

Private-Jet Etiquette

Among the no-nos: Smoking pot and videotaping other guests.

By Matt Thurber

Illustration by Scott Pollack

WHAT DEFINES POLITESSE WHILE FLYING in a private jet? The poster child for how *not* to travel on one is 19-year-old pop star Justin Bieber. His flight from Toronto to Teterboro, N.J., on Jan. 31 was reportedly so polluted with marijuana smoke that the pilots donned oxygen masks.

That was after Bieber and his fellow passengers allegedly refused to surrender their spliffs. It's illegal to not heed a pilot's commands, so it's no surprise there's buzz that the Federal Aviation Administration may investigate the incident.

Passengers sometimes seem to think the rules on Earth don't apply while they are up in the air. Business-aviation consultant Gil Wolin recalls a flight in the 1980s, when he was part of the crew for a charter carrying famous passengers. After they fired up a fatty, the captain asked Wolin to tell the passengers that if they didn't put the joint out, he would land the airplane at the nearest airport. "They did immediately," he says.

Perhaps we could all use a refresher course on our manners. Most private-jet fliers don't own their wings but are "borrowing" an airplane via jet cards or charter, or they share ownership of an airplane with others. So treat your ride "with the same respect you would want your property treated," says Wolin. "You're in somebody's living room or office."

Furthermore, whether you own your airplane or fly charter, have a thought for the pilot and crew. "The people flying that airplane are skilled professionals," says Wolin. "Your life, your safety and security, depend on their being able to execute their job properly."

Needless to say, blowing out bong hits of hashish into the air you share with your pilot isn't conducive to safety. "There's just so many levels of wrong with that," says Denise Wilson, president and CEO of Palm Springs, Calif.-based charter operator Desert Jet, which requires pilots to land immediately and deplane the passengers in case of drug use.

"Our responsibility is to the aircraft owner and keeping that aircraft out of any legal wranglings," she adds. "You can't put everyone on the airplane at risk. That just gives our industry a black eye."

So heed the rules of the house. The owner, for example,



might not want you to bring a bottle of red wine on board because stains are extremely hard to remove from light-colored upholstery.

Also, "pay attention to the safety briefing," Wilson says. The crew may be incapacitated in an accident, and you may be called on to help rescue your fellow travelers. As a passenger on a relatively small aircraft, "there is an expectation that you're prepared for anything."

Pilots are not there for your entertainment. They are highly trained and paid to keep you alive and well. It's extremely uncool, not to mention unsafe, to ask the pilots to push into worsening weather, or, say, land at Aspen, Colo., at night.

That might work in a Sidney Sheldon novel, but you don't want to be along for a ride that turns into a high-risk test flight. Nor do the pilots. As Wolin dryly puts it, "The first one to arrive on the scene of an accident is always the pilot."

Which also explains why it is wise, if you own a private plane, to give the pilot and crew enough of a per diem to sleep well in decent hotels. A Motel 6 on the highway just doesn't cut it.

Arriving at the airplane by car? If you are allowed to

drive onto the airport ramp or are being driven, safety protocol says to angle the car parallel to the aircraft. Never park pointed at the airplane, and keep the car's wheels turned away from the jet, in case someone forgot to shift the transmission into "park."

And never be late for a flight, particularly when hitching a ride on someone else's jet. It's polite to arrive at the airport or private terminal before the owner or host, but don't board the airplane and grab a seat before your host has done so. He or she may have a favorite seat—there is usually a "CEO chair" that controls all of the cabin equipment—and you don't want to be embarrassed into having to move.

We also recommend not turning into a paparazzo while on board. Be discreet when it comes to photographing your fellow travelers, and make sure they are amenable. "It's a corporate jet," says Wolin. "It's used for privacy and security" reasons.

In one notorious case, a charter company itself ended up in court after surreptitiously videotaping Michael Jackson and trying to sell the video. The case was settled for a reported \$2.5 million, and the charter company went out of business.

Then there is the issue of carrying bags. After landing, the crew will prefer to unload the airplane, and the personnel who pump gas and park airplanes will gladly move the bags into the terminal for you.

While it's acceptable to tip the ground staff helping you lug luggage through the airport, Wilson doesn't want you to tip her pilots. "I encourage my pilots to say, 'Thank you, but no thank you; tips aren't required,'" she says. "Our pilots are well compensated."

In short, the rules of common sense and propriety apply as much in the air as on the ground. "If you expect to be invited again, be cool. Be courteous and respectful," says Wolin.

And if you own a plane—please be decent to your pilot and crew. ■

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Don't board and take a place before your host. He or she might have a favorite seat.