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China and HK wealthy flee coronavirus in west by private jet

Territory's airport near capacity for chartered aircraft as outbreak grips Europe and US

Thomas Hale - Hong Kong international airport reported its busiest day for private jet activity on record this week as wealthy residents of the territory and Chinese citizens rush back to the city before authorities imposed strict quarantine measures on new arrivals.

The airport was close to its maximum capacity of 30 private jets on Wednesday and The Hong Kong Business Aviation Centre added that landings and take-offs had reached their highest level.

The flurry of chartered flights into the territory came as the virus's centre of gravity shifted towards the west, where infection rates have spiralled and governments this week launched multitrillion-dollar measures to combat the economic fallout.

In January, private jet flights out of Hong Kong to the US and Australia trebled as the virus spread rapidly in China's Hubei province.

"Back at Chinese new year, we saw people trying to leave China . . . and now we're seeing the reversal," said a director at a broker for chartered jets. "The phone's been ringing off the hook".

The Hong Kong government this week unveiled quarantine measures for all overseas arrivals, which came into force on Thursday. That led to a surge of residents trying to return to the territory from the US and Europe.

"Most of the commercial flights are full or cancelled . . . they can't get flights at all," said Sarah Keates, a spokesperson for the Hong Kong Business Aviation Centre. She added that many owners of private jets had moved their aircraft overseas at the start of the crisis but were now bringing them back to park in Hong Kong.

This week, Cathay Pacific reinstated flights from London and Manchester to the city to "bring Hong Kong students and citizens home". Universities in the US and the UK, where many students from Asia study, have closed as part of a range of measures to stem the spread of the virus.

Brokers for private jets said that demand also came from families in mainland China, where they said many foreign operators were unwilling to enter.

"Hong Kong is kind of being used as a point where they can come in and . . . we can then get a Chinese operator to fly into the mainland," said a director at a private jet charter company. "There's a bottleneck."

Eymeric Segard, the founder of LunaJets, a private jet broker based in Switzerland, said his company had recently sent clients to Hong Kong but that many foreign operators were "too scared" to enter the mainland.

He said there were fears that regulators would not allow planes that had flown to China to subsequently enter other destinations. "An owner will say I'm willing to charter my plane out but I don't want to be stuck 14 days."

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