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LUXURY AIR TRAVEL

There was a time when simply travelling by air was an exclusive experience, but with commercial airlines converted into glorified bus shuttles in the air, those with the means and the need to travel swiftly, efficiently and in comfort are looking to other options.

By Michel Cruz



In the early days flying was a privilege few could afford, and therefore a world of glamour accompanied by good service and even sleeper flights complete with comfy fold-up berths as found on trains of the era. The jet era, however, also brought larger aeroplanes, and as cheaper seats in 'economy class' became the norm, the erstwhile gentleman experience was now restricted to 'first class'. Business class was later introduced for the convenience of executive commuters, but now it is the very concept of first class on commercial airlines that is under threat.

Indeed, for this segment of the market these are 'do or die' times. Having ceded the initiative in the mass market to specialist cheap airlines like Easyjet and Ryanair, national carriers such as British Airways, Lufthansa and Air France need the business and luxury clientele to prosper. However, Emirates and Qatar Airways seem to have the edge when it comes to offering in-flight and in-transit opulence, luxury and service. Perhaps an even bigger threat to the major airlines' desire to develop this market further is the fact that more and more luxury air travel is moving towards private jets.



Airborne opulence

What's more, with flexible private charters and even regular routes becoming increasingly common, private jet flight is now more accessible and really taking off. Apart from the obvious convenience, luxury and service involved, there is the networking and status appeal to travelling in this way. And while well-heeled business and private flyers are beginning to get in on the act the super-wealthy have been enjoying this form of super-deluxe transport for some time now. Even they, however, are taking in-flight luxury to a new level, effectively converting the erstwhile private jet into flying palaces.

The latest trends include not just luxurious lounges similar to the home cinemas found in grand villas, but also exquisite vodka bars, opulent private bedrooms complete with large step-in showers or baths and sophisticated mile-high offices with all the latest gadgetry. While these luxuries are certainly practical too, features such as Jacuzzis, on-board casinos, heated bathroom floors, banqueting kitchens, discos, chill-out zones and extravagant dining rooms are 21st century follies. Naturally, the range of options increases with space, so a small

Learjet is more limited in terms of features, if not necessarily the opulence of its design, than a large airliner originally designed for 300 or more passengers.

Russian billionaire, Roman Abramovich, has a Boeing 767 that is nothing short of an apartment in the air, complete with dining room, boardroom, bedroom suites with luxury bathrooms and a large lounge. The Boeing 757 of Donald Trump would set you back almost \$100 million, but for that you would get space and features to rival that of Saudi princes and Russian tycoons. For this booming mode of bespoke transport, the sky certainly is the limit.