

# The Desert Sun

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## Business Plus

TALKING BUSINESS WITH... DENISE WILSON

# Working the sky

BY JOHN HUSSAR

Special to the Desert Sun

When she was a music teacher at a Southern California private school, Denise Wilson couldn't help looking out the window to watch planes fly overhead, not missing a beat conducting with her baton.

Today — and 6,500 hours later as a licensed pilot — Wilson's passion for flying has grown into a lucrative business as founder and president of Desert Jet, the only exclusively jet charter company in the Coachella Valley. Her husband, Rob, is a pilot for Desert Jet, too.

Based at the Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport in Thermal with three jets and an office at the Bermuda Dunes Airport, Wilson said she has thrived in the charter jet and aircraft management business since it was launched in 2007.

"This year, we saw a 175 percent increase in revenue," said Wilson, saying gross sales were \$2.1 million last year compared to \$787,000 in 2009.

Desert Jet has 11 employees and operates three jets, a Citation V, Citation Encore and Hawker 1000.

All of the pilots are captain-qualified in a number of different jet aircraft manufactured by Boeing, Gulfstream, Lear, Hawker and Cessna and have more than 25,000 hours of accident- and incident-free flight time combined, Wilson said.



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Desert Jet team founder Denise Wilson is photographed with the company's Cessna Citation Encore seven-passenger jet on Tuesday at the Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport in Thermal. The company has a fleet of three aircraft used for on-demand private aircraft charters. Wilson learned to fly as a hobby in her 20s.

Her clients are diverse, from business people and well-heeled people who want to take their lap dogs on vacation to nationally known celebrities from former Vice President Al Gore to former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to entertainer Britney Spears.

### Desert Jet

**Who:** Denise Wilson, founder, president  
**Business:** Desert Jet, Bermuda Dunes Airport, Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport, Thermal.  
**Home:** La Quinta  
**Family:** Husband Rob, a pilot at Desert Jet.  
**Education:** Bachelor's of Science, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.  
**Information:** [www.desertjet.com](http://www.desertjet.com); (800) 381-JETS



COURTESY OF MORGAN ANDERSON PHOTOGRAPHY

Denise Wilson, president and chief pilot of Desert Jet, smiles in the cockpit in one of her planes.

The reason, she said, is because more and more business people who either owned their own plane or had fractional ownership realized it was becoming too expensive as the economy soured over the past few years.

"They were looking for something more cost-effective and a lot of them just don't want to fly commercial airlines," she said.

"About 20 percent of our clients used to own a plane. We are an alternative to ownership. People pay as they go and don't have to worry about all the things of ownership like storage, fueling or maintenance."

She said even though Palm Springs International Airport has more commercial flights now than in the past, "You still have to connect to multiple hubs."

Charter flights make that

easier though it might cost more.

For example, a day business trip from Palm Springs to Fresno for six passengers would cost under \$6,000, Wilson said.

"That is less than \$1,000 per person on a direct route that takes under an hour. This route and many other West Coast routes are impossible to do within a business day on an airline."

She said "more local small businesses are coming out of the recession and they want to get in front of their customers. The best way to do that is to fly."

### Flying snowbirds

Desert Jet customers also include snowbirds who want to bring a lot of possessions with them to stay for the winter; people who want to travel with

their lap dogs or their Labs and golden retrievers; and people who like the convenience of charter travel without the hassle of TSA inspections.

Desert Jet's routes are as diverse as their clients.

"About 35 percent of our flights are to Canada."

Desert Jet routinely flies to Chicago and Buffalo, N.Y., as well as throughout California and the Pacific Northwest.

In the winter season, Desert Jet averages about 130 flights a month and 60-80 in the summer, Wilson said.

A Desert Jet charter flight from Palm Springs to Calgary Canada is about \$16,000; cross-country to New York is about \$22,000 and \$3,500 for a round-trip to Los Angeles or Orange County.

Wilson got started on her entrepreneurial flight when she was hired in 2006 to manage the

schedule for a desert developer's jet for business travel. But two years later, the developer lost interest in owning the jet.

Wilson came up with the idea to start a charter company. That allowed him to keep his plane and help Wilson to start her business.

Wilson isn't finished expanding. She's planning to open a 23,000-square-foot hangar open later this year.

"I'm adding a jet this year and another aircraft next year for a total of five," she said.

Her marketing strategy is traditional "word of mouth" and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Desert Jet also has been a sponsor of the Bob Hope Classic and various charity events that don't get a lot of press.

"I have flown the Special Olympics bocce team from Long Beach to Lincoln, Neb., to participate in the games there," she said. "It is so much fun for these athletes to go to that kind of competition."

She said other pilots donate their planes for taking athletes to this event, including actor Harrison Ford.

And what is Wilson's favorite place to get away? Sun River, Ore.

"The weather here (Coachella Valley) is so beautiful in the winter, but we like to get away to somewhere so beautiful and cooler in the summer."

John Hussar is a public relations/media consultant and freelance writer in Palm Desert. Have an idea for "Talking Business"? He can be reached at [john@prnewsworks.com](mailto:john@prnewsworks.com)