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Rent-a-jet set

On-the-go execs like Pat Croce enjoy using a plane without the cost of owning one.

By Howard Shapiro

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When Pat Croce was ready for a vacation in Key West, Fla., several weeks ago, he and his wife, Diane, their son and daughter-in-law and brand-new grandson, Mac, jumped on a private jet at Philadelphia International Airport.

They were heading down to join a daughter and son-in-law for 10 days, so they packed a lot of stuff - especially with an infant on board. "On a commercial jet, that would be tough," Croce says.

Croce wasn't using his own jet, or even a piece of his own jet. Like many on-the-go execs these days, the motivational guru, movie producer, museum owner, author, physical therapist, fitness master, and former 76ers president was using a card - a card that essentially gives him an airplane when he needs one.

For travelers who want to fly upper-tier but don't want the expense of ownership, buying a card that permits exclusive use of a plane on an hourly basis is an alternative. Croce was using a Marquis Jet card - issued by the company that established its jet card program in 2001. Marquis Jet opened an office in the Queen Village neighborhood south of Center City in 2007, and the region has more than 100 customers.

Beginning at \$132,900 and topping out at \$359,900, Marquis Jet customers buy flight time on one of 10 levels of private jet service, depending on the plane. They own 25 hours of time in a sleek airplane, for whenever they want an hour here or there. They can trade up to larger or faster jets and can fly with only 10 hours' notice.

Standard onboard catering offers fruits, cheeses, crackers and the like, but for an extra cost, passengers can order onboard food in advance - anything from McDonald's to premium steak. Tipping is discretionary.

About 70 percent of the Marquis Jet hours used at Philadelphia International Airport are for personal travel, with the rest going to business trips, says Seth Zlotkin, the company's vice president for the Philadelphia area. "But we're seeing a bigger uptick in the business side, because a lot of businesses are getting out of owning whole aircraft."

Marquis Jet customers typically use the card for travel in the United States, but they can travel anywhere. All the flights are provided by Marquis Jet's partner, NetJets, which owns a private fleet that covers the globe. At Philadelphia International, the NetJets service primarily uses Atlantic Aviation's airport facilities.

Croce travels to Key West to visit his daughter and son-in-law, his Pirate Soul Museum, and his pirate-themed Rum Barrel bar and restaurant ("the southernmost portion of Philadelphia," he calls it, where customers celebrate the Eagles, the Mummers, and just about anything Philadelphian). Croce also uses Marquis Jet for other business, and takes commercial flights when the timing is right.

For example, after a recent speech in Fort Lauderdale, he boarded a commercial flight to Los Angeles, where he's coproducing a film for Paramount about Blackbeard - pirates are a passion - then flew Marquis Jet to Las Vegas, where he addressed 3,500 people. The time frame was tight, Croce had work to do during the Los Angeles-Las Vegas flight, and he didn't want to worry about security lines and delays.

"If you have the wherewithal to do it, and you need to save time, you can use it in a variety of ways," he says. "If I have the time, it's commercial, but when I have to go to an out-of-the-way meeting and it's going to take me a full day to catch different flights, that's what Marquis Jet is for."

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