

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

## Private flights and record heights: jet activity reaches historic rates

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Rapid growth brings welcome evolution and novel challenges to the private aviation industry. Image credit: VistaJet

By AMIRAH KEATON

Private travel is now more accessible and, in some cases, less expensive than ever before.

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Recent data reflects that more people are now flying privately, as globalization and economic growth, a pandemic-induced travel boom following eased restrictions and even digital "flexing" and the impacts of influencer culture continue to fuel growth. Higher travel rates are bringing greater implications to interested individuals and booming businesses, in addition to the planet.

"Covid fear, greater wealth due to real estate and investment gains, and the desire to travel more conveniently, with reliability, privacy and security have created high demand well above pre-Covid in 2022," said Milton Pedraza, CEO of [Luxury Institute](#), New York.

"Today it is under greater stress, with record demand and unprecedented shortages in parts, crews, and pilots while living with high fuel prices. The private aviation industry is choking on its growth."

### Private travel peaks

Greater wealth and eased travel restrictions are among the primary factors driving current jet travel demand.

From January through December 2021, business aviation insights company [WingX Advance](#) reported 3.3 million private flights, the highest of any previous year, up 7 percent from 2019.

Growth reached new heights in December 2021, with a 23 percent influx in private travel versus the same period two years ago, according to the data research and consulting firm. This was likely due to affluent populations seeking increased protection from infection as the virus peaked, aligning with insights that holiday plans tend to spike travel rates among this group ([see story](#)).

Who is responsible for private aviation's surge? Surveys and flight data reflect that the 1 percent has consistently courted jet travel.



*WingX Advance offers a number of advanced business aviation tracking tools. Image credit: WingX Advance*

Today, high net worth-ers continue to take to the skies solo, citing reliability, convenience, comfort and security as reasons behind their choice. Private flyers contain a segment that had been well-acclimated to this style of travel prior to the pandemic, but also includes those newly-introduced, who felt compelled to jump ship from the commercial sector after fiscal shortages and staff cuts irreparably cut into their experiences.

According to a 2021 survey from online platform [Private Jet Card Comparisons](#) which engaged 145 private jet travelers split between clients who started flying privately before and during the pandemic, 41 percent of new private aviation clients reported plans to continue flying privately "regularly" after the pandemic. Furthermore, about four in 10 respondents who were flying privately before the pandemic expect to increase their usage once the pandemic ends ([see story](#)).

"Many HNWs, during the height of Covid, got more used to private jet travel, or began to fly private despite the costs, and have stayed with it for reliability, convenience, comfort and security," Mr. Pedraza said. "It is hard to go back to the hassle of airports and delayed or canceled flights after flying private."

"The sorry state of commercial travel, with high levels of canceled and delayed flights, crowded airports and lost luggage, are a huge deterrent to commercial travel for HNWs," he said.

So far this year, over 20 percent of flights have been delayed, up from 11.44 percent in 2021. Even as demand rises, airlines are slashing the number of flights, according to flight charter and travel newcomer [Flewber](#).

With issues ongoing, demand for convenience has trickled down, sparking interest among those with relatively fewer means who also want to skip the lines and lost luggage.

Thus, first-time buyers are taking up a more sizeable portion of those investing in luxury aircraft. According to private jet broker The Private Jet Company, twice as many first-time buyers were in the market for private jets by the 2020 year-end, versus the former year.

"High-net-worth individuals with multiple homes continue to contact us because they're no longer willing to fly in first class on commercial carriers due to Covid concerns and the deep cuts in the frequency of commercial service," said Daniel Jennings, CEO of [The Private Jet Company](#), in a statement.

"They want to know how can I make buying a jet work?" he said.

Mr. Jennings' advice for interested buyers wondering how to afford the hefty price tags light jets capable of accommodating four to eight passengers begin in the \$2 million dollar range, while the cost of a heavy jet with space for nine to 16 passengers goes for upwards of \$100 million dollars includes chartering planes to external parties to pay for upkeep, though, on the flip side, even those looking to charter planes are having trouble tracking down options, per new reports from [Bloomberg](#).

Burgeoning demographics aside, private aviation use has also been fuelled by larger players in sectors like high-end hospitality. Mainstays like the Four Seasons offer jet flights central to their luxury experiences, with the company publishing its 2024 itinerary recently ([see story](#)).

Last year, luxury hotel Viceroy L'Ermitage Beverly Hills teamed up with travel transportation agency Private Jet Services to offer "The Red Carpet Private Flight Package", which provided a private flight to Los Angeles and a stay at the hotel's Presidential Suite ([see story](#)).



*Four Seasons Private Jet Experience journeys in 2024 announced, with more to come. Image courtesy of Four Seasons*

Luxury retail is also no stranger to promoting these perks.

In 2020, private aviation firm [Jet Linx](#) became the official private aviation partner for the 2020 Neiman Marcus Fantasy Gifts in its iconic Christmas Book, providing services for Neiman Marcus Fantasy Gifts including a trip to New York for an Assouline-curated custom travel library and a holistic, yearlong wellness journey with Canyon Ranch. For each travel experience, customers and their guests flew roundtrip on a luxury, large-cabin aircraft such as a Gulfstream IV or Challenger 604 ([see story](#)).

At what cost?

Armed with a demographic breakdown paired with insights behind why those propelling private aviation's surge forward are doing so, the rate of industry growth begs questions of sustainability, both economically and ecologically.

Despite the construction of the first private aircraft over half a century ago, exclusive air travel has only recently reached a level of mass appeal and as use climbs, so too do its associated costs. The luxury tide seems to be turning, as private players struggle to scale alongside demand.

"Due to high demand, some providers are unable to deliver on the promise and prices are skyrocketing," Mr. Pedraza said.

"Clients are not happy. Inherently, according to one trusted insider with whom I exchanged notes recently, private aviation is an industry that is already living on razor-thin margins," he said.

Environmental concerns are also yielding greater scrutiny towards this mode of travel amongst public figures meeting heightened travel demands by jet-setting about, often worldwide. Taylor Swift and Kylie Jenner rank among celebrities who've recently been called out for excessive resource use, and for good reason.

Though just 1 percent of the global population are private jet users, this group is responsible for 50 percent of global aviation emissions, according to a study from European clean transport campaign group [Transport & Environment](#). Transport & Environment also found that private jets are 5 to 14 times more polluting than commercial planes per passenger, and 50 times more polluting than trains.

A mix of industry pressures and public demands is exposing the industry's shortcomings and potentially harmful long-term effects. On the bright side, this has created the perfect opportunity to explore cheaper alternatives that are better for the planet.

One new area of potential exploration? Semi-private flights.

Private aviation firm [Wheels Up](#) restarted its popular shuttle service this year, offering round-trip flights to Nantucket with individual seats available through the company's member app or group seating available through the firm's website ([see story](#)). In 2021, it became the first private aviation firm to begin trading on the New York Stock Exchange, continuing its accelerated growth ([see story](#)).

The aforementioned Flewbar is taking on the challenge of revolutionizing aviation by making private flights available to the masses, offering seats at rates often for less than a first-class ticket. Luxury music experiences are even trying to get in early in 2018, JetSuiteX offered festival goers an affordable semi-private jet experience between Burbank and Coachella Valley on a 30-seater E-135 plane ([see story](#)).

All in all, the normalization of private aviation deserves greater examination, especially while demand reaches new

highs. Recent efficiency losses and shortages could ultimately lead to frustrations that mirror commercial travel, but at way greater costs to the environment.

"The industry is inherently complex given short-notice deliveries, volatile weather, dead legs, regulations, unions, multiple jet variants, maintenance and other challenging factors that make it very difficult to deliver great service in the best of times, and, especially now when demand highly exceeds supply."

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