

FARHAD MANJOO

Private Jet Travel Is Booming. And Shameful. And We're All Paying for It.

May 5, 2023



By Farhad Manjoo
Opinion Columnist

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Four or five times a year, Stephen Prince, a businessman who lives in St. Simons Island, Ga., has taken friends, clients and colleagues on a hunting trip to a pheasant preserve in northwest Nebraska. A commercial flight on that route would be arduous — if everything went perfectly, he'd probably spend at least nine hours traveling over one or two connections, plus about an hour's drive to the nearest commercial airport and more time going through security, boarding and the other ritual indignities of commercial air travel.

But Prince, who founded a business in the 1990s that has made a fortune printing gift cards, is a wealthy man. He purchased his first private plane a few years ago; his current jet, a Cessna Citation 650, can do the trip in about three hours (with a possible stop along the way to refuel) from a small airport just a few minutes from his home. Prince says flying private is a magical experience: He can drive right up to the side of his plane and hop on board. Crew members will load his bags and hunting gear and park his car. If he's flying in the afternoon, he'll be greeted with a glass of scotch; in the morning, he'll get coffee and a newspaper.

"If that doesn't spoil you, you're not spoilable," he told me. "You don't need a whole spoonful of private aircraft to find out what it tastes like — it's pretty amazing."

As much as he loves it, though, Prince has decided to kick his high-flying habit. A progressive activist — he's the vice chair of Patriotic Millionaires, an organization of wealthy people who favor higher taxes on rich people like themselves — Prince argues that flying private is just too expensive and unfair. Not for him, but for the rest of us, and for the planet. His group isn't calling on other private fliers to ground their planes, but maintains that if rich people are going to continue to jet around in luxury, they should at least be taxed for the privilege.

According to an analysis published this month by Patriotic Millionaires and the Institute for Policy Studies (I.P.S.), a left-leaning think tank, private jet users pay nowhere near their share of the cost of maintaining American airports and airspace.

Every commercial airline passenger in America is subject to a 7.5 percent tax on domestic ticket prices, a facility charge of up to \$4.50 per flight segment (up to a maximum of \$18 for a round trip) and extra charges for flights to Alaska, Hawaii or international travel. Private fliers only pay fuel surcharge taxes of about 22 cents a gallon, according to the analysis. As a result, though they make up about 16 percent of all flights handled by the F.A.A., private jet flights "contribute just 2 percent of the taxes that make up the trust fund that primarily funds the F.A.A."

Per the analysis, "the median net worth of a full and fractional private jet owner is \$190 million and \$140 million respectively." In other words, some of the richest people in the world are effectively being subsidized by plebes like you and me flying coach.

Then there's climate change. Because they typically carry so few passengers on each trip, flying private is far worse for the environment than flying commercial. According to a report by Transport & Environment, a European group that advocates zero-emissions transportation, "private jets are on average 10 times more carbon intensive than commercial flights."

When I spoke to Ed Bolen, the chief executive of the National Business Aviation Association, a trade group that represents the private air travel industry, he challenged several of I.P.S.'s claims. Private planes can fly to thousands of airports around the country that aren't served by commercial flights, Bolen said, allowing businesses to operate across a wider geography than would otherwise be possible. He also argued that air travel infrastructure is designed largely to suit the needs of large commercial planes, so it made sense for commercial airliners to bear a larger share of the cost of maintaining the system. And he said that his industry is committed to improving its environmental impact; the N.B.A.A. has pledged to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Prince isn't convinced. Flying private is "probably one of the most greedy, selfish things I've ever done in my life," he told me. "I just can't continue to do it."

A lot of other private fliers seem to have no such worries. Private jet travel hit record levels last year, and many manufacturers and operators have reported surging demand.

Part of this surge might be due to favorable tax laws for private jet ownership. Donald Trump's 2017 tax cut allowed businesses to deduct 100 percent of the cost of a plane from their tax bills immediately, making buying a jet a very pleasant way to reduce a business's taxes. And as ProPublica recently reported, it's pretty easy for wealthy people to use their business jets for leisure travel; the law allows them to keep their deduction as long as they use the plane mostly for business travel, an indefensible giveaway.

Perhaps the worst thing about private jets is the profligacy they encourage. As I've written before, ordinary commercial air travel is already often extremely wasteful; flying is one of the most carbon-intensive, least environmentally efficient ways to travel, and we rarely consider its costs as we jet around the globe.

The inefficiency means that a relatively few travelers are responsible for a disproportionate share of pollution. One study published in 2020 found that "the percentile of the most frequent fliers — at most 1 percent of the world population — likely accounts for more than half of the total emissions from passenger air travel."

Private jets turbocharge the problem — they make flying so easy for the superrich that some people spend inexcusable amounts of time in the air.

Last year the marketing company Yard used data from @Celebjets, a Twitter account that tracked celebrities' private flights (and has since been suspended by Twitter), to calculate how much time some luminaries spent aboard their planes. Yard's top-flying celeb was Taylor Swift, whose jet spent nearly 23,000 minutes — about 16 days — in the air in the first half of last year, spewing more than 1,000 times more carbon into the atmosphere than the average person does in a year. (Swift's representative disputed the numbers, explaining that the jet is often lent out to others.)

@Celebjets' data has revealed another cringey phenomenon: The very short private jet trip, a pollution-belching flex that is the height of irresponsibility. Last year, Floyd Mayweather took a 10-minute flight between Henderson, N.V., and Las Vegas — a roughly 15-mile trip that would have taken him about 20 minutes by car. Kylie Jenner took a 17-minute flight between two Southern California suburbs, a drive that would have taken less than an hour. There's only one word I can think of to describe this sort of reckless extravagance: Shameful.

The Institute for Policy Studies suggests several sensible ideas that might slightly curb such excess. The group proposes a surcharge on flights shorter than 210 miles, close to the distance between Kennedy Airport and Reagan National Airport. I.P.S. also recommends a tax on sales of private aircraft — 10 percent on purchases of used planes, 5 percent on new ones — and a doubling of the fuel tax for private jets. The group estimates that Elon Musk — whose plane took 171 trips in 2022, according to Bloomberg — would have paid about \$4 million more in taxes under its proposals.

For Musk, that wouldn't break the bank, and it's hard to imagine that I.P.S.'s proposals would halt the private jet boom. But asking private fliers to pick up a little more of their aviation tab would be a good first step toward a more equitable transportation system.

Chuck Collins, one of the authors of the I.P.S.-Patriotic Millionaires report, pointed out one final problem with private jets: They allow the wealthiest individuals to ignore the problems the rest of us have to endure.

"When the ultra wealthy get to opt out of a system, they have much less of a stake in improving it," Collins said. He pointed to the debacle at Southwest Airlines over the holidays. "If over 100 billionaires couldn't get home to their families because the air traffic system was having a meltdown, maybe we'd have a better system."

Office Hours With Farhad Manjoo

Farhad wants to chat with readers on the phone. If you're interested in talking to a New York Times columnist about anything that's on your mind, please fill out this form. Farhad will select a few readers to call.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.