

Private shuttles, flights on rise

Written by Skip Descant, *The Desert Sun*
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Sean Caballero, a line service technician with Signature Flight Support, prepares a Citation Mustang jet for towing at Desert Jet, a private charter air service at Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport in Thermal. / Skip Descant/The Desert Sun

It's not just commercial air traffic that's been on the rise in the desert. Premium air travel in the form of private chartered flights have also seen a rapid ascent as local providers shuttle the well-heeled and business clients to lands across the country, and even international destinations.

"It's really hard to predict any kind of growth, but I am feeling a trend of more aviation activity, and I would predict a good season coming up, that kind of thing," said Jeff Porras, assistant manager at the Bermuda Dunes Airport, a private field in the east valley, which only handles charter and private planes. "I've seen positive growth with every charter company that uses our facility, which we have quite a few of them."

This year, Desert Jet, a private air charter company with seven aircraft and based out of Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport in Thermal, has been named in the Top Ten Aircraft Charter Services by Best of Luxury, a guide to buying luxury goods and services. Desert Jet was founded in 2007, starting as an aircraft management, acquisition and sales company, then

received air-carrier certification from the Federal Aviation Administration in 2009, which is when Desert Jet began offering charter flights.

"So, we're the only jet charter service here in the desert, and in January we opened up a jet maintenance facility out here as well," said Denise Wilson, founder of Desert Jet. The company recently opened a satellite office at John Wayne Airport in Santa Ana. "We're basically pretty slow in the summer in the desert, so we move a lot of our airplanes to Orange County for the summer," she explained.

Desert Jet has been on the Inc. 500 list the past two years, and listed as the fastest growing aviation company both times, Wilson said. "Which is quite an honor," she added. "Last year, we were listed No. 69 of all privately owned companies in the country, as far as our growth rate."

The growth trend comes on the heels of the national recession, which pulled the rug out from the private plane market and other luxury goods as even the 1 percent saw these trinkets as some of the first items to hit the resale market.

As the economy has slowly rebounded, and spending on items like second — or in some cases, third — homes has returned to the Coachella Valley, a desire to access them easily has translated to a growth area for providers of premium air travel.

“In the desert, a lot of our visitors and residents here, they’re very mobile. They have maybe a second home here, or maybe a third home here. So the best way for them to get to the desert is by flying privately,” Wilson said.

“Most people like to fly closer to where they actually live,” she added, noting that Palm Springs International Airport is a little out of the way when considering cities like Indian Wells or Palm Desert, making the Bermuda Dunes Airport or Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport more attractive.

Business on rise

Officials with Schubach Aviation in Carlsbad, near San Diego, acknowledge the private and charter aviation industry bottomed out about 2009, but has since been in recovery.

“The buying and selling of private jets has also increased along with the demand for charter flights,” said Kimberly Herrell, director of charter sales at Schubach Aviation.

“We hear from old clients all the time that stopped flying during the crisis and are now able to utilize flying private for business as well as personal trips.”

Schubach often flies to the Coachella Valley, mostly using Palm Springs International Airport, but also the fields in Bermuda Dunes and Thermal.

“You have more people asking about charters, and inquiring, and so they’re shopping,” said Porras from the Bermuda Dunes Airport. “That’s what’s giving us the vibe. Also, people shopping to buy private airplanes again.”

Though Palm Springs International doesn’t keep firm statistics on the number of passengers traveling via charter flights or private planes, Tom Nolan, executive director for the Palm Springs airport, said the private aviation industry also contributes heartily to region’s travel economy.

“PSP provides a high caliber of airport service to all visitors that arrive and depart by air travel regardless if it is by airline, private aircraft, corporate aircraft, or charter,” Nolan wrote in an email. “They all are important contributors to the valley’s tourism industry.”

Desert Jet fliers are often coming to or from the Pacific Northwest, Wilson said, though a number originate from Midwestern locations as well. A flight from the Coachella Valley to the Pacific Northwest aboard Desert Jet runs about \$12,000 one way, she said.

For many fliers, this may be a stratospheric cost. Though Wilson points out the planes are sumptuous and equipped with satellite phones and other equipment allowing passengers to stay in touch with the outside world, often a must for a high-level business person.

And Desert Jet provides any number of concierge services, such as point-to-point transportation.

Also, fliers do not encounter long lines for either checking in or going through security, since both of these are handled in advance of the flight.

“Time is a precious commodity. So if they fly with us, they actually drive the car right onto the airport ramp, and they park their car right next to the plane,” Wilson said. “And they board the aircraft immediately, on their schedule.”