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Book a private jet seat, Priceline style The Boston Globe

OneSky can cut flight cost in half

By Peter J. Howe, Globe Staff | April 17, 2006

BEDFORD -- Private aviation, once an option only for the rich and famous, now has a company that's the equivalent of Priceline.com, the "name your price" online flight-booking service.

OneSky Network serves as the Web link between passengers and companies that operate more than 1,500 private jets. And starting this morning, OneSky will be the focus of a big new promotional campaign at -- where else? -- Priceline.com.

The company, which has been ramping up operations and now has about 200 regular customers who fly out of Hanscom Field and other private airports, lets business and vacation travelers shop for prices up to 50 percent off market rates for seats on private flights that would otherwise be operating empty.

In what it calls an "ultimate upgrade" sweepstakes, Priceline will award five people who book regular commercial airline tickets or hotel rooms through the website between now and May 8 free travel, worth up to \$30,000, on private planes flown by OneSky affiliates.

"Obviously, the average consumer would never go out and lease or rent a private jet," Brett Keller, Priceline's chief marketing officer, said last week. "We wanted to come up with something that was big, splashy, compelling, and fun."

Just as Priceline.com has offered a way for airlines and hotels to increase revenues by selling, at heavily discounted rates, airplane seats and hotel rooms that would otherwise go unused, OneSky, based in Manchester, N.H., does the same for private jet operators.

OneSky founders Greg Johnson, a former Federal Express executive, and Henry Laughlin, a general-aviation industry veteran, scrutinized three years' worth of private jet operating records from the Federal Aviation Administration. They found that 40 percent of the time, pilots are operating empty planes, either to return to a home base or to move the plane to its next assigned departure city.

Fancy jets costing up to \$20 million operate just 75 minutes a day, on average.

"The economic incentive to take an asset that costs \$20 million and has a flight crew and use it is very, very high," said Trey Urbahn, OneSky's board chairman who, not coincidentally, was a founding officer of Priceline.com.

"If the plane is going somewhere anyway, the opportunity to turn that flight into revenue is pretty attractive," Urbahn said. "It makes a huge difference in the underlying economics of the airplane."

Marcia Lee, a sales executive with Segrave Aviation Inc. in Kinston, N.C., one of many operators that sell seats via OneSky, said, "We make money by moving our planes. Obviously, when they choose us, we appreciate the business."

Early customers rave about private-plane service for prices that often are only a few hundred dollars more per person than flying first-class to a destination -- without security check-in hassles, lost bags, and missed connections in jammed-up hubs. For a family or group booking a plane, flights can cost as little as \$1,000 to \$1,500 per person.

Dan Decker, who owns a company near Denver but stresses that "I am not a gazillionaire," has used OneSky three times in recent months to fly with his wife and daughter to family vacations in Laguna Beach, Calif.

"It's not a whole lot more than going first class," Decker said. "We can drive to a little airport that's just five minutes from our house and go. Otherwise, if you fly anyplace commercial today, it's an all-day affair."

Tony Compto, chief pilot for J. I. Kislak Inc., a Miami Lakes, Fla., real estate investment firm that owns and operates its own private jet, said the company has begun using OneSky to handle flights on days when the company jet is booked or grounded. "They have startlingly lower prices and better equipment" than many other private plane services, Compto said.

Today, not counting people who own and fly their own planes for business, about 60,000 Americans are estimated to regularly use private jet services such as NetJets, Flight Options, and Marquis Jets. Customers can buy a direct share in a plane or buy flight time in 25-hour increments.

Another business model is Sentient Jet of Weymouth, through which customers who put up an initial \$100,000 deposit can then book flights at will, paying by the hour.

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OneSky customers pay nothing up front except the cost of the flight. "A lot of the players in the industry have positioned it as a lifestyle choice: 'If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it,'" Urbahn said. But probably 1.5 million Americans -- those who have annual incomes over \$250,000 or net assets of over \$1 million -- can afford to consider booking private flights through OneSky, he said.

For those who can schedule on days when private-plane seats are going begging, OneSky can offer once-a-year splurges like a \$1,000-a-person golf foursome round-trip to Hilton Head, S.C., or Sea Island, Ga., Urbahn said. "That's the market we're trying to go after."

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