

Fashion & Style

Hey, Big Spender, Flying My Way?



Photographs by Gordon Grant for The New York Times (Airplane); Everett Collection

RIDE SHARING Hitchhikers have come a long way from the days of Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in “It Happened One Night.”

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BACK in [Jack Kerouac](#)’s day, when people more often traveled along blacktop roads than through the jet stream, they hitched free rides by sticking out a thumb at a freeway onramp or hopping into a friend’s old heap. Often enough the destination didn’t matter to a hitcher embarked on a personal picaresque. What counted was the ride.



Eric Kayne for The New York Times

GENEROUS HOSTS Janet and Leonard Tallerine frequently shuttle friends to Houston, New Orleans and East Hampton, N.Y.



Neil Rasmus/Patrick McMullan

SMART GUEST Steven Stolman advises invitees to bring food.

Then air travel became cheap, Baby Boomers grew up, hitching turned into something scary (and illegal in places) and the romance of the highway waned. Fewer people were willing to risk turning up as a news brief with Hannibal Lecter's name in the headline. More had urgent reasons to reach their destinations on time.

But as one breed of hitchhiker vanished into folk legend, another kind has appeared. This new one isn't hauling a backpack with a well-thumbed copy of "Siddhartha" in its side pocket or wearing Levi's with holes in the knees. This new one isn't contentedly meandering in the general direction of [Coachella](#) or Burning Man.

With a pastel cashmere Loro Piano cardigan knotted casually around his or her neck, the new hitchhiker can be found in the lounges at places like Teterboro Airport in New Jersey or Aspen/Pitkin County Airport in Colorado. Tossing off the tail numbers that are the passwords for entry to airports serving private jet traffic, a person may be heard debating the merits of a Hawker versus a Challenger, extolling the seating capacity of Gulfstream jets and rating the onboard catering at a given airport, or fixed base of operation (F.B.O.).

These people do not refer to themselves as hitchhikers, of course, any more than a gold digger admits to being on the make. The old aphorism that one does not marry for money, but rather mingles with the rich and marries for love has useful applications when it comes to cadging rides on private jets.

"I don't think it's a calculated thing people do," said Marjorie Gubelmann Raein, the socialite and cash register heiress, who admits to having hopped the odd ride from New York to Palm Beach, Fla. "There's a misconception that this is some hobby some people have of going around constantly on people's Gulfstreams."

In fact, Ms. Raein added, more often it is just a matter of friendly convenience. "It's not like you're some moocher," she said. "You're going somewhere and someone happens to have a plane."

Green that formulation is not, and yet it does possess a kind of poetry for its beneficiaries. Someone happens to have a plane. As it turns out, the likelihood of this being the case is less great than it was even a year ago, for reasons that must seem obvious. A slumping economy and spikes in fuel prices

have each made serious inroads on the recent unprecedented boom in private aviation.

The news stories of billionaire high fliers impervious to economic downturns may be misplaced, aviation industry insiders say. Fuel consumption at private airports is markedly down (note: mainly as private pilots in their single engine cessnas cut back). Hours spent aloft by private jets, either rented in full or through time-share programs, are “exactly flat,” said Dan Hubbard, a spokesman for the National Business Aviation Association. “The economy is hitting everyone,” he said.

Still, there are signs that those with their own jets won’t be flying in cattle class anytime soon. “The big trend is people upgrading to jumbo jets for private use,” said Douglas D. Gollan, the editor of *Elite Traveler*, the glossy journal that bills itself as the “private jet lifestyle magazine.”

People who once cruised comfortably in a 12-seat Gulfstream G450, Mr. Gollan said, now gaze covetously at a Boeing Business Jet, a 737 reconfigured to accommodate not 150 commercial passengers but 18 to 25 private ones. “In the land of high fliers,” Mr. Gollan said, the talk is of jumbo McMansions in the sky. “[Airbus](#) just signed six orders for private A350s,” at a Swiss trade show, he said, referring to a \$180-million jet that in its commercial application accommodates 300 passengers.

Who are the buyers of these behemoths? “Russian oligarchs and Chinese billionaires and Indian steel moguls and Arab royalties,” he said. “But there are also plenty of American entrepreneurs who made their money making widgets, billionaires who pull out of the driveway and nobody knows who they are.” Somebody knows them, though, because the planes those people own serve not just as business shuttles but as taxis for friends and acquaintances and also the family Labrador. For example, Leonard Tallerine, the independent oil and gas producer, and his wife, Janet, routinely extend their hospitality to pals on their frequent “short hops” between their houses in Houston, East Hampton and New Orleans.

“Our attitude is, ‘We’re going, there’s room, so come,’” Mr. Tallerine said.

ON a recent Thursday morning, Diane Sustendal, a writer in New Orleans, got a call from Mr. Tallerine, who said he was flying to New York to meet with his investment bankers. He had space on his eight-seat Hawker 800 XP, a jet that is the aeronautic equivalent of a midsize sedan on the car rental lot. Did she need a lift?

By 10 a.m., Ms. Sustendal was “drinking hot coffee and having warm muffins” on Mr. Tallerine’s jet, aboard which, she said, “no one ever tells you to turn off your computer or your iPod.”

By 3 p.m. she was in SoHo getting coiffed at [Frédéric Fekkai](#). By 7:30 the next morning, she was back on the plane with Mr. Tallerine, who made apologies for the cock’s-crow departure.

“I thought we should try to be back in time for lunch at Galatoire’s,” he said, referring to the legendary restaurant.

Generous and impulsive as Mr. Tallerine’s gesture was, it was not unusual, say those who have developed a taste for ride sharing, a select group with a nose for what those in the industry call “private jet families.”

“There are a lot of people in the social world who don’t have the equipment to fly privately on their own,” said David Patrick Columbia, who chronicles what used to be called the beau monde in his exhaustive *New York Social Diary*, whose Web site features a banner ad for a fractional jet share company.

“And they do work it with some people,” Mr. Columbia added, referring to beneficent types like a male Florida couple who own his and his eight-seat [Bombardier](#) Challengers, the four siblings from a wealthy Los Angeles clan who each owns a Gulfstream V, the billionaire financier who impulsively flies friends from his house in Hawaii to his other places in Aspen or New York on a retrofitted 737, or

the former United States ambassador whose private Airbus some pals board as casually as it were the [Amtrak](#) Acela making a shuttle stop at Paris [Charles de Gaulle](#).

“They’re all looking for the ride, of course, but they’re also looking for the quote unquote prestige,” Mr. Columbia said, referring to the warm elation private jet hitchhikers profess to feeling at the thought of having joined the airborne elect.

In its outlines, hitchhiking on private jets is not entirely different from thumbing a ride by the side of a freeway.

It is not, for a start, the kind of travel that suits people on rigid schedules (or for that matter, with round-trip discount commercial tickets, which, as Ms. Raean pointed out, become void if one flies just a single leg). It is not the sort of travel for people with who find it challenging to sing for their supper, and it is not an ideal means of transport with those lacking the Zen patience to cater to rich people’s whims.

“How can you possibly thank somebody enough?” said Steven Stolman, the designer who is organizing a 50-year retrospective of clothes by Lilly Pulitzer, the Palm Beach dressmaker. “People who fly private all the time are always stuck with F.B.O. catering,” said Mr. Stolman, who does most of his airborne hitchhiking along axes popular with the society ride-share crowd.

Referring to the typical private-jet fare of cold cut platters, fruit plates and defrosted shrimp cocktail, Mr. Stolman said the gift best appreciated by jet owners is often food. “I stopped at a sports bar on the way to the plane once and bought 100 buffalo wings,” he said. “They appreciate things like that.”

They also value guests who know the rules of the road, he added. But what are those?

“Never be late, because they won’t hold the plane for you,” Mr. Stolman said. “Always ask the crew where you should sit, since the crew knows where the owner likes to be. Always sit in back until you are invited to move forward. Become an expert at determining how much personal space your host requires. If they want to read quietly, let them. But, believe me, I will perform Act II of a Broadway show if it’s required.”

Given the costs of flying — the hundreds of thousands of dollars in fractional flight hours, the fuel surcharges and crew overtime, the equipment management fees and, in cases of full ownership, the \$40 million or more required to buy a jet — it makes sense that hosts might expect their guests to keep them entertained.

Mostly, though, hitchhikers attest that their hosts are “happy to invite friends to share in that wonderful experience,” said Dennis Basso, the high-end furrier, who flew to Paris in a friend’s private aircraft not long ago.

“The majority of the people I know are just helping each other out,” Mr. Basso said. “The way you or I would say, ‘You want a ride cross town in a taxi?’ the people I know might say, ‘Can I give you a ride, or can I get a ride with you on Friday?’”

The ride is not across town, of course, but from Palm Beach to Aspen, or Aspen to New York, or New York to Nantucket, or Nantucket to East Hampton, or East Hampton to Carmel.

“It’s like doing a friend a favor, you know?” Mr. Basso said. “Like, ‘Oh, do you have room for my housekeeper and a dog?’”