

Light Jets, Heavy Benefits

Save money by matching your machine to your mission.

By Matt Thurber

TECHNOLOGY MAKES MANY THINGS SMALLER and cheaper, and thankfully, private jets are no exception. Until 2006, when the new generation of very light jets like the Cessna Mustang and Eclipse 500 hit the market, and then, two years later, the Embraer Phenom 100, your only choices were supercramped light jets or putting up with the extra cost of flying larger models.

But now there are options. The vast majority of business aircraft seat six passengers in a cabin roughly the size of a large SUV and fly an average trip of less than 1,000 nautical miles, claims the National Business Aviation Association. That's frequently in planes costing about \$10 million. Very light jets, in contrast, typically seat six to eight passengers, have a maximum range of 1,178 nautical miles, and roughly cost between \$2 million and \$4 million. (See box.)

In other words, most business flights neatly fit the very light jet's mission; if owners need a larger jet for the occasional long-range flight, they can always charter. Says Eclipse Aerospace's CEO and chairman, Mason Holland: "I use the plane like an air limo myself."

Consider the flight path of attorney Mark Tate of the Tate Law Group. The lawyer typically flies from his base in Savannah, Ga., to anywhere on the East Coast or as far west as Chicago, generally a trip of up to three hours. The occasional trip to the Cayman Islands requires a stop, and usually another lawyer or a paralegal flies with him.

Tate, who has a pilot, previously owned a single-engine Piper Meridian turboprop, and tried the TBM 700 and a Pilatus PC-12. But none of these properly suited Tate's mission profile. He also tried Cessna's Mustang, but the higher purchase and operating costs meant it wasn't "the right fit."

But now Tate contentedly owns an Eclipse 500 and is trading that in for a new Eclipse 550 later this year, which will cost him around \$2.9 million. Like Tate, about

30% of Eclipse owners employ professional pilots, claims Holland.

What makes the Eclipse work for Tate is that its cost of operation, about \$800 per hour, is a third that of larger jets. And he doesn't feel that the ability to stand up and walk around the cabin is worth the extra cost. "This allows you to get where you need to go," he says.

A typical trip for Tate is from Savannah to Atlanta. To fly on an airline, he has to leave the office 1½ hours before the flight, go through the security theater at the TSA checkpoint, and endure the inevitable delays. In his Eclipse, it's another experience altogether: Tate is in the air soon after he leaves his office and can land at one of the less busy Atlanta-area airports. Even though the cost of an airline ticket may be \$500, he says, "at what I bill at, it costs me more to fly commercial than [to use] my airplane."

Tate averages 152 hours a year in his Eclipse 500. "Private aviation is not about saving dollars," he says. "It's about maximizing your revenue potential. It means I can take on clients all over the country. My waiting for an [airliner] is a prescription for revenue failure. There are tax benefits [to flying privately], but the best [benefit] is management of time."

And while Tate employs the Eclipse primarily as a business tool, he also uses the plane for family jaunts. His 16-year-old son, who is six feet tall; 12-year-old daughter; and wife all fit in the small jet. "They are comfortable with it," he says. But the family is, it must be said, also eagerly awaiting their upgraded Eclipse 550. ■

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Eclipse 500



Cessna Mustang



Phenom 100

The Bottom Line

The Mustang, Eclipse 500, and Phenom 100 essentially use the same Pratt & Whitney Canada PW600 series engine, but with different power ratings. The Eclipse is the smallest with the lightest maximum takeoff weight at 6,000 pounds. The Mustang's is 8,645 pounds, and the Phenom's, the heaviest, is 10,472 pounds.

For these reasons, price, size, and maximum payloads vary. The Eclipse 500 costs \$2.2 million and seats six. (The updated Eclipse 550 costs \$2.895 million.) In contrast, Cessna's Mustang costs \$3.2 million and also has six seats. The Phenom 100 costs \$4.1 million and seats up to eight. These very light jets can carry payloads, not including fuel, of 1,100 pounds to over 1,300 pounds, depending on how each is equipped. The key difference is that the Eclipse planes have no space for a toilet; the Mustang has a curtained nonflushing toilet in the forward cabin; and the Phenom 100 has a lavatory with a door in the aft cabin.

What does this all mean? Teterboro, N.J., to Martha's Vineyard, Mass., takes roughly 40 minutes in a VLJ and 62 minutes on an airliner, with its padded travel time accounting for airport congestion and taxiing. Advantages diminish over longer flights, but consider a trip from Teterboro to Orlando Executive Airport in Florida: It would take roughly two hours and 40 minutes in the VLJ or by airline, but you would still have to budget an extra two hours of airport time for the commercial flight, versus the 15 minutes needed to board a private light jet. As attorney Mark Tate puts it, "I don't mind stopping to be refueled. If I have a choice of my plane or commercial to Dallas or Houston or Scottsdale [Ariz.] or New Orleans, I will take my plane."

—M.T.