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## Business class: Jet revolution opens up market

By Roger Bray

A small revolution is brewing in the world of business jet travel. Lower prices are set to make the convenience of on-demand flights and avoiding congested airports a more realistic proposition for small to medium-size companies.

But amid continuing concern about the carbon impact of aviation, will increasing use of such aircraft prompt accusations of a selfish disregard for the environment?

The revolution has been sparked by the advent of the VLJ (Very Light Jet), whose relatively low purchase price and operating costs promise to make private flying possible within the budgets of a much wider spectrum of business travellers. One early operator, the Florida-based air taxi company DayJet, is offering fares starting only slightly higher than those charged by US airlines for flexible economy tickets.

Joe Leader, president of the US Air Taxi Association, says: "VLJs are a great step forward. They put within the reach of more people the ability to fly point-to-point and get closer to their end destinations. Typically they sell for about 50 per cent less than traditional light business jets and operating costs are at least 30 per cent lower."

Most VLJs are designed to carry four to six passengers – though at least one, the Grob SPn – described by its German manufacturer as the "new class of aircraft combining the versatility and robust short field performance of a turboprop with the comfort, elegance and superior cruise speed of a genius luxury jet" – has space for up to nine.

With a range of nearly 1,300 miles (1,125 nautical miles), the Eclipse 500 twinjet, for example, can fly trips such as London to Warsaw, Oslo to Milan, and Madrid to Moscow. Grob and New Mexico-based Eclipse Aviation are just two of at least 15 manufacturers that are producing or developing VLJs. Others include Brazil's Embraer, whose twin-engine Phenom 100 made its maiden flight in July, and Cessna, which already claims over 350 orders for its Citation Mustang, around one third of them from European buyers. The Colorado-based Aviation Technology Group is developing the two-seater Javelin executive jet, which it describes as "a civilian aircraft with the power and performance of a military fighter plane".

DayJet has placed firm orders for 239 Eclipse 500s, with options on 70 more. Deliveries, which have already started, are being spread over two years. It began operating on routes within Florida but is expected to spread its wings to other states in the south east US and eventually to Europe. To reach some destinations in its home state by airline, passengers must fly via Atlanta, a spokesperson says. This persuades many to drive long distances. "We will be giving middle managers the option of getting to their destinations and back in a day rather than making what could be a three-day trip."

The company's charging system is intriguing. "You will only pay for the seat you book even if the other seats are empty. The wider your windows for departure, the more the price will drop. Fares will range broadly from \$1-\$4 per mile. For example, if you are willing to leave any time between 6am and 9.30am to get there by 11am, you will get the cheapest deal. But if you can only leave at 9.30am then the price will be towards the upper end. This will help us make the most efficient use of our aircraft. In any event, customers will be notified the previous evening what time to come to the airport. And you can play about on our website with different time and price combinations."

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Answering fears that large numbers of such jets could worsen congestion in the air the spokesperson says: "We will never fly into hub airports and we will fly at different altitudes from the airlines."

Dublin-based JetBird, which plans to operate Embraer Phenom 100s from bases at Stansted and in Germany starting in April 2009, says the price for each of four passengers will not be significantly higher than that of flying short haul business class. It has ordered 50 of the aircraft and has options to acquire the same number again.

London Executive Aviation has ordered seven Cessna Citation Mustangs and hopes to manage three on behalf of other owners. Patrick Margetson-Rushmore, chief executive, says the price of chartering the aircraft for a day trip from the south east of England to Frankfurt, for example, will be around £4,300, compared with £5,500 using a Citation 2, its current "entry level" jet.

"The Mustang is opening up a new category of customers, probably middle management, and the reason for that is the lower cost of buying and running the aircraft."

Business jet travel is already under fire from environmentalists, who see it as a self-indulgent contributor to climate change. But while VLJs may encourage more private flying, Mr Margetson-Rushmore argues that they may help existing business jet users become greener. "Earlier entry-level jets can seat seven to eight people but quite often there are only three to four flying. Now those people will be able to fly in a smaller aircraft and their trips will be more environmentally friendly."

The ATT's Mr Leader also defends the VLJ's environmental performance: "They are incredibly efficient and quiet aircraft and use less fuel per passenger than a typical SUV [sports utility vehicle]."

### **A more choppy way to fly**

Nobody could claim that going by helicopter is the greenest way to travel on business. But nor could anybody deny it is the most convenient. Road traffic delays and security problems at airports are two factors driving senior executives towards private aviation. And while helicopters are significantly slower than jets, their operators are among those reaping the benefits.

"If you have two or three places to visit in a day it is sometimes the only way you can do it," says Howard Mersey, chief pilot of UK charter operator Aeromega, which has bases at Stapleford, Essex, and Cambridge. "We have seen a big increase in business over the past couple of years, though it may not be as strong as in the fixed-wing market."

"We hear constant complaints about the time it now takes to get anywhere," says Robin Taylor-Hunt, commercial manager of PremiAir, another charter company, which also runs London's Battersea Heliport. "By flying point-to-point we can save people two to three hours. Our business is up 10 per cent compared with last year and I would say it was about the same the year before that."

"Our corporate customers are predominantly private. There's a different perception in the US where big companies all use private aviation. Their shareholders would probably complain if they didn't."

Roughly, the maximum range of a twin-engined helicopter from London is a short way beyond Paris. A one-way flight to the French capital in an AS535 Twin Squirrel, for example, would start at around £3,000. A typical charge to fly approximately the same distance from Manhattan to Boston would be \$6,200, or about £3,100.

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Mr Taylor-Hunt believes it would be “foolish to argue that travelling by helicopter is more environmentally friendly than going by car – though you do often have to sit for hours in traffic when you drive.”

The prime consideration for his company’s clients is the efficient use of highly valued time, he says. But like a growing number of operators in the aviation sector, PremiAir is currently considering the introduction of a carbon offsetting scheme.