

Weekly Edition

Charter jet services climbing to new heights

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RONKONKOMA – Remember when flying was hassle-free, with swift security checks, negligible airport arrival times and lines that were ... well, lines have always been a source of contention for travelers.

To avoid them and other irritants of commercial flying (such as crowds, cancelled flights and lost luggage), a number of travelers are habitually taking an altogether different route to meetings and vacations – they're booking charter jets.

“One of the great benefits of flying privately is you determine when you go and the exact airport you want to fly to,” said David Rimmer, senior vice president of ExcelAire, a private jet charter and aircraft management firm based at Long Island MacArthur Airport in Ronkonkoma and Republic Airport in Farmingdale.

Founded in 1985 as Eastway Aircraft Services by licensed pilot and mechanic Bob Sherry, the company expanded from aircraft maintenance services to business jet and helicopter charters. Sherry has since become the firm's chief executive.

ExcelAire, which travels all over the world, today employs more than 100 people, including 45 full-time pilots and flight attendants. The company expects to add at least seven more jets to its fleet in the next 12 months.

Manufacturers report that sales of business jets are on the rise, a reflection of the industry as a whole, which is growing between 12 and 15 percent a year, according to Fred Gevalt, publisher of Air Charter Guide, a 20-year-old industry source. Demand for charter flights increased significantly after Sept. 11, he said, when a number of airlines filed for bankruptcy, others curtailed their flight schedules and rigorous security checks were put in place. Time-pressed passengers turned to charter companies where, “you control all the aspects of your travel,” according to Rimmer.

That control comes at a hefty price, one that admittedly “is not going to be financially accessible to the majority of people,” said Rimmer, which is why half of his clients are VIP executives and half are well-heeled leisure travelers.

On-demand charter flights are typically priced by the hour. Rimmer said costs can range from \$2,500 an hour for a seven-passenger Lear55 to \$7,500 an hour for a 13-seat Gulfstream V, which includes on-board DVD and CD players, satellite communications, power ports for

laptops, gourmet meals, beds and a shower. The company recently added an ultra long-range Bombardier Global Express to its operating fleet of 18 (two of which they own, the rest managed). The luxury jet can fly non-stop from New York to Tokyo in 14 hours of ultimate comfort, with entertainment and communications systems, oversized seats and a split cabin for privacy.

The excessive fees might fare comparably to commercial flights when other factors are considered. For example, “If I wanted to have a meeting tomorrow in Pittsburgh and I’m in Boston, I might discover a round trip fare would be in the neighborhood of \$1,600,” Gevalt said.

Throw in two executives, an overnight hotel stay and a great deal of wasted time commuting to and from commercial airports, and it adds up.

Instead, for around \$4,000, a call to a charter operation could render a flight departing at the time of your choosing from a field close to your home. A car would be waiting at the landing field, Gevalt continued, and the flight back would serve as a private meeting space. Best of all, the entire business trip can be accomplished in a matter of hours.

“It’s a very addictive experience,” Rimmer noted.