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Private jets aren't just for wealthy executives—they have been used to transport everything from birds to diamonds

BY NATASHA TOURISH

When it comes to air travel, there are few things that can compare to flying on a private jet.

It is usually the preserve of billionaires, royals, celebrities and chief executives but sometimes the 10 prized seats on a private aircraft are filled with a different type of precious cargo.

Dubai-based private aviation pilot and executive director of Business Aviation Concepts Ivan Vanderhyden says he has flown everything from falcons to diamonds over the years for his wealthy clientele.

“I have seen it all really and had all sorts of celebrations onboard,” he says.

He has captained everyone from the Real Madrid team just after they won the champions league to Will Smith, Sting, Naomi Campbell, David Beckham and Zinedine Zidane over the years.

But some of his most difficult guests were of a different breed.

“I had to fly falcons for the Abu Dhabi royal family to Pakistan,” he says.

“These are big birds in large cases so just to get them onboard was a tough mission.”

Vanderhyden, who also worked for Saudi Arabia’s Al Saud royal family, has transported other strange, precious cargo, including millions of dollars’ worth of raw diamonds from Zimbabwe and Hong Kong to Dubai.

He recalls piloting a private jet to an Eastern European country to pick up a group of young women and take them to the Maldives for a 10-day yacht party at the request of a Middle Eastern royal family member.

But it is not all party girls and diamonds. He has also embarked on life-and-death missions with medical evacuations, which, he says, “can be risky” as private jets are not equipped with medical facilities or equipment.

On a particularly precarious mission, he had to fly to a Middle



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Eastern country to pick up a patient who was in a coma as a result of a serious motorcycle accident and bring him to Germany for specialised treatment.

Sadly, on that occasion the patient did not survive.

But such cases are a rarity. The Canadian pilot says the majority of his clients in the Middle East are ultra high net worth business executives who want to maximise their time by making multiple stops in one trip.

“I deal with the top one per cent who could have an 8am meeting in Kuwait, a lunchtime meeting in Jeddah and a 4pm meeting in Riyadh.”

“They will stay overnight, have a meeting again in the morning and come back to Dubai.”

The veteran pilot, who has recently taking a step back from flying to concentrate on developing his private aviation advisory business, says business aviation has been proven to maximise an executive’s time by up to 40 per cent.

While commercial airlines like Etihad and Emirates have introduced private suites and a butler service to target the same wealthy individuals, Vanderhyden does not think it will affect the top one per cent’s decision to fly on a private jet.

“Private suites are for a very niche market and I think they will do well with them but the top one per cent will always prefer their own private aircraft,” he says.

“They want to work onboard and would rather opt for total privacy. They want to show up 15 minutes before the flight is due to depart and be able to easily reschedule the flight if their meeting runs over or plans change.”

While it has been a tough few years for the business aviation industry globally, Vanderhyden says the introduction of new long-range aircraft models and fresh business coming from Africa and Iran will be “a game changer”.

“North America is driving the business aviation sales market right now because its economy is strong,” he says.

“The European market is weaker, partly due to the Greek crisis and sanctions in Russia have caused traffic flow to be down four per cent year on year globally.”

He says the ongoing crisis in the region is also affecting business.

“Some people just do not want to fly within the region because of the conflict in Syria and elsewhere.”

However, the businessman is looking to Africa, where by



Ivan Vanderhyden, executive director of Business Aviation Concepts

2040 there are expected to be more than 10,000 ultra high net worth individuals, four times the number today, according to the Wealth-X annual wealth analysis report. He also estimates the private aviation market in Iran is worth upwards of \$1 billion.

“Iran is an untapped market and once the sanctions are lifted, which we estimate will be between March and May next year, the opportunities for private business aviation are huge,” he says.

Vanderhyden says he is actively working with his business partners to find a local partner in Iran who knows the market and hopes to open an office there by early next year.

According to the pilot, the UAE would be a good option for Iranians to register their private jets, as its reputation and servicing standards are comparable to the US.

He expects that there will be more than 800 private aircraft in the Middle East region by 2030, while a joint Wealth-X WingsX Advance report says the regional market is worth \$10 billion over the next decade.

He says: “When an aircraft is registered in the UAE, it carries an A6 registration so when we see that, we know as far as maintenance and air worthiness is concerned, it has been kept to the highest standards because it is on a par with European authorities.”