

THE REAL JET SET

Left: The pandemic has seen a rise in families opting to travel with members of their own 'bubble', limiting exposure to the virus

Although commercial airlines have seen a huge decline in passengers in recent months, private aviation is flourishing more than ever, as *Melissa Moody* discovers

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The end of March marked an unprecedented time for the aviation industry worldwide as aircraft were grounded practically overnight for months on end. And yet that didn't mean people completely stopped travelling. Instead, they turned to private aviation in their droves.

Private jet companies reported astronomical increases in their enquiries as lockdown dragged on. Air Partner reported a rise in enquiries of 321 per cent in June, while PrivateFly registered an increase of 170 per cent for the month of August alone compared to 2019. Orlando-based company Stratos Jets also reported a 50 per cent increase in bookings in June, July and August compared to last year, most of them from clients new to private aviation.

"A little more than half our bookings have come from clients who are first-time private jet travellers," says Stratos Jet Charters' president and CEO Joel Thomas. "It's likely they were close to considering it before and have made the leap because of the pandemic. Covid-19 has definitely turned a lot of would-be private fliers into committed business jet users. We've heard clients say that for them, private aviation is the only way to travel now."



Clockwise from left: Private jet flights allowed many passengers stranded due to lockdown restrictions to return home; private jets allow a greater deal of control over the travel experience; passengers can opt to use smaller, more convenient terminals; corporate clients may, in the future, make the shift to flying privately

travel to ensure their senior executives can avoid commercial services for the foreseeable future.”

Air Partner has seen a similar trend, explaining that prior to the pandemic its client base was a mixture of corporate travellers and High Net Worth individuals (HNWIs) but now, while it has seen a decline in business travel due to a shift to online meetings, it has also observed a noticeable increase in leisure travellers.

Mcnaughton has found that it is families in particular who are wishing to travel with members of their own ‘bubble’, limiting potential exposure to the virus. A number of these are first-time private jet passengers, who would previously have travelled in first or business class on commercial airlines, but are now looking for more end-to-end control over the experience.

In the US, Stratos has seen the biggest rise in bookings from families and those aged 50-plus, according to Thomas. “They just don’t want to take the risk and they see how they can mitigate that risk by getting their group of friends together who, previously, would have booked commercial flights separately. As a group, they can manage the cost of a private flight and reduce their risk of exposure by travelling with people they know.”

Keeping it green

Despite the spread of coronavirus being the main source of conversation over the past few months, sustainability remains a big issue for both airlines and passengers. “The industry is investing significantly in a number of initiatives, including sustainable alternative jet fuels and – in the longer term – electric aircraft,” says Twidell. “The latter has great potential in private aviation, given the majority of our



A growing popularity

So just why exactly are passengers deciding to go private? “People want to avoid any unnecessary exposure to the coronavirus. Compared to commercial flights, private jet flights let you travel from a small regional airport directly to your destination with people who are already in your own bubble,” explains Thomas.

“Crews are constantly being screened and they follow all the additional safety protocols for the aircraft. Airplanes have never been so well cared for and all of that gives people a lot of peace of mind right now.” Even the smaller things have changed, he adds. “Pilots used to shake your hands before the flight, but now they give you a wave and a smile.”

Air Partner’s managing director of charter Kevin Macnaughton says that the upsurge of private aviation users is down to a number of reasons. At the peak of the pandemic, flights were grounded with little notice, sometimes leaving passengers stranded for weeks on end. Those with the means turned to private aviation as a way to get home and realised that it offered a number of benefits, including safety, availability, flexibility and a greater degree of control over the travel experience.

“We’ve integrated a range of new measures in accordance with government and industry guidelines, as well as consultancy with our safety and security division,” points out Macnaughton.

“These include deep-cleaning of all aircraft between uses and our clients are

able to request additional measures to be adhered to for their flights, including availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) like masks and gloves, personal hand sanitisers and individual, sealed-meal service.”

The private aviation industry has cited the ability to bypass busy airports for smaller and more private terminals, decreasing the risk of exposure to a minimum in security and check-in areas, as one of the biggest reasons customers are choosing to fly private.

“In the UK, private passengers can opt to use terminals such as Biggin Hill or Farnborough, with vastly reduced passenger numbers and therefore correspondingly reduced potential infection risks from touch points and surfaces,” points out Macnaughton.

Space for everyone

Now that the pandemic appears to be past its peak and countries are opening their borders again, it’s not just clients looking to come home who are turning to alternative forms of travel.

PrivateFly CEO Adam Twidell says that by being able to step in to provide critical point-to-point travel for clients at a time when commercial flights weren’t an option, it has enticed more users looking to fly privately.

“New clients include families with vulnerable or elderly family members, or people with underlying health conditions. We are also talking to businesses that are considering a switch to private jet

flights use smaller aircraft and operate on relatively short routes.”

Air Partner has found that there has been a growing demand for carbon offsetting from both corporate and individual clients, with other companies echoing that statement and offering solutions to keep up with demand.

Through a partnership with TerraPass, Stratos allows its passengers to purchase a carbon credit. TerraPass will then use those funds to develop greenhouse gas reduction initiatives, including wind energy, clean energy, farm methane digesters and landfill methane flaring.

“The amount in dollars equates to about one per cent of the total quote, but the benefits are significant,” explains Thomas. “Just a few months after we launched the programme in 2007, Stratos clients had already offset more than 35,000 pounds of carbon emissions.”

It has also found that by keeping costs down, clients are unintentionally lowering emissions. First-time fliers during the pandemic often drive to the airport where the plane departs, rather than having the plane come to them.

“With more new private jet fliers travelling in groups of family members and close friends, they’re really filling all the seats on the plane, and that’s great to see because it’s the aviation equivalent of carpooling,” remarks Thomas.

Future thinking

The big question now though is: what next? Macnaughton at Air Partner

Covid-19 has turned would-be private flyers into committed business jet users

predicts that its corporate business will be slower to recover than the leisure side but, as face-to-face meetings become more necessary, so will the demand for flights. It’s thought that HNWIs and corporate clients who have made use of private flights out of necessity during the pandemic may make the shift to flying privately in future.

“Even after a vaccine is found, people will be warier of safety on flights and the risk of further new diseases,” he ruminates. “We think we’ll see a rise in popularity over the next few years. Once the events industry comes back in force, we expect to see an increase in demand as commercial routes may not be back to full capacity and travellers may want an environment that they have more control over.

“A larger number of former first-class and business-class commercial flyers may look at private flights as an option until they are confident of the safety and hygiene standards in commercial aircraft and airports.”

It’s a feeling echoed around the industry. Twidell agrees that PrivateFly expects the ongoing uncertainty around quarantine measures and travel restrictions worldwide to keep the demand high even as travel for conferences, events and other large gatherings is on hold.

Last-minute bookings are also expected to be on the rise as clients become more reluctant to make plans too far ahead.

It is predicted that being able to reduce risk when flying will remain a top priority for passengers, keeping the use of private aviation high and therefore bringing more business and jobs to smaller airports that have been hit hard in recent months.

“Private planes offer the opportunity to reduce risk, but so do the smaller regional airports they’re flying out of, so I think it’s going to have a big impact long term. That increase in use is creating more demand for all the related businesses as well, such as caterers and ground transportation, so it’s having a very positive trickle-down effect,” concludes Thomas.

Although disastrous for many in travel, Covid-19 doesn’t look like it’s going away any time soon. It will be something the corporate world and aspiring holidaymakers will have to work around. If the past few months are any indication, perhaps one of those to benefit will be the private aviation sector. 📍