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A Surge in Flights-by-the-Hour

By [JOE SHARKEY](#)
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Many travelers stranded last week had alternatives, jets their companies own outright, or jets in which they have purchased fractional shares. But last week's disruptions gave a sharp boost to a smaller but fast-growing segment of the private jet market — a niche for customers who purchase time cards that allow them to fly a certain model of jet by the hour.

The surge in demand for flights-by-the-hour surprised some of the companies that operate these planes. They cater primarily to people who fly most of the time on commercial airlines but use the private-jet cards for special occasions, including emergencies.

Most jet cards are sold in hourly increments — providing from 10 to 100 hours of on-demand flying in a specific type of plane. Other plans require a payment that works like a bank account, and is drawn down as passengers book flights in various models of jets.

“There was a large uptick,” said Paul A. Svensen Jr., the chief operating officer of JetNetwork, which sells cards in increments of \$100,000, \$250,000 and \$500,000 and books planes all over the world.

Delta AirElite, a subsidiary of [Delta Air Lines](#) that sells jet cards in hourly increments and also offers charter flights, said that there was “a dramatic upsurge” in calls and bookings for both charters and jet-card flights on Thursday and Friday.

Mike Green, chief executive of Delta AirElite, said the sharpest jump was in requests for private charter flights out of Europe. Many people are also using, and asking about, its 10-hour jet card, which sells for \$41,900.

“We first saw that last year during the hurricane, and it really spiked again this time,” he said.

Jet cards often sell in hourly rates ranging from around \$4,000 for five-seat light jets to \$9,800 an hour for 10-seat heavier jets, which can fly across the Atlantic nonstop.

A spokesman for Sentient Jet said that during the four days from last Thursday through Sunday, revenue was 150 percent higher than the comparable four-day period last August, normally a slow travel period. Over the last 12 months, Sentient had a 60 percent growth in membership.

Charter private jet companies — which arrange flights on a pay-as-you-go basis — also reported heavy demand late last week and into the weekend.

“The flood of nonstop calls from across the country continued all day Friday at almost the same level as Thursday — a 300 percent increase in booking requests,” said Justin Sullivan, the vice president for sales at OneSky Jet Network.

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Some of the calls on Thursday and Friday, he said, were directly from people at airports “staring at a four-hour security line.”

Regular jet-card customers said they were only too happy to plunk the cards down for flights in recent days.

Observing the air travel commotion late last week toward the end of a family holiday near Inverness, Scotland, Rudy Ruggles booked two private jet flights for a son, a daughter-in-law and two grandchildren who had originally planned to fly on a commercial airline from Scotland to London and then back home on Sunday.

Using flight time he had already reserved with a \$100,000 down payment to Sentient Jet, he booked the four on a jet to Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and from there on a Gulfstream jet home to the Boston area.

Another jet-card user, David Edelstein, a New York real estate developer, had to leave Westhampton, N.Y., on Sunday for an important meeting yesterday in Las Vegas, where his company is renovating a luxury shopping mall. Mr. Edelstein has a jet-card membership with JetNetwork.

The original plan was for Mr. Edelstein and three colleagues to leave for Las Vegas by private jet from a small airport near Westhampton on Sunday, and to have meetings in Las Vegas yesterday with other principals in the project, including three executives who planned to fly commercially Sunday from New York to Las Vegas.

With no slack in scheduling and airports still severely disrupted, Mr. Edelstein changed those flight plans on Friday, booking a larger jet — a 10-passenger Challenger 601 — to pick up himself and the three colleagues in Westhampton, and then hop over to Teterboro Airport, a busy general aviation airport in North Jersey, to pick up the three others who had planned to fly commercial.

“That way, we could get all seven people together, and we could have a working session on the way out, while scheduling meetings efficiently for Sunday night and Monday, and fly home Tuesday,” Mr. Edelstein said. “The economics of the private jet worked because it eliminated the potential for some people crucial to the project actually not making it if they flew commercial.”

Like most fliers using fractional ownership or jet cards, Mr. Edelstein uses a combination of commercial and private aviation, “depending on the need for expediency and how many people are going.”

Nobody argues that private jets — which have access to thousands of smaller noncommercial airports — come close to competing with commercial airlines on fares, of course. On Sentient Jet’s top line of aircraft, one-way hourly rates range from \$4,050 for five-seat light jets to \$9,800 an hour on 10-seat luxury jets, which can fly about 3,700 miles nonstop.

But sometimes, time really is money, said Steven M. Hankin, the chief executive of Sentient.

Last Thursday morning, Mr. Hankin was an hour away from leaving for the Orlando, Fla., airport for a commercial flight back to New York when he heard about the London threat and saw delays and cancellations piling up.

“I needed to get back,” he explained. So he changed plans fast and booked a flight on one of his company’s jets, avoiding Orlando’s chaotic commercial terminal altogether.

Security on private jets is the responsibility of the owner or the private airline terminal. There are no [Transportation Security Administration](#) checkpoints to navigate.

Why in the world then would the top executive of a private-jet company even

contemplate flying commercial, as Mr. Hankin had last week?

“It’s expensive to fly privately,” he said.

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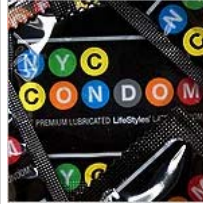
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