

How to Find the Right Charter

By James D. Butler 05/28/2008

If you're trying private air travel for the first time, traditional charter is likely to be the best way to dip your toe in the water. There are no long term commitments or big capital outlays. Just like renting a limousine, you pay only the cost of your trip.

There are at least one thousand charter operators in the United States. Increasingly, you can find charter operators on the internet, making it easier to shop for the best fare. But this isn't quite like buying a set of steak knives. Charter flying is expensive and, more importantly, you're putting your life and the lives of your family members in the hands of the operator, its aircraft and pilots. Here are some questions you should ask to make certain not only that the price is right, but also that you'll enjoy the flight and be as safe as possible.

- How long has the operator been in business?
- What is the five year accident/incident history of the operator?
- What model and year is the aircraft you'll be flying? What avionics and other safety equipment does it have? Is it in compliance with all FAA directives and manufacturer maintenance requirements? What is its damage history? If it's an older aircraft, has it recently been refurbished?
- What is the seating layout of the aircraft? What is its luggage capacity? Is the cabin height and width sufficient such that you'll be able to comfortably stand up and move around? Is the lavatory separated from the rest of the cabin by a door?
- How many hours have the pilots flown overall and in this particular type of aircraft?
- What is the aircraft's range? Will it be able to fly your trip without a fuel stop?
- Is the price quote firm and, if so, for how long? What, if any, additional charges will there be? Expect to pay a 7.5% federal excise tax, but be clear as to whether there will be any fuel surcharge. In today's environment with rapidly escalating fuel costs, many operators will only guarantee a price without a fuel surcharge for a short time.
- What standard catering items will be provided?
- What is the cancellation policy?

Another way to check on the safety record of the operator, the aircraft and the pilots is to request a certification from one of the established safety auditing firms, like ARG/US or Wyvern Consulting. I'll explain more about these options in a future article.

When we at Shaircraft Solutions book charter flights for our clients, we prefer operators with whom we've done business before and who have a proven track record. Even with these operators, we ask for updated answers to all these questions. So if you're thinking about charter, don't just shop for the lowest price. You wouldn't do that when you're looking for a surgeon, so why would you do it when choosing a charter company?

Our goal is to find our clients the best price for their flight with an experienced operator on a well maintained and appropriately equipped aircraft flown by top notch pilots, all with a spotless safety record. That should be your goal as well.

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