appreciate the on-demand access, the seamless experience and the productivity benefits."

Air Partner has observed similar activity among younger users. "This crowd expects customisation and personalisation, which private jet travel can offer," says MacNaughton.

Flexjet, on the other hand, has been observing uplift from formerly sporadic users. "Where we are seeing strong



Netjets

interest is from those who used private jets on an occasional basis, but are now looking for consistent and premium solutions for frequent flying," says the company's European managing director Marine Eugène.

In a move to expand its proposition, Flexjet's parent company Directional Aviation recently acquired helicopter operator Halo to offer customers chopper transfers, and has aligned with sister company PrivateFly to provide additional JetCard and premium charter benefits, such as fixed hourly rates and guaranteed capacity.

As you might expect, innovation is coming thick and fast. For example, air charter broker VistaJet recently launched its "Private World" service, offering members access to private islands, yachts and ski destinations. Meanwhile, Sentinel Aviation now provides 24/7 telemedicine support, which covers clients both while on their aircraft and on the ground during their trip.

What does all this growth mean for the future of private travel? Dominvs Aviation predicts jet charters will grow 20% in the second half of 2021, as premium passengers switch to PJs as a reliable

solution in the face of evolving travel restrictions.

XO's Khurana is seeing a rise in demand from corporates. He says: "At XO, we saw a 39% increase [year-on-year] in business travel in April 2021 because nothing can take the place of face-to-face meetings." Meanwhile, aviation marketplace Flyjets has seen double the number of family bookings in 2021 (compared with 2020). Flyjets founder Jessica Fisher told *The New York Times*: "There is this readiness to 'move' in safe ways among groups, especially for those who are choosing to reunite with extended family."