



# The sky's the

The air charter business is booming, according to leading operators in the sector, and allows artistes personalised schedules that commercial airlines can't facilitate, privacy, quick arrival and departure at airports, security and even colour-filtered M&Ms and a choice of duvets and slippers. Murray Stassen reports

**T**he freedom, efficiency and luxury of private air travel has gone hand in hand with touring artistes in the upper echelons for at least 50 years.

Frank Sinatra was one of the early adopters, and not only sang *Come Fly With Me*, but also used to have himself and members of the Rat Pack flown between Las Vegas and Palm Springs on his own Learjet 23.

A decade later Delta Airlines sold Elvis Presley a Convair 880, which he named the Lisa Marie after his daughter.

The plane, now on display at his Graceland estate in Memphis, was fitted out with a 52-speaker sound system, master bedroom, conference room and gold taps.

By the '80s and '90s, the private air travel market had expanded, but wasn't as vast in terms of the range of aircraft and routes offered, as it is

now, suggests David Macdonald, UK-based director of charter broker Oxygen Aviation, which has offices in London, Madrid and Moscow.

"I've been doing this for 29 years and in the last 15 years, it's really boomed, which is good for customers and good for the business," he says.

A turning point for private air travel was the development of aircraft that could complete longer non-stop journeys.

"Gulfstream introduced the G V, which was a ground-breaking aircraft because it could fly from London to South Africa non-stop, or London to Tokyo," says Macdonald.

A big source of Oxygen's business now comes from the music industry, due to the importance of live music revenue for artistes following a decline in record sales.

"The 2008 financial crisis hit everybody," says

Macdonald. "There was a drop in private charter from big banks, but not the music industry, because tours are so important. And for a lot of tours, hiring an aircraft is often the only way to get it done, so it remains a strong sector."

As performance opportunities in both emerging and established markets have increased around the world, air charter companies have adapted to meet the demand for bespoke flight schedules.

"If you've got to hit a bunch of capital cities in a very short space of time, trying to fit that around scheduled services is very difficult," explains Macdonald.



Nicola Taylor

# limit



Premier Aviation

Partner. The company has offices in France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK and US.

With the rise of electronic dance music's popularity around the world, coupled with the accumulation of wealth of its creators, producers and DJs such as Steve Aoki, David Guetta, Armin van Buuren or Calvin Harris use private jets to get from country to country.

"The dance market was very, very busy this summer," Taylor reports.

One of the busiest hubs for the dance music scene's jet-setting DJs is naturally the Balearic island of Ibiza off the coast of Spanish.

"Ibiza is always a massive hotspot over the summer," says Taylor. "It surprised people this year just how busy it was. There were lots

of issues with airport slots. It seemed to start very early this year and seemed to continue all summer."

David Doughty, charter sales director at Private Jet Charter, which has offices in France, UK, United Arab Emirates and the US, says that the main reason why DJs charter flights to Ibiza is "purely because commercial flight times are rubbish".

"They're all at 4am or 11pm, just really poor hours, apart from one or two scheduled flights. Obviously if you have an artiste that can afford it, they won't want to wait around until 4am at an airport," he says.

### Time machines

The limitations of scheduled flight times offered by commercial airlines is a key deciding factor for artistes that choose to fly private instead of business class.

Adrian Whitmarsh, director of UK-based broker Premier Aviation, says that chartering saves so much time that the higher costs involved make it worthwhile.

"It's time machines that we are selling," says Whitmarsh. "You are able to cover more

territory in a given space of time.

"You can keep artistes away from the big airline terminals and you don't have to check in two or more hours before every flight. You also choose the times of day that you travel and you don't have to get up really early in the morning to catch a cost-effective flight."

Premier Aviation has worked with artistes ranging from the Back Street Boys and The ▶



**"There is always a solution"**

**David Macdonald**

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Private Fly - Citation XLS

Black Eyed Peas, to the Rolling Stones and AC/DC over the years.

Although the company's music clients are usually globally renowned stars with sizeable tour budgets, Whitmarsh explains that it can be financially viable to charter a private aircraft for an artiste earlier on in their career than you might think.

"You don't have to be taking a large, luxurious corporate jet," he says. "There are very cost-effective, smaller business aircraft for doing that sort of travel."

Oxygen Aviation's Macdonald agrees that private air travel doesn't necessarily have to be reserved for the likes of the Stones and artistes at different levels of their careers often approach his company for travel solutions.

However, there are the legacy acts that will always fly in private jets. "For them, it's a no-brainer," he says.

"Artistes often come to us thinking something won't be possible, because they live in a world where they are governed by scheduled airlines, but there is always a solution. We are often the problem solvers. Yes, it costs money, but if it solves their problem, they're happy. That's where the charter comes in."

Carol Cork, director of marketing at Private Fly, an online booking platform for private jet flights, says that to charter an overnight round trip between London and Budapest in Hungary for nine passengers can

cost £14,500 (\$18,021) on a Citation XLS, compared to the business class average of £12,150 [\$15,100] for the same trip.

Private Fly operates 13 booking platforms tailored to different regional markets and its flight sales team is comprised of multi-

lingual aviation experts who operate on a 24/7 basis.

"On occasions, private flights can be surprisingly cost-efficient," explains Cork. "Especially for a larger group travelling together as you pay per aircraft, not per seat. Plus, a private jet saves time of around four hours on an average European return flight."



Carol Cork



Dan Hurley

## Down time

US and Canada-focused tour company Egotrips counts Eric Clapton, Neil Diamond, the Beach Boys and The Moody Blues as clients who have chartered planes from the company.

Egotrips owner Jim Bodenhiemer says that he's witnessed a shift in recent years where artistes touring in North America are actually ditching planes for buses.

"Many tours that previously used airplane charters have shifted to tour buses," he says. "Instead of using an airplane charter for the entire tour, they are using occasional charters to avoid the long bus drives. Also, the record companies previously provided financial support for major tours, which would sometimes allow for more airplane charters."

However, all of the charter brokers representatives interviewed for this feature agree that, in addition to saving time, security and privacy are two of the primary reasons why their music clients charter private air transport.

"We've seen alarming security threats in the last year or so. We did get a call from a client caught up in a hotel in the midst of one incident who wanted to get out of the city immediately," remembers Premier's Whitmarsh.

"We had a jet on standby ready to go within two hours," he adds. "For clients travelling

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### Private lives

Dan Hurley, chief operating officer at Shy Aviation, which has offices in Canada, Spain, UK, United Arab Emirates and the US, as well as representatives in El Salvador, France and Mexico, reiterates the value of the privacy associated with using a private aircraft.

"Artistes don't have to worry about any unwanted intrusion," he says. "They can discuss anything and rest up in preparation for their event – we can even provide the exact duvet type and slippers a client would like."

Included in this high level of customer service offered by charter companies are ground transfers and branding deals.

"We can help with exterior vinyl wraps to brand the aircraft in line with the tour, as well as bespoke interior design," says Private Fly's Cork. "This is particularly effective for longer, world tours where teams will be travelling with media and guests."

Private Jet Charter's Doughty adds that the cost of branding depends on the size of the aircraft. "The Rolling Stones put decals on the side of a Boeing 737 and that probably costs somewhere around £25,000 [\$31,000]," he estimates.

Additionally, artistes with specific food, drink or even crew preferences are also catered for

to the highest standards. "We used to have a passenger who would order the finest wines and then ask the crew to pick up fish and chips on the way to the airport," relates Air Partner's Taylor.

"We were also asked once to make sure that the cabin crew on a certain tour weren't too pretty, because obviously these guys were out on the road for some time and occasionally the wives and girlfriends would join them at certain points, and might otherwise get a bit jealous."



**"It's time machines that we are selling"**

**Adrian Whitmarsh**

### Special touches

Matthew Purton, commercial jets director at Air Charter Service Group, a brokerage that employs 350 people across 20 offices on six continents, says he has had requests ranging from removing blue M&Ms and stocking specific water brands, to playing whale music.

"It's not just divas though, rock bands and DJs like to have the small touches accommodated as well," he adds.

Air Charter Service counts a range of high-profile artistes amongst its clients, from top DJs, to solo artistes and rock bands. "If we added all the Grammys, MOBOs, Kerrang! and Brit awards from artistes we have flown, we would need a room full of trophy cabinets," says Purton.

"One artiste didn't like the dress that she had brought with her on her charter flight in the morning, so rather than go shopping in the small Scandinavian city she was in, she hired a small, four-seat private jet to fly out two other dresses complete with shoes and accessories to wear instead," he adds.

The nature of private air charter for the music business means that charter brokers are often faced with the challenge of putting incredibly complex and often last-minute travel arrangements in place.

"I flew a male solo artiste who was on at 2pm at a festival near Vienna [Austria] and flew to headline an evening slot at a festival near Valencia [Spain] the same day," recalls Purton. "It was only possible by charter. It needs military precision planning."

Air Partner's Nicola Taylor chartered an aircraft for a rock band and one of the members was taken ill. "We had to organise a ▶



Matthew Purton

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helicopter to fly in a replacement to a festival," she says. "It was quite a tight schedule, but we got the guy there, had the car waiting at the helicopter, whisked him away to the festival and he stepped on stage pretty near bang on time."

Premier Aviation was tasked with the travel arrangements for a tribute concert for Luciano Pavarotti in the ancient city of Petra in Jordan. "It was one that he never got to sing at but apparently always wanted to," says Whitmarsh.

A Boeing 757 airliner was chartered for a round trip from London as well as multiple business jets to fly in guest artistes from around Europe and the Middle East.

"Coordinating with the Jordanian travel logistics company and Aqaba airport in the south of the country required a reconnaissance visit to plan the arrival and departure procedures of so many VIP visitors for such a small, regional airport," says Whitmarsh.

While charter companies can provide almost any aircraft depending on the needs of an artiste – and budget – from a light, four-person jet like a Cessna 510 Mustang to a Boeing 737, an aircraft that has become a popular choice for touring bands is an Embraer Legacy 600, which is a 12 to 13-seat jet with a large luggage capacity.

"The Legacy is generally what a lot of tours are operated on," explains Air Partner's Taylor. "Passengers have a nice-sized cabin. They're not sitting on top of each other and they also don't have to worry about what they're taking with them because they can get a lot on that aircraft."

Although private air travel can work out significantly more expensive than business class on a commercial flight, with the benefits of added privacy, security and efficiency, it is no surprise why it has become so appealing for artistes at different levels of their careers.

"Private aviation is always going to be a bit more expensive than getting on a scheduled service, because of the nature of what it is," says Oxygen Aviation's Macdonald.

"It's the difference between getting on a bus and hailing a cab. A taxi is never going to be cheaper than a bus because of sheer economics. But you've got that vehicle for you. We're the aviation equivalent." ■

## Mission possible



Lux Aviation UK - Embraer Legacy

Lux Aviation UK operates a fleet of Embraer Legacy 600s, one of the most popular aircraft with touring artistes.

"They are most suited to flying from one festival to the next, comfortably reaching all of Europe and much of the Middle East non-stop," says Lux Aviation UK CEO Patrick Margetson-Rushmore.

The Luxembourg-based Lux Aviation group, which has its own fleet of 250 aircraft and 1,500 employees worldwide, has provided *Audience* with this budget for an imaginary eight-day European tour using a Legacy 600.



Patrick Margetson-Rushmore

| Day       | Departing | Arriving  | Hours |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Friday    | London    | Paris     | 1.05  |
| Saturday  | Paris     | Madrid    | 1.55  |
| Sunday    | Madrid    | Nice      | 1.45  |
| Monday    | Nice      | Venice    | 1.10  |
| Tuesday   | Venice    | Berlin    | 1.35  |
| Wednesday | Berlin    | Amsterdam | 1.30  |
| Thursday  | Amsterdam | Dublin    | 1.40  |
| Friday    | Dublin    | London    | 1.10  |

The cost for 13 passengers would be around £66,190.00 (\$82,550) or £5,091 (\$6,350) per person, which equates to around £636 (\$789) per person, per flight.

While the cost might seem high, this schedule would not be possible by any other means and other benefits include the ease of boarding and disembarking at airports.

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