



Looking up

The global aviation industry may have been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, but private business aviation is bouncing back faster and stronger than its commercial airline counterparts, writes *Emma Kelly*

Largely thanks to pent up travel demand, and new customers attracted by the convenience, availability and safety benefits of flying in a private jet, the VIP aviation sector is taking off once again.

When Covid-19 hit in 2020, business aviation suffered the same as airlines, with traffic slowing to a near halt amid travel restrictions. In the first two weeks of April 2020, for example, just over 26,000 business jet flights operated worldwide – a 79 per cent drop or 95,000 fewer sectors that had flown

in the first two weeks of April 2019, according to data analytics and consulting company WINGX. Fractional business jet operators, aircraft management and charter operators were all hit equally severely.

Jump forward a year and things are looking up for business jet operators as commercial airlines continue to be restricted. ‘Business aviation recovery is accelerating past pre-pandemic trends in many places, with the US charter market taking the lead,’ says WINGX in its latest business aviation bulletin.

‘In Western Europe, demand has surged in response to selectively lifted travel restrictions. Flight activity from Eastern Europe to Russia and the Middle East is busier than ever,’ the report adds. Business jet travel in Asia, Africa and South America is exceeding 2019 levels in some places, with particular growth in Brazil, Australia, China, UAE, India and Nigeria. In May 2021 alone, some 330,000 business aviation sectors were flown – more than double the same month a year ago – are edging closer to pre-pandemic levels.

Aviation data and analytics company Cirium says flight activity trends have been ‘fascinating’ in business aviation, with a new breed of customers leading the charge. ‘While of course overall levels did initially decline, it quickly became apparent that business aviation was staring at an opportunity with health and safety conscious new users wishing to avoid commercial airlines or airports,’ says Daniel Hall, senior valuations analyst.

‘Bringing new users to private aviation is difficult and many of those charter or fractional providers will be hoping they remain,’ he adds.

The US National Business Aviation Association has urged its members ‘to turn the tragedy of the pandemic into opportunity’, ►

Pictured: The global private jet market is recovering well after a very turbulent 18 months, with challenging times ahead



Pictured: Ultimate luxury is peace of mind, according to NetJets

CEO and president Ed Bolen calling on members to “really take advantage of the fact that a lot of people for the first time experienced what it was like to be able to go wherever you want to, when you need to and be able to turn travel time into very productive work time”.

Operators themselves are optimistic. NetJets, which pioneered business jet shared ownership, believes there will continue to be an influx of new owners who are also new to private aviation. Research has suggested there have been a lot of people with the means to fly private aircraft, but who have previously viewed it as a luxury they didn’t need, it adds. “Now they are recognising that the ultimate luxury is peace of mind. With reduced commercial airline schedules and the prioritisation of COVID-19 precautions, these same individuals are considering private flying for the first time and

we don’t believe this will change,” says NetJets.

NetJets is already experiencing 85 per cent of typical flight demand – with a 80:20 split in leisure and business demand – and expects to be back to 2019 levels this year. Global business aviation company Vista Global concurs. “As more people are vaccinated and the world continues to open up, we are expecting a resurgence in flight activity to take place in the second half of 2021,” says founder and chairman Thomas Flohr.

“Business aviation has performed an essential service through the pandemic when commercial airlines stopped and it will be a long time before their network is restored. During this period, we will continue to convert prospects to clients,” he adds.

VistaJet programme subscription memberships increased 29 per cent during 2020 – the fastest growth since

the company’s formation – with Europe accounting for 43 per cent, North America 25 per cent, Asia 18 per cent and the Middle East 10 per cent – and the on-demand XO service growing even faster. “The pandemic has demonstrated the clear demand for business aviation as a safer and more reliable alternative to commercial flying,” says the group.

European private jet charter company GlobeAir says it has

seen a 67 per cent increase in new clients since the start of the pandemic, many of whom are frequent airline business or first-class passengers who have turned to business aviation due to the lack of airline availability and the perceived reduced health and safety risks in business aviation.

Albert Einstein’s adage “in the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity” is certainly ringing true for business aviation. ■

