



Flight Apps

Technology is making the private-aviation market efficient

The AgustaWestland AW109 is a popular traffic hopper for those in a rush to get to the airport.

By Mark Huber

ASERIES OF SMARTPHONE APPS FROM AVIATION COMPANIES ARE bringing luxury transport to a whole new market of passengers, who possibly number in the millions. The service apps are designed for the economically aspirational and the socially spontaneous.

Let's say it's 2 p.m. on a Friday in February near the end of a grueling week on Wall Street. A friend texts temptation from the glistening slopes of Vail, Colo.: The powder is great, the sky is blue, and there's plenty of room in the rustic manse that his party is renting. Several of your buddies are getting together that night at the Ritz Bachelor Gulch for dinner. "Get out here," your friend taunts. The logistics of such an invite once would have seemed impossible or economically irrational for all but the wealthiest. No longer. Today, all you need are the right apps on your smartphone.

One of the companies offering these services is private-jet membership firm Wheels Up. The New York-based operator has created a ride-share membership service that you can join after downloading the app. You pay a modest \$5,950 annual individual-membership fee and can book a spare seat anytime one is available on a Wheels Up flight—or even the entire airplane. "The app is allowing us to create a much more efficient marketplace," says CEO Kenny Dichter. "We will probably have 20,000 missions this year. That could not happen without technology and without having the app on your smartphone."

Costs? Ride-share members can book a single seat on a 350-nautical-miles-per-hour Wheels Up King Air turboprop for \$500 an hour, plus a \$50 booking fee. Its Cessna jets go for \$775 an hour. Dichter thinks that pricing this low, with easy-to-use apps, could add millions more customers to the private-aircraft game. Calling it "social aviation," Dichter says the technology allows us "to geo-locate our members and for our members to geo-locate each other—and airplanes and crews." To help clients with their aviation matchmaking, Dichter and his crew sponsor a variety of "wheels down" social events, such as the Super Saturday Tailgate in Scottsdale, Ariz.

So if you get that call from Vail, any smartphone using the Wheels Up app will find you a flight leaving from, say, Teterboro, N.J., in three hours with two ride-share seats available. Estimated time from Teterboro to Vail is about four hours, which will get you there practically in time for après ski. Estimated cost: \$2,050 to \$3,150 one way, depending on aircraft model. Other aviation companies offering similar types of app-based services are Gotham Air, Blue Star, and Victor.

OK, but the slog to Teterboro through New York's Friday night rush-hour traffic is going to be brutal. Well, not necessarily. More than 45,000 users have downloaded the Blade app since its inception two years ago. That app lets you book individual seats or charter an entire six-seat Airbus helicopter heading to area hot spots like the Hamptons and Montauk, as well as a shuttle service, called Bounce, to local New York-area airports. Operating from Blade's dedicated lounges at Manhattan's heliports at East 34th Street and West 30th Street, the Bounce shuttle services to local commercial airports cost a flat rate of \$895 if you book the whole helicopter.

The Bounce flights are available with as little as 20 minutes' notice, and if you book the entire helicopter, you can use the same app to offer up spare seats, potentially driving the cost of your airport shuttle down to about \$150. (The math: \$895 divided by six, but that's not including a tip, which is generally 20% of the total fare.)

That puts the cost of the Bounce trip on par with ground-pounding via Uber Black, which comes in at \$116 to \$143, according to the Uber fare estimator. Of course, the Bounce ride is a lot quicker; six minutes in the helicopter flying at up to 120 knots, versus an hour or more by car in rush-hour traffic. And odds are pretty good, too, that on a Friday afternoon in New York, you won't get stuck paying for the whole helicopter.

The app is the only way to book on Blade, says CEO Rob Wiesenthal, and I found it very easy to download, register on, and find and originate flights. At these competitive prices, it's possible I'll see you in Vail. ■

MARK HUBER reviews aircraft for Business Jet Traveler.