HOW TO FLY ON A PRIVATE JET FOR $109

News / Business aviation

Public charter operator JetSuiteX wants to deliver a private jet–style experience for the cost of a commercial flight.

Affordable private jet travel? It's the way of the future, if California-based JetSuite has anything to say about it. The private jet company has carved out a niche as a “value” operator, and today takes its business plan one step further by launching an upscale but regularly scheduled service dubbed JetSuiteX, with fares starting at $109 one-way.

Tickets go on sale this week on jetsuitex.com (and its app), with weekday flights beginning April 19 between L.A.'s Burbank Airport and Contra Costa Country airport near San Francisco. Weekend service from San Francisco to Las Vegas will start April 22, and the carrier plans to add a number of new gateways in the coming year. At all airports, the company will use terminals normally reserved for private air travel, which, it says, means freedom from crowded terminals and long TSA lines (although customers will still be subject to security screening). Aircraft will feature business class–style seating, with 36-inch seat pitch, plus free Wi-Fi and streaming of inflight entertainment to fliers’ personal devices.

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Travelers will also earn points that they can redeem on JetBlue through a partnership between the two carriers—no surprise, given that JetSuite CEO Alex Wilcox was one of JetBlue's earliest employees. He says his aim with JetSuiteX, which is technically a public charter operator, is to meld the benefits of private flying with the economies of larger planes. “It’s a private jet–style experience for the price of an airline seat,” he says. Unlike the smaller jets he uses for charters—four-seat Phenoms and six-seat CJ3s—the company is acquiring a dedicated fleet of Embraer E135 regional jets, configured to hold 30 seats, versus 37 in a standard layout. It expects to receive delivery of ten jets over the next year, he says.

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The timing is right, he says: “Gas is cheap. Airlines are making money and stock prices are high.” And his experience with JetSuite has given him a close-up look at the potential demand for shorter flights—especially when the stresses of commercial flying are removed. “We looked at some short-haul markets in California where people fly a lot, and we found that while nationwide, traffic is up, there are fewer people flying those (smaller) markets every year,” he says, attributing the drop to “higher costs and less convenience” brought on by industry consolidation.

Operating jet charters has also revealed the potential of some markets that mainstream airlines have overlooked, he says. For example, on June 30, JetSuiteX will add nonstop service between San Jose and Bozeman, Montana, a route that makes perfect sense for his target audience, Wilcox says. “We’ve been flying to Bozeman for members of the Yellowstone Club for quite a while,” he says.

His hope is to exploit the potential of smaller airports that cater primarily to general aviation or

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commuter operations. “My favorite airports are the airports where a 737 can’t land,” he quipped. His short list for new cities includes Santa Barbara, San Diego, and Phoenix.

He added that JetSuite itself won’t be affected by the addition of this new division—in fact, they’ll work together, since the E135s will be available for charter for around $8,000 an hour for the whole plane (or $300 per person).

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