

BUSINESS JETS – VIP AIRLINERS

One of a series of papers for business jet owners

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WHY?

The biz-airliner is increasingly popular as an alternative to traditional smaller business jets. In fact, there are several hundred in service today with UHNIs and corporations, in addition to those used by governments and other state organisations. Its origins, however, perhaps date back over 75 years, as a large number of Douglas DC3s and similar then large cabin aircraft were converted for private and corporate use around the world. In the 'seventies and 'eighties, a number of BAC 1-11s, Douglas DC9s, Boeing 707s, Boeing 737s and a very significant number of Boeing 727s were converted from former airline aircraft. In more recent years, the major airframers have all entered the market.

The reason for their use is simple. Acquisition costs are often lower than the new-build corporate jet. Parts are cheaper. Maintenance labour is cheaper and more widely available. Crew training is cheaper, as are salaries, and highly experienced type-rated pilots and skilled engineers are more widely available. Designs are mature, proven, and the aircraft are built for long and hard lives, with necessary reliability and ease of maintenance and support built-in from the very first conceptual drawing. Not least, is the obvious fact that they offer much more floor space and therefore a multitude of possibilities for an owner's optimum use of the cabin.

A typical configuration will include a large and comfortable lounge area, a private working space, an owner's bedroom and private washroom, and provide for gourmet dining and entertaining in privacy. Furnishings, materials and colours will be to taste. While seating is provided for perhaps 14 to 19 passengers in comfort, a more usual passenger group may be just four or five people and a typical flight less than three or four hours. The greatest benefit is space. Room to move about. Room to stand up and chat. Room to stay refreshed and arrive refreshed.

These aircraft are discreetly operated, painted in neutral colours, and routinely fly unnoticed into and out of secondary airports around the globe, with passengers using the same private, secure and low traffic business aviation terminals and FBOs.

Yes, they burn more fuel as they are heavier, and navigation and landing fees are higher, but, given other lower costs, they are routinely operated for very similar or even lower costs than the typical large business jet. They are undeniably more mature and reliable, and are more widely supported when on a trip.

CHOICE

Principal manufacturers offer new-build business jet versions of their airliners, notably Airbus with its ACJ family, and Boeing, with its BBJ.

These manufacturers are, however, primarily focused on large airline fleet orders and only sell a small number of aircraft each year directly to buyers as so called '*green*', i.e. without any interior furnishings, in conjunction with which the buyer will contract separately with a Completion Centre specialising in the manufacture of a bespoke interior and its subsequent fitting out. Third party aesthetic designers may be utilised to add flair and individuality to the design.

Others are re-purposed former airliners, with the benefit of a new-build interior.

WHAT ABOUT HIGH TIME?

A typical buyer concern is raised about the relatively high airframe and engine time and cycles of a former airline aircraft versus the low hours and cycles routinely sought when buying a traditional smaller business jet.

It is worth remembering that, while the traditional business jet may only fly several hundred hours a year and perhaps less than 10,000 hours in its life, with a lot of the time spent in a hangar, an airliner is designed to fly with minimum support and maximum reliability for may be 12 hours a day for much of the year and have a life of well over twenty or twenty-five years. In fact, airliners are often retired at an even greater age, with many well-known perceived national airlines keeping aircraft in service beyond this period with continuous cabin upgrades and repainting to attract passenger traffic from competitors.

Thus, much more important, as is also the irrefutable case with the smaller jets, is the pedigree of previous ownership, operation and maintenance. An experienced pilot or engineer will always tell you that a good aeroplane is a 'good aeroplane' and a bad one a 'bad one', irrespective of whether new or used, hence there are indeed, like cars and yachts, aircraft to select and aircraft to avoid.

IN CONCLUSION

A new-build or airliner conversion is not for everybody. It may be perceived to be too big for the job or to be overly ostentatious. Economics may nevertheless favour it, particularly when operated professionally and discreetly.

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