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From FORTUNE: The Good Life

Private jets for non-gazillionaires

For those already flying first class, it's easier than ever to upgrade.

By **Barney Gimbel**, FORTUNE writer-reporter
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NEW YORK (FORTUNE) - There's a saying in the private jet business: If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it. But it's possible to charter your own jet without spending a fortune.

First it's helpful to know how the industry works. Some companies push fractional ownership of jets, others want you to shell out \$100,000 to buy a debit card redeemable for flight hours, and many just act as middlemen between you and the thousands of charter operators nationwide.

There's no Expedia, Travelocity or Orbitz to help you sift through the options.

"Historically it's been a rather ugly business," says Adam Webster, the co-founder of rsvpair.com, an air charter directory. "People generally don't hunt for the best prices because it's a status thing."

But charter brokers are starting to go after non-gazillionaires -- albeit those who would typically fly first-class.



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Typically, prices for private jet charters of more than a few days can cost double the time you're actually in the air because the plane won't wait for your return flight. That results in pilots flying empty or "deadheading" 40 percent of the time.

A company called OneSky Jet Network (www.onesky.com) is helping more travelers take advantage of those empty planes -- sometimes saving customers up to 50 percent between top markets. A small jet from Los Angeles to Aspen in May, for example, will cost about \$8,000 each way through most charter brokers, but OneSky says it can offer the same plane for \$5,900. If your days are flexible, the price could drop to \$3,600.

"The more you're willing to play chicken with them, the more money you can save," says Chris Carille, a real estate developer from Portland Ore. "I've been chartering planes for years and I've tried everything from fractional jets to those card programs to regular old charter operators. But the OneSky folks are really saving me money."

One caveat: The services don't typically work for same day flights or off-the-beaten-path locales. But for flexible fliers, traveling via private jet is a big upgrade from first class.

Here's where some of the biggest player in the rent-a-jet world can (and can't) take you.

NetJets

What it does: Sells fractional ownership shares starting at \$406,250 for 1/16th interest in a small jet.

Pluses: Ideal for those who fly at least 50 hours per year often with short notice or during peak demand periods. The planes are first rate; the service impeccable and you get the consistency of the same plane every time. (It also seems to provide social cachet.)

Minuses: Really expensive. Not only are you buying a piece of a plane, but you're also paying monthly upkeep on top of the time you're in the air. Plus it's not easy to get a bigger plane should your needs change. (They've also had to increasingly use outside charter operators when they run out of planes.)

Marquis Jet

What it does: Marquis sells chunks of time in NetJets planes in 25-hour increments. Price starts at \$115,900.

Pluses: NetJets is considered to have one of the best fleets in the industry. Planes can be on site within four hours.

Minuses: One of the most expensive ways to fly. The hourly rate is set regardless of the destination or time of year that you're traveling. (And even though they say that you only pay for the hours you're in the air, the rate often figures in the cost of returning the plane home.)

Sentient Jet

What it does: Sells membership cards starting at \$100,000 to fly on approved charter operators. It works like

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a debit card.

Pluses: You're just charged for the time in the air and you can choose the size plane that best suits your immediate needs. There are no maintenance fees or positioning costs and, unlike fractional jet cards, there is no time limit for using the funds in a membership account. Unused funds on deposit are fully refundable at any time.

Minuses: Expensive. The fixed hourly rate tends to be close to double that of regular charter operators regardless of the destination or time of year that you're traveling. (Again, the rate often figures in the cost of returning the plane home.)

Blue Star Jets

What it does: Acts as a middleman between you and its approved charter operators.

Pluses: "Any Jet. Any time. Any place." With full 24-hour concierge service, they can arrange for limos, rental cars or everything else you might need on and off the plane. They can get the size plane you request to you within four hours. They also tend to have some of the better prices in the business and will help you look for discounted "deadhead" flights per your request. (They even have a frequent flyer program with rewards that can be everything from the highest end leather goods and diamond jewelry to plasma televisions.)

Minuses: Prices can vary widely and you may be stuck with the cost of keeping the plane with you or flying it back to its base.

OneSky Network

What it does: Acts as a middleman between you and its approved charter operators.

Pluses: Tends to offer the lowest prices on popular routes thanks to its system of predicting where empty-leg flights can be picked up.

Minuses: Few cost savings if your schedule isn't flexible and you're not flying between big markets.

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