

Should you buy a jet card?

The answer could be “absolutely”—or “absolutely not.” It all depends on your circumstances.

by James Wynbrandt

JET CARDS, INTRODUCED JUST OVER A DECADE AGO AS BAIT for fractional-ownership programs, are now the access option of choice for many business aviation users. The cards are even finding a place in the wallets of numerous aircraft owners and dedicated charter customers.

These debit-style cards were created to mirror the benefits of fractional shares, with one-way pricing, guaranteed access to a specific model of jet and concierge service—all without the capital investment or commitment of ownership. But today, card programs may offer roundtrip discounts, peak and off-peak rates, use of multiple aircraft models with no interchange fee and refundable deposits instead of a “use it or lose it” policy on pre-purchased flight time.

Before comparing program details, evaluate your business jet usage to see whether a card would make sense for you. Cards aren’t inexpensive on an hourly basis compared with other private-jet alternatives, but particularly if you fly 15 to 40 hours per year, they can offer a simple and convenient way to go. A card locks in costs and, unlike charter, guarantees you an aircraft whenever you need it.

The pricing model favors flyers who make one-way trips, as there are no roundtrip or repositioning charges. (Card prices do, however, reflect the fact that holders basically subsidize one another’s one-way travel, which isn’t as cost-effective as round trips. And as noted above, some cards offer roundtrip discounts.) A jet card can also be a smart solution if you own an aircraft and occasionally need supplemental lift or access to one or more other business jet categories.

Fractional companies, business jet manufacturers and charter operators and brokers all sell jet cards. (No reliable numbers on overall card sales exist, according to aviation data service Jet-net.) Sponsors often tout the benefits of their particular business model, such as access to an exclusive fractional fleet or a fleet maintained by the manufacturer; or access to hundreds of quality aircraft in the case of broker-backed cards. But the business model generally matters less than program details that determine which cards best suit your preferences and needs.

One common element: all quality card programs use auditing services (Air Charter Safety Foundation, ARG/US and Wyvern) that vet aircraft and flight crews to standards higher than the FAA requires. Consider such auditing a must, then focus on the following variables:

Dollars or hours. You can buy dollar-value cards—typically redeemable for \$50,000 to \$250,000 worth of flying—and flight-time cards, which are generally available for 10 to 50 hours. The more money advanced or hours purchased, the lower the hourly rates. Hour cards are generally best for travelers who use one category of aircraft and like to keep tabs on their available flight time. Dollar denominations are preferable for flyers who desire access to a fleet, where hourly rates vary with aircraft category. Several programs sell both types of cards. Charter broker Sentient, for example, offers one card for fleet access and another for 25 hours of flying on specific categories of aircraft.

One model or many. Cards may provide access to an entire fleet, a category of aircraft such as light or midsize or a specific model. Most programs allow aircraft interchanges for a fee and adjust customer accounts accordingly. If you anticipate using multiple aircraft types, consider a card program that has no interchange fees, like the one from Delta Private Jets. If you’re particular about aircraft types, you can choose a model-specific program, like CitationAir’s, which uses only Cessna Citations, or Magellan Jets’, which offers 10 hours on an Eclipse 500 very light jet.

Peak, off-peak and blackout dates. All cards have peak travel days, during which cardholders may face restrictions on access or added costs, based on their membership level. The number of peak days and associated rules vary. If your schedule is flexible, consider a card that offers lower rates for restricted access, such as Flexjet’s 275-day or 325-day Calendar Card. If you need the ability to go anytime, a card that provides uniform pricing for all dates with no restrictions, such as NetJets’ Marquis Card, may be best. If your travel includes round trips, consider a card that offers round-trip discounts, such as charter operator Jet Aviation’s PT Jet Card.

Expiration rules. Most jet cards have a finite life—typically one or two years—after which unused hours or dollars evaporate. Some cards—Flight Options’ Jet Pass Select, for example—never expire and others allow you to roll unused credits into a new card. That’s a plus if you’re unsure about your access needs. Also check the card’s replenishment policy; some programs allow deposits of additional funds into a card account before it expires, a boon if you need just a few additional hours, while other programs require purchase of a new card.

Included costs. Make sure you compare apples to apples when evaluating card costs. Prices of some cards don’t include the 7.5 percent Federal Excise Tax charged on all flights within the U.S. Some cards add a fuel surcharge, others don’t. Other costs that may or may not be bundled into the price of the card include crew overnight fees, catering and ground transportation. Check flight-cancellation policies and minimum per-flight and daily charges. Determine whether hourly rates, fuel surcharges and other costs are locked in for the life of the card or subject to change. If you fly outside your home country, pay attention to international rates and any additional charges levied.

With their evolved program features, today’s jet cards provide great opportunities for maximizing value. But they can also deliver some costly surprises if you don’t read the fine print. Analyze your travel needs and the offerings carefully, and you’ll be holding the trump card when it comes to choosing the best program for your travel needs. ■

James Wynbrandt welcomes comments and suggestions at jwynbrandt@bjtonline.com.



Notable Jet Card Providers

Company	Cards	Fleet	Minimum card cost	Program highlights
AirPartner Airpartner.com (888) 247-7278	JetCard, JetCard Sterling	Worldwide access to aircraft from helicopters to VIP airliners from vetted providers	\$36,600 for 10-hour light-jet JetCard Sterling	Category-specific cards from one of the world's largest charter brokers. JetCard fleet is 10 years old or newer; Sterling JetCard fleet up to 15 years old. Available in 10-, 25- and 50-hour denominations. JetCard from \$3,900 per hour for light to \$11,400 for large cabin in the U.S., \$15,480 for global jet in Europe. Sterling JetCard to \$8,700 per hour for large-cabin in U.S. (Discounts negotiable with larger denomination cards.) Refundable deposit, no card expiration. Point-to-point pricing and discounts on qualifying round trips (25 percent continental U.S.; 15 percent Europe; 30 percent Mexico and Caribbean).
Avantair Avantair.com (727) 538-7948	Edge Card	Avantair's 57 Piaggio P.180 Avanti and Avanti II twin-turboprop aircraft	\$67,500 for 15-hour card	Card component of Avantair's fractional-ownership program. Piaggio P.180s offer midsize cabin combined with light-jet speed at turboprop prices. Program operates throughout U.S., 250 miles into Canada and in portions of Mexico and the Caribbean. 25-hour (\$110,000) and 50-hour (\$210,000) cards available.
CitationAir Citationair.com (877) 692-4828	Aircraft Jet Card, Fleet Jet Card	Citation CJ3, XLS, Sovereign and X	\$100,000 (refundable deposit)	Charter operator owned by Cessna. Fleet Jet Card provides fleet access (Citation X as available); Aircraft Jet Card is for a specific model, with access to fleet as available.
Delta Private Jets Deltaprivatejets.com (877) 541-3548	Delta Private Jets Card	Light, midsize, super-midsize, and large-cabin jets from Delta's managed and owned fleet and a network of approved charter operators	\$50,000	Cards available in denominations up to \$200,000 provide fleet access with no interchange fee. Owned by Delta Airlines; card bestows SkyMiles Diamond Medallion status on the airline. Delta Private Jets is a charter operator.
Flexjet by Bombardier Flexjet.com (866) 473-0025	Flexjet 25 Jet Card, Flexjet 25 Jet Card debit option	All Bombardier aircraft: Learjet 40XR, 45XR and 60XR, and Challenger 300 and 604s	\$100,000—Flexjet 25 Jet Card debit option	Owned by Bombardier, operated by Jet Solutions, LLC, a charter operator. Debit card provides access to entire fleet. Calendar Cards (275-, 325-, 355- and 365-day) reduce rates for off-peak travel. Model-specific cards from \$127,750 for 25 hours on a Learjet 40XR (275-day card) to \$309,650 for 25 hours on a Challenger 604 (365-day card).
Flight Options Flightoptions.com (877) 703-2348	JetPass Select	Hawker 400XP, Hawker 800XP, Citation X, Legacy 600	\$100,000 for 25 hours on Hawker 400XP (dry)	Model-specific 25-hour cards with no expiration provide access to Flight Options' fractional fleet. Aircraft interchange permitted. Card can be split to guarantee access to more than one category aircraft. Card costs don't include fuel charges or FET. \$5,000 credit for card renewal.
Greenjets Flygreenjets.com (800) 916-5387	Silver, Gold and Black Greenjets Cards	Aircraft sourced from vetted operators	\$5,000 introductory price on \$9,000 Silver Card	A shared-ride charter service by a charter broker. Card provides free companion ticket with each flight, priority access, lower advance-booking requirements and per-seat pricing at 40 percent off retail. Black card for continental U.S. travel; N.Y.-L.A. rates from \$2,000 to \$6,600 per seat (based on number of travelers); Gold, three-hour maximum flight; Silver, N.Y.-Fla. market with rates from \$1,000 to \$3,400 per seat.
Jet Aviation Jetaviation.com (888) 430-5387	PT Jet Card	Light (including Beechjet 400, Citation Bravo, Learjet 31), midsize (Citation XLS, Hawker 800XP, Learjet 60) and large-cabin (Challenger 604, Falcon 900EX) jets from Jet Aviation's managed fleet	\$51,000 for 10-hour light-jet card, \$112,500 for 10-hour large-cabin jet card	Cards sold in 10-, 25-, 50- and 100-hour increments by major operator of managed aircraft. Aircraft category interchange allowed. Cards may be purchased with time-specific hours on more than one aircraft. Unused hours can be rolled into a new card. 25-hour and above cards are fully refundable.
Magellan Jets Magellanjets.com (877) 550-5387	Voyager Jet Card/ Business Travel Jet Card/25-Hour Getaway Card	VLJ, light, midsize, super-midsize and large-cabin jets from vetted operators	10 hours in an Eclipse 500 VLJ, \$34,950 (Business Travel Jet Card); Voyager Card, \$250,000	Category-specific card with two category upgrades per card from major charter broker. Two free flight hours with Hawker 800XP 25-hour card. Sikorsky helicopter-card program for pooled weekend flights to and from the Hamptons debuts summer 2012 (\$995 per seat). Voyager card is refundable.
Marquis Jet Marquiscard.com (866) 538-0707	Marquis Jet Card by NetJets	Uses NetJets' fractional fleet of some 750 jets comprising nine models ranging from Hawker 400XP light jets to large-cabin Falcon 200EX/2000 and Gulfstream G450/G400/GIV-SP	\$119,900 for 25 hours on Hawker 400XP	Aircraft-specific card provides access to NetJets' fleet of fractional jets. Aircraft interchange allowed. Combo cards available for 12.5 hours apiece on two aircraft types. U.S. members can access to NetJets Europe fleet and European clients can access the U.S. fleet.
Sentient Sentient.com (866) 602-0051	Sentient Jet Card, 25-Hour Card (Preferred and Select)	\$110,450 for light jet Select 25-Hour card; \$150,000 for Sentient Jet Card	Uses charter broker Sentient's fleet of light, midsize, super-midsize and large-cabin jets from selected charter operators	Sentient Jet Card offers access to entire fleet of managed and chartered aircraft. The 25-Hour Card provides category-specific aircraft in two quality classes: Preferred and Select. One-way and roundtrip pricing. Rates from \$2,255 per hour for roundtrip Select light jet to \$11,850 per hour for a one-way Preferred large-cabin jet.
TWC Aviation Twcaviation.com (800) 538-6070	Debonair Jet Card	\$50,000 refundable deposit	Operates more than 60 jets based at over 20 locations and sources additional aircraft from vetted operators	One of world's largest charter operators. Card offers all-inclusive fees, guaranteed aircraft availability, no blackout days. New alliance with Hong Kong-based Sino Jet Management provides simple access to Asian market.