



INSIDE THE SECRET WORLD OF CELEBRITY TRAVEL AND PRIVATE JETS

News / Business aviation, Personalities



Justin Bieber, Kim Kardashian and every other A-lister in between – their Instagrams are full of private jet selfies and videos.

But what's it really like inside this world of elite travel? And is it even remotely affordable?

I went to Farnborough TAG Airport as a guest of Volanteus, who have chartered jets for everyone from politicians to pop stars, Hollywood royalty to real royals, to find out.

The first surprise, arriving at the airport, is how low key it all is.

Hidden away down winding Hampshire lanes when you arrive, sure security's very strict on the gate but, after you've driven through (or your driver has) there's a free carpark and, when I arrived, I parked right outside.

Private jet revelation number one – you only have to arrive 20 minutes before your flight (not the

minimum two hours of commercial flights).

For a commercial flight this would be the part you'd spend hours queuing to get checked in and check in your luggage, queuing to get through security, queuing to shop and fighting through tired, stressed crowds.

There is none of that.

The waiting lounge at Farnborough TAG Airport. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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The waiting lounge at Farnborough TAG Airport (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

You're usually met by one of your plane crew at the door to the airport.

There are no shops (sorry Duty Free fans) but, on the plus side, once you've checked in (in a matter of minutes) you can wait in the cinnamon-scented lounge while your crew get your plane up and running.

The lounge has a magical iPad-controlled coffee maker and cool furnishings made of repurposed bits of old aircraft – a BAE exhaust lamp and a 747 table.

(Picture: Farnborough Airport)

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The magic coffee machine (Picture: Farnborough Airport)

You can look out at the other private jets flying off to their glamorous and important events.

Volanteus for The Metro

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A bombardier challenger seen from the lounge at Farnborough TAG Airport (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

To avoid any waiting around, you can get Volanteus to pre-clear your passports, although there's one step everyone from Rihanna to royals have to go through – security.

So, yes, they need to take off their heels, get their airport socks on and panic about the underwire in their bras going off too.

The difference is that there's no God-awful queues – it's just you and whoever's flying with you.

Once that's done you step through, right onto the tarmac, and get a car (or your limo) over to your plane.

Mark Green, Director of Volanteus entering an Embraer Legacy. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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Mark Green, Director of Volanteus entering an Embraer Legacy (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

I was having a look round an Embraer Legacy 600, which is worth £24million and has a big enough fuel tank to get you to Dubai.

I was shown round by Mark Green, the founder and CEO of Volanteus, which charts a fleet of 5,000 jets to any destination worldwide.

As you can see, the steps you walk up are teeny and it almost feels like going on a toy plane.

The Cockpit of an Embraer Legacy. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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The cockpit of an Embraer Legacy (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

The plane has a huge luggage hold at the back – ideal if you've packed lots of bags or you're in a band travelling with kit.

Like in commercial airports, your luggage is taken over in a separate van and packed in first.

The difference here, however, is, because the hold is accessible, if you realise you've left your favourite novel in your case you can just pop to the back to get it – or get a member of cabin crew to.

The main cabin of an Embraer Legacy. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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The main cabin of an Embraer Legacy (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

This private jet was a classic design, with a muted, business-like interior.

It's a 13-seat aircraft but, Mark explains, usually no more than six people use it.

However, if you're looking for something more flamboyant, zephyrs (favourites of The Red Hot Chili Peppers if their lyrics are anything to go by) have lurid, different-coloured seats.

According to Mark, 'some are Austin Powers meets Doctor Death.'

Mark Green, Director of Volanteus. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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Mark Green, CEO and founder of Volanteus (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

You can pick your favourite aircraft type, colour and age, (five years or less is the most popular) and, in terms of modifying a plane, you can do pretty much what you like – get in an interior designer to have it decked out in your favourite colours and ‘decal’ it too (change the exterior), as

long as it doesn't damage the plane or cause a hazard (so no helium balloons guys).

Famously Iron Maiden has their mascot, Eddie, on the tail of their planes.

All the safety procedures and plane maintenance is the same as on commercial jets, so there's the same take off and landing routine, with the cabin crew looking like they'll burst into the YMCA at any minute.

Like most commercial flights there's in-flight meals.

These are a far cry from the usual rock hard roll, gloopy brown sludge and baffling dessert posts of economy though.

A starter of canapés prepared by Air Culinaire. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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A starter of canapés prepared by Air Culinaire (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

Volanteus uses a company called Air Culinaire for their inflight catering.

They can get your best-loved dishes from your favourite restaurants – from Nandos to Nobu and everything inbetween.

When money's no object, a star's assistant will send through all their requests, a bit like a rider.

Inflight food prepared by Air Culinaire. Menus are tailored to the customers requests, often having food prepared by their favourite restaurants (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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I was served Moët and some beautiful canapes – Brixham crab, duck and date briefs in bok choy and smoked salmon roulades.

There was also a sample three-course menu – a starter of Cromer crab with clementines, burnt lemon gel, green onion oil and oyster leaves, a main of short rib of British beef with charred onions, sandy carrots and pickled kohlrabi and a lemon posset with caramelized white chocolate shards, blueberries and pea cress for pudding.

A lobster salad prepared by Air Culinaire. Menus are tailored to the customers requests, often having food

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A lobster salad with autumn fruit prepared by Air Culinaire (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

I also got to try a lobster salad with autumn fruit prepared by executive chef Chris Mouyiassi who, before joining Air Culinaire, headed up The Stables Restaurant at 5-star London hotel The Grove and previously with Chris Galvin.

I asked him what the limitations were when creating 5-star food on a plane.

'The space for flight attendants,' he replied – 'the size of the oven is the size of a shoe box onboard.'

The kitchen onboard an Embraer Legacy. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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The kitchen onboard an Embraer Legacy. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

However, as food is driver direct from top London hotels (or whichever restaurant you choose), all the crew really have to do is heat it and put it on the plate.

Air Culinaire runs classes for cabin crew to show them 'how to plate' (ie how to make your lunch

look stunning as opposed to a pile of sludge).

The planes are equipped with full working kitchens and champagne glasses. (Picture: Marco Kessler for

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Chris said: 'You can do almost anything. You can't do espumas (edible foams) but you can do beautiful, vibrant colours.

'I know what the teams can do. I've been a five star hotel for the past 10 years so I'm into giving people the five star service.'

The bathroom of the plane features veneer wall panels, leather toilet seat covers and a selection of toiletries.

Image not found or type unknown

The bathroom (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

Now – let's talk loos.

Obviously, unlike in commercial jets, there's no embarrassing struggle to wake up or climb over the sleeping passenger next to you, or tedious, cramped wait for a free loo.

Although they're not massive they are more spacious, with veneer wall panels and leather toilet seat covers.

The bathroom of the plane features veneer wall panels, leather toilet seat covers and a selection of toiletries

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The bathroom (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

This plane was stocked with fancy Molton Brown toiletries – everything you could possibly want from flannels and toothbrushes to perfume and lipbalm.

When it's time for a nap the cabin crew decline the seats so they're flat, bring out the mattresses

from the hold and make up proper beds (this plane has room for two doubles).

So, if you were wondering about mile high antics, there's no need to sneak to the loo (although the aircrew wouldn't thank you and it's pretty awkward as it's just your party and them).

Controls for the in flight entertainment systems. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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Controls for the in flight entertainment systems (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

If you're into more standard inflight entertainment, the usual method these days is to load up an iPad for each passenger with TV, films and music just for them, although there's also TV screens and speakers in the plane.

Entertainment system storage. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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The cabin crew's entertainment system storage space (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

Mark tells me his company is all about 'making clients feel a little more loved'.

In one instance, a client was a big fan of Xbox, so Volanteus had his plane modified with 42 inch

TVs so he could get more out of Call Of Duty Black Ops during his flight back from LA.

Mark said: 'I like to think we do things differently. We're a boutique.

'When you go to a boutique they know you like a particular brand of sheets in the bed, Game Of Thrones on the DVD and a particular type of wine.

'It's an instinctive service – understanding what the client wants without them having to tell you.'

An Embraer Legacy parked at Farnborough TAG Airport. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

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An Embraer Legacy parked at Farnborough TAG Airport. (Picture: Marco Kessler for Metro.co.uk)

The sky's the limit on what you can take and do on a private jet – hire a live band, bring your pets (as long as they have their pet passports and vaccines up to date) or even, as Mark has, charter and modify a plane just for a beloved pet.

(Picture: Volanteus)

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An airbus interior – these are bigger and a lot pricier (Picture: Volanteus)

If you smoke the usual commercial rules don't apply – as long as you don't mind paying £2,000 extra for the deep clean the plane will need afterwards.

But there's a line when it comes to drugs – nobody's above the law and you'd be dealt with as sternly by customs however you arrived in a country.

However, when you land there's no giant passport control queue and you can be on your way swiftly.

Overall, if I'm honest this plane wasn't decadent enough for my tastes – you can travel first class for a similar experience and less money – but, if you're travelling as a group and want something different, you'll be pleased to know there's bigger, more extravagant models to blow 10x your annual salary on.

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