

# **Robb Report**

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## **The Wary Traveler**

by Dexter van Zile

*Private Travel may be more secure than its commercial counterpart, but you still have to practice some precautions to ensure a safe trip.*

It is a common scene at any major airport terminal: chauffeurs of taxi drivers holding signs bearing the names of passengers, awaiting the clients' arrivals so that they can drive them from the airport to their hotels. To an exhausted traveler who has just completed a long flight and is far from home, such a sight can be welcome, but for the cautious visitor of the security professional charged with protecting him, it should arouse suspicion. In some parts of the world, it is not uncommon for criminals to overpower or even kill a driver, seize the car, and find the paperwork containing the name of the client whom he has been hired to meet. The proper uniform, an appropriate vehicle, and knowledge of the client's name are often enough for a criminal to lure a victim into a car for the purpose of robbing or kidnapping him. "It happens all the time," says David Soergel, president of Secure Transport International, a private security firm that is headquartered and has offices in Washington, D.C., and Louisville, Ky. "I never trust local drivers. I send in an advance crew, usually one or two men, a couple of days before the arrival of my client, and they rent a car."

Soergel and other security professionals prefer that their clients avoid airport terminals and commercial air travel altogether by traveling via a private jet—one that they charter, own a fraction of, or own outright. Not only is flying by private jet more convenient because it enables you to circumvent airport lines and avoid airline delays, security professionals say, it is also safer. In most cases, your aircraft and its crew have been rigorously vetted, you are familiar with all of the other passengers, and everyone's luggage has been thoroughly inspected. Your travel itinerary remains private rather than posted on monitors in airports throughout the world, and when you arrive at your destination, you usually deplane away from the general aviation terminals. "By arrangement and good advance work, you can have limited exposure on the pickup so you don't get near the terminal in which a hostile person might have been waiting," says William A. Hawthorne, a former Secret Service agent and the founder of William A. Hawthorne Associates, a security firm with offices in Naples, Fla., and Boston.

Because of these security benefits, private jets have become almost a necessity for those who can afford to travel in them, says Milton Ferrell, president of Ferrell Schultz Carter Zumpano & Fertel, a Florida law firm that advises current and former heads of state and CEOs on personal security., “It’s imperative that [affluent] people fly on private jets,” Ferrell says.

But private travel does present its own set of security challenges. Security professionals consistently caution their clients to remain as anonymous as possible when traveling abroad. Arriving at a foreign destination in a private jet can sometimes compromise this objective because the aircraft itself will draw attention. The mere presence of a private jet at a local airport informs the locals that someone with wealth is in town. A potential assailant would have every incentive to learn the identity the moneyed individual and how he or she could be exploited.

The conspicuousness of a private jet does indeed pose a challenge for the affluent traveler seeking anonymity, acknowledges Charlie LeBlanc, vice president of operations for Air Security International, which provides aviation security for corporations and private jet owners throughout the world. “You can’t ignore the curiosity factor private or corporate jets bring to a city or an airport, especially when you’re in a remote location,” says LeBlanc. “This is not an issue when you fly to London, but when you fly to a Third World country, the plane you’re traveling in may very well be the first Gulfstream IV the people there have ever seen.”

However, any dangers associated with private travel can be minimized. Knowledge is power, Louis Mizell tells his clients when describing the benefits of enlisting the services of security consultants. Mizell is a former counterterrorism specialist for the State Department and current president of an international security service that gathers extensive information on crimes against travelers. “The best weapon we have is information.” This holds true for assailants as well as travelers.

Recognizing the potentially sinister value of information, Richard Isaacs, senior vice president for the LUBRINCO Group, a worldwide vulnerability management firm with offices in New York City, warns against placing any information on the exterior of a plane that could reveal the identity of its passengers. “It’s not a good idea for anyone to get on a plane that has his corporate logo on it,” he says. NetJets, the leading fractional ownership provider, concurs. “Each tail number [of a NetJets plane] has no reference to the company or individual flying on board,” says NetJets Senior Vice President Kevin Russell, adding that such security measures do not end with

the plane's exterior. "Passenger manifests are available to no one but customs or immigration.

Ferrell, who recently authored a chapter on personal security for the book *Wealthy & Wise* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), applauds this type of discretion. "No one has to know when you're traveling from New York City to Milan," he says. "Keep that information limited to personal assistants, family members, and the people who are going to fly you there." Among those who certainly have no business knowing your travel plans are the members of the ground crew. "Don't talk to the fuel person," advises Soergel. "Don't talk to the dispatch person. Don't talk to the mechanic."

If an itinerary becomes public, reschedule or cancel the trip, says ASI's LeBlanc. In an effort to keep their plans secret, some high-profile celebrities, LeBlanc says, often do not inform even the authorities at their destinations of their impending arrival until well into the flight.

Given the value of the information available to a jet's crew, background checks are essential says LeBlanc. Indeed, any reputable private jet company conducts extensive background checks as a matter of course. "With our pilots, we go back 10 years at a minimum," says NetJets' Russell. "We conduct psychological, financial, and criminal background checks on all of our pilots."

Although it is important to preserve your anonymity when you are on a plane, the need to maintain a low profile becomes even more imperative once you arrive at your destination. The advice typically give to young children—to not speak to strangers—is especially applicable to affluent travelers, says Vincent Bove, a regional manager for Summit Security Services, which provides crime prevention assistance to businesses in and around New York City. If, Bove says, someone asks you for directions, walk away because it is likely an attempt to divert your attention from your own safety or property. "You're a tourist," he explains. "You're the last person in the world somebody should be asking for directions."

Following such advice might put a damper on your social activities while traveling, but in some cases, experts say, this is a necessary sacrifice. Steer clear of bars, Ferrell warns, especially if you are the type of person who, after a few drinks, feels compelled to tell everyone how important and wealthy you are. The easiest way to remain anonymous, he says, is to stay in your hotel room. "If you're in Mexico City, you might want to avoid the discotheque at 2 am," he says. "Go to dinner with someone you know, go back to your hotel room, watch CNN, read a book, and go to sleep."

This counsel becomes particularly pertinent when visiting some South American countries where kidnapping has evolved into an industry with its own infrastructure of informants (who frequent expensive bars and hotels scouting for potential prey), abductors, and fortresses for holding the victims. With some sense of irony, Ferrell says that if you are kidnapped, you had better hope that your abductor is a professional who is capable of pulling off the crime. “An amateur might kill you by giving you bad food or be too stupid to talk with our company,” he says. Given the risks, it might be prudent to purchase kidnapping insurance, but, he emphasizes, keep this information strictly confidential, otherwise you will become an even more attractive target.

The threat of kidnapping is hardly confined to travelers visiting South America. Law enforcement officials throughout the world are bracing for an onslaught of kidnappings and outright attacks on foreign travelers as the war on terror continues, says Bob Newman, editor and publisher of *Global Security Newsletter & Intelligence Briefing*, a newsletter that provides information on dangers to travelers overseas. While the ultimate goal is to generate headlines by harming as many people as possible, targeting the affluent is also part of the plan, he says. “Evidence [found] in the al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan indicates they’ve looked at going after yachts.”

Militant Islamists are not the only potential assailants, says LUBRINCO Group’s Isaacs. “All of the leftist groups from the ‘60s and ‘70s are reappearing,” Isaacs says. “The onslaught of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism has created the environment where they feel their time is back again.”

Under the conditions presented by Isaacs, a traveler might be tempted to arm himself. This is exactly why Isaacs is adamantly opposed to his clients carrying firearms. “We don’t generally let people carry guns,” he says. “We don’t want them to feel confident. We want them to feel like they are hunted—that they’re sort of exposed—to make sure they don’t have any problems.”

The unfortunate reality, says Isaacs, is that criminals will find victims, but his goal, and the goal of all personal protection professionals, is to render clients less vulnerable to attacks, to ensure that they are not easy prey. “It’s a pity someone else will be taken,” Isaacs laments. “But I can’t keep the whole world safe.”