

FINANCIAL TIMES

# How to Spend it

FEBRUARY 1 2014

**MEETING MR MIYAKE**  
A RARE INTERVIEW WITH A  
TRULY MODERN DESIGN ICON





# is this seat taken?

**A savvy new website lists the private-jet “empty legs” of over 230 operators. Time to sample the high life at a fraction of the normal fare, says Simon de Burton**

**A**s my small children get older, they are beginning to display irritating levels of logic beyond the required “square-peg-in-a-square-hole” and “two-plus-two-equals-four” variety. An example occurred the other day when the six-year-old asked me whether or not I would deliver him and

his younger sister to their village school the following morning – not because they prefer my company to that of their mother’s, but because they fancied travelling “off-road” in our 50-year-old Land Rover, which Mrs de Burton only deigns to drive on very special occasions.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that tomorrow,” I replied.

Boy: “Why not?”

Me: “Because I’m going out for lunch.”

Boy: “But it doesn’t take four hours to go from school to the Ring O’ Bells [favoured Dartmoor pub that is about two miles from home].”

Me (slightly annoyed): “I’m fully aware of that – but I happen to be having lunch in France.”

Boy: “It’ll take more than four hours to drive to France.”

Me: “I know. Which is why I’m going by private jet.”

Such a trip might seem completely run-of-the-mill to quite a few readers of *How To Spend It* but, to an impecunious hack, it smacks of the deliciously decadent – which is why I didn’t have to think twice before accepting this arduous assignment. It was, in reality, less about lunch than discovering the joys of a savvy internet-based service that promises to provide an entirely new way of uniting empty seats on private jets with people who would like to fill them.

Called JetPartner.net, it is the brainchild of private-aviation-industry veterans Antony Rivolta and Patricio Zunino, who began working together in 2003 as colleagues in the aircraft-sales business.

In 2010, the pair created Jet Partner, an air-charter brokerage company that generated €7m in sales in 2012.

Its success made Rivolta and Zunino realise that the market for private air travel is growing fast, but that there are still hundreds of planes flying to or from destinations every day without any passengers on board – either because they are going to collect people, are returning from taking them to their destination or are being positioned for their next operation.

While it’s always been possible to take advantage of these “empty legs”, few people know how to find them, and fewer still manage to find a journey with the right number of seats going where they want, when they want.

The genius of JetPartner.net is that it provides an instantly accessible and constantly updated database of empty flights to and from locations all around Europe, and further afield. It’s a simple matter of logging-in and entering your favoured departure point, destination airport and required number of passengers, after which the system provides details of suitable routes and the means to book on the spot. It will even send e-mails or texts when a potentially useful flight becomes available.

And as the online platform is connected to 230 operators in Europe, with a choice of 1,600 aircraft, ranging from small, turboprop planes to 18-seater jets with transatlantic capabilities, the chances of finding a matching empty leg are generally high.

My trip was to take me, Rivolta, Zunino and six others on an hour-long hop from Farnborough airport in Hampshire to Reims, France, so that we could enjoy lunch at the Dom Pérignon château in Epernay, followed by a tour of the cellars. As regular users will appreciate, the pleasure of private air travel makes itself apparent well before boarding – simply because you can arrive at the airport just 15 minutes before take-off and not have to endure the aggravation of conventional check-in procedures and queuing for security.

“There are many reasons why people fly privately,” says Rivolta. “Often, they simply don’t want to be with anyone

else – perhaps for security reasons – or they want to use the journey to do business. Then, of course, there’s the hassle-free departure and control over the take-off time.

“Empty legs typically cost about 40 per cent less than if the aircraft is specifically chartered; most users will pay approximately the price of a first-class, scheduled ticket, but they will have far greater flexibility.

“It means, for example, that a passenger could travel to a destination and return the same day, whereas regular flights to and from that destination might not be at convenient times. And if there is no empty leg precisely matching the requested route in the system, then it will find any partially matching flights.”

We flew to Reims in a Cessna Citation XL with seating for nine passengers – but JetPartner.net clients looking for the ultimate in sky-high luxury also have access to superbly equipped, long-range aircraft such as the Gulfstream G650, which can carry 18 people up to 7,000 nautical miles, and Bombardier’s Global 6000, which can take 15 passengers and boasts queen-size beds and state-of-the-art catering facilities.

According to Rivolta, there are two or three such planes making empty-leg, transatlantic trips each week. Through JetPartner.net, those vacant seats could be taken advantage of for as little as £60,000, against the standard, one-way charter cost that starts at around £80,000.

Our experimental flight to Reims, meanwhile, would officially have cost about £3,500 each way. That might sound like a lot for an hour-long plane ride, but divide it between the nine passengers on board, and somehow flying to France for the privilege of enjoying several glasses of Dom Pérignon and a lunch of chicken and chips cooked by the maison’s brilliant, in-house chef, Pascal Tingaud, doesn’t seem so decadent after all.

And it was a darned sight more fun than doing the school run, I can tell you... ♦

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