

The rich are different than the rest of us when it comes to flying.

They don't stand in long security lines. They don't worry about flight delays. They never eat lousy food in the air. And they buy their hassle-free jet travel in 25-hour increments, starting at about the same price as a small starter home.

That concept, and the booming market for private and business aviation, has in just a few years created a \$700 million business for Marquis Jet, a company that sells travel aboard private luxury jets without the hassle — or expense — of jet ownership.

"No matter how you cut it, it's still going to be more expensive than commercial," said Ken Austin, executive vice president of the 6-year-old company. "The economics are not what people look at. It's the value of your time and your quality of life."

The New York-based company is one of the 1,000 or so vendors in Atlanta this week for the 8,000-member National Business Aviation Association's 60th annual meeting. The event, which concludes today, attracts 30,000 attendees, takes up a million square feet of exhibit space at the Georgia World Congress Center and pumps about \$50 million into the local economy. About 100 airplanes are also on display at Fulton County Airport, better known locally as Charlie Brown.

The convention attracts companies that sell aircraft as well as insurers, avionics manufacturers, fixed base operators, maintenance companies and a growing list of upstarts like Marquis Jet that sell time aboard fancy airplanes to celebrities, well-heeled individuals and mid-cap businessmen in a hurry.

Marquis Jet, which partners with Warren Buffett's company NetJets, sells pre-paid cards with 25 hours of flight time aboard jets ranging from a 7-seat Citation V Ultra —cost: \$119,900 — to the ultra-posh 14-seat Gulfstream 400 (that'll set you back about \$339,900). NetJets is also at the NBAA convention.

NetJets pioneered the concept of selling fractional ownership in its 600-plus fleet of private jets. Marquis Jet, however, gives people access to those planes at a much lower entry fee and has opened the doors to jet travel to mid-level businesses as well as the millionaire next door.

There are about 200 Marquis Jet cardholders in the metro Atlanta area, Austin said, and about 3,500 nationwide.

"Atlanta is a good market for us because of the companies you have there as well as the wealthy individuals," he said. "New York, Atlanta, Chicago, L.A., San Francisco, Florida and Texas. We have six or seven key markets."

Nick Trigony, 67, of Sandy Springs is a retired broadcasting executive who is on his fourth Marquis Jet card — he last bought 25 hours aboard a Citation Excel for a base cost of \$169,900. There are add-ons for things like insurance and fuel price adjustments.

"It's much more expensive than commercial, but it's worth it for me," Trigony said.

"It takes all hassle out of travel. We're lucky enough that we have the money to be able to afford it."

He's used his hours to fly his daughter and her two children to visit him and his wife, Rosemary, at their Naples, Fla., vacation home and for golf outings with friends. He recently used a few hours for his 50th high school reunion on Long Island. On the return leg of that flight he was upgraded to a Gulfstream 400.

"This is a luxury," said Trigony, who often takes friends along for the ride. "A lot of people in my position wouldn't do this. But some people die and leave all their money to taxes. We're going to enjoy ourselves."

Trigony said he burns through his hours in about a year, which enhances his family's lifestyle without the hassle of airplane ownership.

"Two things I would never want is a boat or a plane," he said. "If you have your own plane you have to have insurance and a pilot. I don't want to get involved with any of that."

Austin said about 25 percent of the company's business comes from corporate users and another 75 percent from individuals. Many of those, Austin said, are entrepreneurs, and the remainder are wealthy individuals, with a smattering of celebrities and big-name athletes thrown in.

Matt Damon, LeBron James and Eva Longoria are among the celebs who have used the service.

"We have hundreds of athletes and entertainers, but they're a small percentage of our overall business, maybe 6 or 7 percent," Austin said. "It gets the most attention because people read about it in People Magazine. But that's not the core of our business."

Austin said Marquis Jet has been able to grow at about 40 percent a year, despite the fact that "dozens of companies" are now selling space on private jet aircraft.

"You have companies that have three airplanes that have their own jet card now," he said. "They're popping up every day now."

Austin, however, said he believes Marquis Jet's business model and its access to the NetJets fleet will ensure its continued success. It doesn't hurt, he said, that commercial aviation has become increasingly hassle-prone in the last few years, recording record flight delays.

A week or so back, Austin flew commercially and had a nearly three-hour flight delay.

"That made me smile," he said. "I knew with Marquis Jet that wouldn't have happened."