

THE MIDDLE SEAT

How to Hire a Private Jet to Beat Winter Weather Delays

Charter Flights Can Offer Escape for Stranded Passengers Willing to Pay High Prices



Email



Print



Save



11 Comments



A

A

Jan. 29, 2014 7:04 p.m. ET



For those few willing to pay, private jets can be a smart way to escape commercial airlines and canceled flights this winter. Scott McCartney has advice on how to shop, check safety records and what to watch out for when getting price quotes. Photo: JetSuite.

Like thousands of other travelers, Debbie Grazioso found herself stranded by bad weather, stuck in a line of 70 people on Jan. 6 in Florida and told by [JetBlue Airways](#) (JBLU -2.75%) that she'd have to wait four days for a seat to New York. That meant missing a birthday party for her 25-year-old twin daughters.

Sometimes emergency situations require emergency measures. Ms. Grazioso and her husband, Glen Vittor, paid \$9,000 to hitch a ride with another family on a seven-passenger Cessna Citation Excel, landing only hours after their scheduled trip. "It was well worth it. You can never get a birthday back," she said.



Photo illustration by Mick Coulas; photos: Getty Images and Alamy (inset)

Time after time, storm after storm, travelers have been left in the lurch this winter. Long after the weather clears, the impact on airlines and their passengers persists. So far this January, U.S. airlines have canceled more than 36,000 flights—more than after superstorm Sandy in 2012 and three times as many as the last two Januarys. That's roughly three million inconvenienced passengers. With most flights booked full, it can take three, four or even five days to get rebooked.

Hailing an Air Taxi

Chartering a private jet is more complicated than buying an airline ticket.

- **CHECK FOR SAFETY RATINGS.** You want an operator with top-level certification from both Wyvern and Argus International.
- **ASK A FRIEND.** Someone you know with a jet card can speed the process up.
- **UNDERSTAND THE PRICING.** Is it fixed or dependent on the trip duration? If one-way, is there a charge for flying the plane empty to its next stop? Airport fees? Catering fee?
- **ASK ABOUT SHARING.** Some brokers will ask clients with available empty seats if they'd be willing to take on extra people to share costs.
- **BUDDY UP.** See a group of well-to-do people stuck in the same airport line? Chartering as a group spreads the high cost out.

Alternatives are limited—driving or taking a train may take days; other airlines are all booked up. For those few willing to pay the very high price, private jets can provide a smart escape.

Terry Cooper, president of Charter Matrix, an online directory and marketplace that lists flights with empty seats and arranges charters, said that during the holiday storms, his requests doubled. "There's a lot of freedom to corporate jets, but you pay for that freedom," he said.

How much? A small jet with four to six seats can cost \$3,000 per hour, brokers say, putting a 2½-hour flight from Florida to New York at around \$7,500. Airport fees and charges to reposition aircraft can raise that considerably. Larger jets run \$8,000 or more per hour.

Magellan Jets, a Quincy, Mass., firm that handles regular customers who buy hours in bulk and one-time on-demand charters, says a midsize Hawker 400XP with seating for up to eight costs about \$12,000 for a trip from West Palm Beach, Fla., to Teterboro, N.J., for its members, and \$17,000 for a nonmember on a one-time, one-way charter.

Private jets have lots of advantages over airlines for getting in the air before and after storms. There are thousands of small airports available to them. While big airports often have more equipment to keep runways open, schedules can often get discombobulated by a lack of gates, a lack of security screeners, baggage handlers or gate agents, or simply the need to thin out airline schedules engineered for perfect flying conditions. That rarely impacts secondary airports, allowing private jets to fly when many commercial flights are grounded.



And there's the bonus of not having to stand in line for Transportation Security Administration clearance, either.

For three couples eager to get home, sharing a plane and paying \$4,000 or \$5,000 each may be more attractive than being stuck in a hotel away from family or work for most of a week.

Ms. Grazioso was grounded when JetBlue had a shortage of pilots after longer rest periods were required starting Jan. 1. She tried to find a way to fly to Dallas and then connect to New Jersey, or drive to Jacksonville, Fla., and get a flight home from there. No luck.



The interior of a Magellan Jets Legacy 600. Bad January weather has led Magellan to fly extra flights.
Magellan Jets

They looked into Amtrak—maybe flying to Washington, D.C., and catching a train from there. But there were no airline seats to Washington available. She had the American Express platinum members' desk working on it, and her own travel agent, who she says usually works miracles. "There was nothing. We checked every airline," she said.

So she began looking into private jets. One charter company quoted her a price of \$22,000—too much, she decided. Her husband called Magellan and an agent said a client—three people and three dogs—were flying from West Palm Beach to White Plains, N.Y., with some empty seats. The client told Magellan they didn't mind sharing and a match was made.

"We had mutual friends, it turned out," Ms. Grazioso said. A rented car was waiting plane-side in White Plains and the drive home to New Jersey took about 90 minutes.

Magellan said it flew about 30 to 40 extra flights on Jan. 5 and 6 with people stranded by the ice storm, and had more people waiting. "It got to the point we were linking clients up with each other," said Anthony Tivnan, Magellan's president. In situations like that, the company charters to one client for one price and lets the passengers decide how to split the cost.

The high season for private jets runs from Thanksgiving through the end of March. No week is as busy as Super Bowl week. This year thousands of small-jet flights will descend on airports around the New York region, booking special takeoff and landing slots with the Federal Aviation Administration because traffic is so heavy. When the game ends, engines start turning with a race to escape quickly and avoid delays.

For the Super Bowl, Magellan said a Denver-to-Teterboro flight on a private aircraft starts at about \$25,000 round-trip and Seattle-to-Teterboro starts at around \$35,000 round-trip.

After slow years through the recession, private-jet firms say business is booming. "The economy is better and airline service is worse," said Bradley Stewart, chief executive officer of XOJet, a Brisbane, Calif.-based private aviation firm.

Charter firms have gotten more aggressive about posting "empty legs" available to travelers at deep discounts. Private jet charter firm JetSuite, based in Irvine, Calif., lists its empty leg flights on Facebook, for example, sometimes with prices as low as \$500 or \$1,000 for the whole airplane. A four-seat Embraer Phenom 100 regularly costs \$3,400 an hour for members and \$3,900 for nonmembers, JetSuite said.

While empty-leg pricing can be eye-catching, finding a trip where and when you want to go can be rare. You can set an alert on Charter Matrix and get an email when any flights that come close to a particular route open up.

With any charter, two safety measures are prudent: Make sure your operator has strong safety ratings from both Wyvern and Argus International Inc., two private aviation safety agencies. Argus includes background checks on pilots as well as rating operating companies; Wyvern runs checks on aircraft as well as crew training and experience.

With the New Year's storm, JetSuite flew customers out of the Caribbean into Texas and Florida, then on to New York once conditions improved, Chief Executive Alex Wilcox said.

XOJet positioned planes just outside the areas expected to be hard-hit by polar vortex storms over the holidays, parking them in places like Greensboro, N.C. They were easily able to pick up passengers in Florida and get them to New York as soon as weather conditions improved.

XOJet will provide a standby jet for good customers, Mr. Stewart said. The customers have airline tickets, but if flights get canceled and they have to be in Davos or at a board meeting, a plane and crew are waiting. "If they make their airline connection, great. If not, we swing into action," he said.

Write to Scott McCartney at middleseat@wsj.com

Print Circulation: 1,566,027

Online U MVs: 1,275,057