

Date : 11 March 2020
Media : CNN.com

Private Jets are Taking Off Because of Coronavirus

So your flight's canceled, but you need to get home or to that important business meeting ASAP. Perhaps you're just nervous about transiting through a busy airport with other passengers.

Most of us are handling coronavirus-related disruption by staying put, but for those in a travel predicament with dollars to burn, there's an increasingly popular alternative: private jets.

While much of the travel industry has been suffering as the infection spreads globally, the private jet industry has apparently been on a roll.

Alain Leboursier, director of sales at Swiss private jet broker LunaJets, tells CNN Travel that there's been an *"impressive increase"* in bookings and enquiries from passengers in recent weeks, correlating with heightened concerns surrounding COVID-19.

In February, about 15% of overall requests were related to coronavirus, Leboursier says. That's now doubled to 30%.

"We got around 200 requests [on Sunday] Out of the 200 requests, 60 requests were coming from 'Coronavirus regions,'" adds Leboursier. "Either people want to escape, or [there is] urgent business that needs to be done today or tomorrow."

Clients include companies that normally book employees in biz class seats and high net worth individuals concerned about the spread of the virus.

Leboursier says LunaJets flew out a passenger over the weekend who usually divides her time between Rome and London. When Northern Italy announced unprecedented restrictions on Sunday, she chartered a flight to London right away. The following day, the lockdown was extended to cover the whole country.

New Customers

Those travelers turning towards the private jet market do so for a range of reasons, with one common denominator: they're all able to spend thousands of dollars on the trip.

Operators say they're now servicing customers who would usually take business or first-class options.

A lot of requests are coming from people who normally would not fly private. An older woman was traveling from the east coast of the US to the west coast and discarded her commercial flight ticket in favor of a private jet.

People basically are happy to pay a premium using private jet services versus commercial aviation to decrease the risk of contracting the virus.

LunaJets, meanwhile, assisted a European passenger who canceled all his commercial tickets for the month of March, and decided to fly private instead. The Swiss company also operated several emergency flights out of Italy when the lockdown on the country's northern regions was announced Sunday.

"We're working on a flight for a company working on moving its 50 top employees from northern Italy back to London where they also have an office," says Leboursier.

A cleaner aircraft ?

Private jet users seek solace in the fact that the aircraft's exactly that -- private. There's no battling for arm rests or ending up in close proximity to others. Plus, these flights operate out of small, private aviation terminals, not mass transport hubs.

Fears aside, medical experts assure CNN Travel that passengers are unlikely to catch coronavirus on board a commercial airplane.

"Even if there is virus in the inanimate environment, it's not going to jump off the seat and bite you in the ankle," Dr. William Schaffner, a professor of medicine in Vanderbilt University's division of infectious diseases, told CNN Travel last week, reiterating that hand washing is the best prevention.

"You've got to touch it, and then touch your nose or your mouth,"

Still, for travelers concerned about hygiene -- the idea that private jet companies likely spend longer cleaning their aircraft is comforting.

Private jet companies also say that, like their commercial counterparts, they've stepped up the sanitization process.

While private jet companies might be more willing to fly in and out of lockdown zones, the aircraft still operate within the same framework, rules and regulations as commercial airplanes.

Flying into a lockdown zone involves a safety assessment and submitting a flight plan to airport authorities, who will send it to health authorities, who pass on a list of requirements.

Air crew are given a full briefing on the route they're flying, the level of risk and the government stance on the destination.

Leboursier says LunaJets ensures crew maintain good health by adopting a "no overnights" policy in lockdown regions and ensuring crew stay on board throughout their time on the ground.

Long term impact

While private jet companies might be reaping the benefits of an unexpected boom, we can't help but have a "weird feeling" about getting more business because of a global health crisis.

"In the long term, to be honest we are petrified -- because as the leader in Europe, if the market goes down, then we will be the most affected," says Leboursier.