



FROM BOOKING TO BOARDING: THE HIDDEN CRAFT OF VIP CHARTER PREPARATION

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Most VIP charter flights are arranged well ahead of time, and experienced operators prefer it that way. But last-minute bookings – sometimes with as little as 2-3 hours before departure – are far from uncommon. In recent years, the VIP market has shifted toward more advanced planning, which allows for thoughtful, methodical preparation. Even so, the ability to mobilise at short notice remains a core operational requirement.

The difference lies entirely in how the preparation is managed. With 72 hours or more to work with, charter experts can address each element of the upcoming flight without rush and in sequence. When prep time is less than a third of that, however, a fundamentally different approach becomes indispensable. In charter operations, the absence of a predictable routine for the dispatch team is not the exception – it is the norm.

Vytautas Trojanas, Head of flight Dispatch at KlasJet commented: “When time is short, we quickly reassess priorities and rally our resources – emotions are set aside, because decisions must be made fast and time is one of our most valuable assets. The standard that passengers encounter

the moment they board, however, remains exactly the same. You may begin the day focusing on a flight departing within hours and, by midday, be coordinating a complex itinerary to East Asia scheduled for the following month. The rhythm shifts naturally between relatively laid-back preparation and rapid execution – often within the same hour.”

When a new flight request comes in, the first priority is schedule alignment. Clients typically have preferred departure and arrival times, but airport restrictions and regulatory requirements often necessitate adjustments. Once the schedule is confirmed, the dispatch team initiates permit applications, secures airport slots, coordinates ground handling, and oversees all operational arrangements. One of the most critical elements at this stage is the passenger manifest: international regulations require detailed passenger information to be submitted to authorities in both departure and arrival countries, making accuracy non-negotiable.

Understanding needs and preferences

In a last-minute scenario, one of the most critical early steps has little to do with the aircraft – before commencing preparation, the cabin crew needs a detailed picture of who will be on board and what they might need. Dietary preferences, allergies, cultural accommodations, specific food restrictions, and the subtler aspects of personal service expectations – all of these must be established from the very beginning. Interestingly, when it comes to VIP charter flights, catering requirements are second only to safety.

The operational preparation – sourcing caterers (usually trusted partners), setting up the cabin, and implementing specific preferences – only starts once the cabin crew has gained a comprehensive understanding of client expectations, and runs in parallel. VIP charter preparation is never the work of a single team. It is a coordinated effort across multiple functions, each responsible for its own domain, but all moving toward the same outcome.

Loreta Krupenkinienė, Head of Cabin Crew at KlasJet said: “First of all, it’s essential to learn as much as we can about our guests and their requirements. The responsibilities of the cabin crew are very clearly defined, even though the entire process happens in close collaboration with other teams. The cabin crew’s primary focus runs from the first point of contact to disembarkation: preparing the cabin, receiving and inspecting the food, service delivery, fulfilling individual requests, and shaping the overall atmosphere on board. But they are in constant communication with other teams on anything that directly affects the passenger experience – particularly around catering details, schedule changes, or specific requests.”

Above the cabin crew level, a central operations function ensures that all teams are moving in the same direction and exchanging information on time. Much of this coordination extends to third parties – airports, ground handling providers, and aviation authorities across multiple jurisdictions. “Coordinating a VIP flight is not unlike conducting an orchestra,” says Vytautas Trojanas. “Every participant must perform their role flawlessly, but it is the harmony of the entire group that creates excellence.” Maintaining that harmony requires persistent, proactive communication and consistent follow-through with partners who cannot be directly controlled by the charterer.

Quality without compromise

One of the more obscure challenges in VIP charter is maintaining consistent food and drink quality across different cities, countries, and suppliers. For instance, how does one select a reliable provider outside of familiar hubs where established relationships are lacking or non-existent?

The answer, Ms. Krupenkinienė explains, is due diligence carried out before the flight rather than

after problems have already become palpable. Catering is always inspected on receipt – both the quality of the products and how they are presented. Advance coordination is standard practice: requesting photographs, clarifying details, and in some cases even physically visiting the supplier to verify the order. “The most important thing is to ensure that what is served to the client meets the highest possible standards,” she says.

In case of last-minute changes – e.g., a revised passenger count or altered preferences – the cabin crew’s task is to adapt creatively using what’s available and finding alternatives or rethinking presentation.

What passengers never see

Cabin crew typically board an aircraft two to four hours before departure, with arrival time determined by crew rest regulations. By the time the first passenger steps on board, a significant amount of work has already been completed: safety and security checks of the cabin, receipt and inspection of meals and desserts, preparation of the service environment, and the precise arrangement of all the details that together constitute a VIP experience.

Speaking of VIP experience, the distinction between charter flights and commercial aviation runs deeper than just legroom or premium meals. In operational terms, VIP charter is frequently more demanding than scheduled services precisely because of its bespoke nature. Client expectations vary widely and extend well beyond catering – airport access, baggage arrangements, and even the language spoken by crew members can all factor into the brief. “Each client has unique expectations, and the planning scope is broader and more personalised than in scheduled operations,” says Mr. Trojanas. “This environment requires flexibility, meticulous attention to detail, and a solution-oriented mindset.”

Loreta Krupenkiene noted: “All attention is focused on individual experience. Cabin crew must not only serve, but anticipate needs in advance, maintain discretion, and adapt to each passenger. “What usually goes unnoticed is how much work the cabin crew does before passengers board. From meticulous cabin preparation and catering inspection to the coordination of the smallest details – all of this is done so the passenger’s experience feels seamless, natural, and effortless.”

It is this anticipatory approach that ultimately separates the world of commercial travel from the world of VIP charter. Crucially, very little of this complex, on the fly effort is conspicuous to the passenger – intentionally so. In VIP aviation, the best service is the kind that looks as though everything falls into place on its own. The reality behind that impression, as Ms. Krupenkiene describes it, however, is anything but effortless – it just happens to be invisible by design.

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