



Off to a flying start

Convenient, comfortable and reassuringly expensive, private charter flights are a sure-fire way to arrive at your sporting destination in style

WRITTEN BY GABRIEL STONE

NOTHING dampens the thrill of a sporting adventure more than gridlock on the M1. Or perhaps first prize should go to the peculiar mixture of stress and bureaucratic tedium that goes with entrusting your guns to Heathrow baggage handlers. For most of us, such ordeals are simply priced into that day on the moor or Spanish partridge pilgrimage. But there must be more than a few people who have gazed gloomily at Stonehenge from a stationary A303 and given serious thought to how much they'd pay to be instead sipping a crisp G&T in the convivial comfort of an Exmoor shoot lodge. Talk to the companies that arrange private charter flights and it's clear that a growing number of fieldsports devotees are turning that fantasy into reality.

"We've definitely seen a growing demand for sporting-related

flights," says William Sheppard, who handles private charter sales for Weston Aviation. The firm offers helicopter transfers and private jet services out of four regional airport bases around England, as well as Cork in Ireland. And it's not just the shooting crowd who have embraced this mode of transport. Sheppard acknowledges "massive growth" enjoyed by the entire private aviation sector as a result of the pandemic. "We've noticed that customers who were previously 'on the

fence' have been drawn to the convenience, greater comfort, fewer touchpoints and, to large extent, privacy," he explains.

There may be a single catalyst that nudges clients to take their first dip into the world of private charter but there are many seductive factors that keep them there. "When you've had that experience it's hard to go back," concedes Charlie White, director of fishing at fieldsports agency Roxtons. For starters, he notes: "If you fly from Kemble or Northolt the customs officers tend to be slightly nicer about your guns and it's a more pleasurable experience."

Efficient use of time may be the major draw for business moguls, but with this saving comes the additional bonus of elasticity for the busy or mildly chaotic: the plane won't leave without you. This element of reassurance adds to the general sense of relaxation that sets the perfect tone for an expedition →



Top: a HondaJet is ideal for shooting trips, according to private charter firm Bookajet. Above: the private aviation sector has boomed since the pandemic

FLIGHT OF FANCY

Forget cutting a dash in a helicopter: visitors to the 2023 Cornbury House Horse Trials may well have caught an early glimpse of the futuristic flying machine that seeks to revolutionise private aviation. With its vertical take-off, the Lilium Jet is perhaps best described as an electric helicopter but one that promises the style and comfort of a jet. More significantly, in a sector that tends to keep awkward silence when carbon footprints are discussed, this zero-emission aircraft positions itself as the solution for environmentally conscious travellers;

the Tesla of the skies.

Manufactured in Germany and currently undergoing final tests in Spain, the Lilium's launch operator and UK distributor is Oxfordshire-based aircraft sales and charter company Volare Aviation. "Sustainability is a massive passion and we wanted to get ahead of it," explains sales director Nick Isbister.

With sporting clients a major customer base for Volare – "90% of our helicopter owners shoot," remarks Isbister – he reports "orders confirmed and plenty of interest" in this innovative product. While suggesting that the initial outlay is "exactly the same as a brand-new twin-engine aircraft", Isbister highlights its lower operating cost. Then there's that helicopter roar, or rather lack of it. "The noise level is the same as an industrial air-conditioning unit," says Isbister. "It allows you to land at more sites: the biggest restriction on heliports is the noise restriction." Expect to see the first Lilium land at a shoot near you in 2025.



Above: with its vertical take-off, the Lilium is best described as an electric helicopter but with the style and comfort of a jet



destined to be memorable for all the right reasons. "It starts the whole process of it being a fun trip," sums up White. "When I was first shooting it was often as much about the Friday night before as the Saturday. This is like starting that Friday night in the best way possible."

TRAVEL REQUIREMENTS

While Roxtons is happy to help with this sort of travel arrangement, White explains that most clients "tend to get their PA to do it, or they're part of NetJets". For those looking to enter a private charter relationship for the first time, the options can seem rather dazzling. Do you choose the company with the largest fleet or the one that will mix your gundog's drinking water with natural flower essences to aid relaxation?

Sheppard confirms that not only are dogs welcome on board Weston aircraft but "provided everything is cleaned before flying, shot game can be brought home for the freezer". Alongside these nice-to-have touches, it's well worth checking that your operator is equipped to deal with the sort of specific requirements that simply don't apply to other leisure or business trips.

Based at Farnborough, a short drive down the M3 from London, Bookajet promises to transport both pets and firearms securely. With a wide range of options

Above: a Cessna Citation XLS arranged by Weston Aviation awaits its passengers. Below: to access remote spots, a multi-engine helicopter is a must



available – it boasts access to "over 5,000 aircraft worldwide" – Bookajet marketing executive Morgan Little picks out the HondaJet, which can carry five passengers, as "the perfect light jet to take to your shooting trips".

If you like your travel arranged with military precision, then it's worth talking to Sentinel Aviation. Roland Dangerfield left the Royal Dragoon Guards to embrace his long-term ambition to become a pilot. While qualifying for a private pilot's licence he forged a firm friendship with ex-banker James Garfield-Davies but it wasn't until COVID-19, when a friend asked for help arranging a charter to go fishing in Iceland, that the pair combined



“We war-gamed the scenarios that could go wrong and have a plan B, C and D”

30 years of flying experience to set up their own private charter brokerage.

“There are lots of people who do what we do,” concedes Dangerfield. “However, the overriding factor is that we have been pilots; we’ve been at the other end of this; we know how charters run well – and badly.” This experience comes into its own when, as can inevitably happen however you choose to travel, a problem occurs. “We war-gamed the scenarios that could potentially go wrong and have a plan B, C and D,” he explains. While he cites adverse weather conditions as the most usual culprit, many clients are perfectly capable of presenting a last-minute curveball.

“We had a very forgetful client who used to turn up at Farnborough without his phone or sometimes even his passport,” recalls Dangerfield. “So one of the many add-ons we have is a partnership with a 24/7 motorcycle courier in London.” Then there was the client en route to a fishing trip who left behind his essential BackMagic wading belt. Unperturbed, Dangerfield “whistled up a taxi that went to Sportfish in Reading and brought one straight to Farnborough”.

The aftermath of Brexit has made flying with firearms a particular headache. Flying privately doesn’t allow you to skip the



Above: a private flight often makes for greater convenience when travelling with your guns and offers a sense of reassurance that sets the perfect tone for a memorable expedition. Top: flying over a grouse moor

paperwork and regulations that differ by country but it does mean there’s someone experienced to sort it for you. That’s not the only time saving. “We work quite a lot with a shooting instructor who says he has to turn up at Heathrow four to five hours before a flight to sort the guns,” says Dangerfield.

While Sentinel will coordinate with everyone from Border Force to the aircraft operator and lodge, Dangerfield also offers sage guidance to clients set on using their own guns. “Most people travel with two guns or a pair,” he observes, “but we always say to everyone, put a third one on the application.” That way if a client’s gun develops a problem the week before their trip, the paperwork is already in order to accommodate a substitute. “You don’t have

to take that spare gun but it means you won’t have to borrow one,” he advises.

HEAVY-DUTY HELICOPTERS

It may seem absurd to worry about cost-cutting at this level of luxury but no responsible operator should let clients take off with an under-qualified aircraft or pilot to the sort of remote location, often complete with unfavourable weather conditions, that typifies so many sporting destinations. When it comes to helicopters, this is no job for the simple, economical, single-engine models used for short recreational flights or flying experiences. Sloane Helicopters is the sole UK distributor for Leonardo helicopters, whose AW109 and AW169 models are not only →



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up to heavy-duty air ambulance or police service but also represent, according to head of commercial operations Dave Usher, “the de facto VIP helicopter”.

Aside from this aircraft’s more luxurious aspects, Usher notes: “It has two engines, two hydraulic systems, two of everything, which certifies it to be able to fly in cloud.” When that cumulonimbus turns into something more threatening, he assures, “it can fly very safely in bad weather. The autopilot does it much better than any human can.” Even if that Scottish sky is miraculously clear, winter nights draw in remarkably fast, so it’s worth bearing in mind Usher’s reminder that “you can only do night ops for commercial travel in a multi-engine aircraft”.

So far, so comfortable, safe, convenient and efficient but there’s no avoiding the thorny question of cost. “You’re looking at roughly £2,500 per flight hour and then



a pilot at £650–£750 per day,” says Usher, although variables such as fuel, location and landing fees will affect the final invoice. As a rough guide that means you should be able to reach most destinations within the UK for about £10,000.

GOING FURTHER AFIELD

When it comes to private jets and the longer distances these aircraft tend to cover, that budget needs to ratchet up a notch. Sheppard suggests that for one of

Above: while flying privately doesn’t allow you to skip the paperwork, it does mean there is someone experienced to sort it for you. Left: a further bonus is that your canine companion can join you in the cabin

his clients’ most popular Spanish partridge destinations, “subject to availability and as a rough estimate, a two-day return flight on a Cessna Citation CJ4 flying from Biggin Hill to La Perdiz, the runway connected to La Nava, six guns can expect to pay around €29,500 [roughly £25,300]”.

Always wanted to take off to the wilds of Iceland on that ultimate fishing trip? Dangerfield reckons he could get you there for “the low £30,000s”. If your bucket list reaches even further afield to sporting Meccas such as Fairbanks, Alaska, then prepare to deepen pockets accordingly. According to Dangerfield, “a transatlantic flight is never going to be less than £125,000 to £130,000 because you need a larger aircraft that can do the range”.

Yes, it’s expensive, eye-wateringly so for those who wince at the price of a slab of cartridges. Yes, some people derive equal pleasure from an armed walk up their neighbour’s hedge. It’s one of the glories of fieldsports that there’s room for just about every budget and preference imaginable. Then again, there’s nothing quite like spending the best hours of a Friday night staring at an endless glare of brake lights to shift one’s perception of good value. ■

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