

COMPANY TOWN

Why private jet travel is booming in Hollywood during the pandemic



Richard Zaher is the founder and CEO of Paramount Business Jets, a Leesburg, Va., charter private jet company that's seen its business more than double during the pandemic. Zaher stands next to a jet at Leesburg Executive Airport. (Kirk McKoy/Los Angeles Times)

By ANOUSH SAKOUI | STAFF WRITER

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When veteran producer Bill Mechanic begins filming his latest movie, “The Divide,” in Australia later this year, he knows he will have to charter a private jet to fly out his

lead actor.

Under normal circumstances, that would be out of the question. Typically, for a limited budget indie feature, all the cast and crew — even the stars — fly commercial, which is substantially cheaper.

But the Oscar-nominated producer is willing to pay the extra costs to fly the actor (whom he declined to identify) from Los Angeles to Australia to reduce the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak on set.

“That becomes, even on a tight budget, something you don’t fight, since if your stars tested positive, then you’d be shut down,” said Mechanic, a former Fox and Disney executive who produced the movies “Hacksaw Ridge” and “Coraline.” “There’s more money lost ... not being smart. Penny-wise, pound-foolish sort of thing.”

It’s not only A-list celebrities who are demanding private flights. Increasingly, requests for use of such perks is coming from a wider group of cast and crew nervous about getting infected with COVID-19 while traveling on commercial flights, or because direct routes have been suspended as a result of the pandemic-related collapse in travel.

Some studios and producers have balked at the demands for private jet travel at a

time when many are facing [additional financial pressure](#) brought on by new safety measures intended to prevent coronavirus outbreaks.

But, like Mechanic, many are willing to compromise because of the extraordinary circumstances caused by the health crisis.

“If a studio is making a star or makeup artist get to a certain place that requires air travel and the person wants to go, the financier-producer will make whatever accommodation they feel is appropriate. Then it becomes a negotiation,” said L.A.-based veteran talent manager [Larry Thompson](#), whose clients include William Shatner.

The willingness by studios to make accommodations is a notable change, he said.

“‘There’s not enough money’ — you hear that on every movie,” he said. “You’re not hearing it now.”

Private jets aren’t being used just to transport cast and crew.

In August, just months after L.A. county health officials approved a restart to filming in the region, the producers of the CBS Network procedural “S.W.A.T.” faced a deadline to get the cast and crew tested for COVID-19 over a weekend to meet its filming schedule.

With just a 48-hour window to get the results and only a laboratory in Austin, Texas, available to process them in time, the only option was to use a private jet to carry the samples the thousand miles, according to a person close to the production who was not authorized to comment. None of the cast and crew travels privately for the show, and no one was flown as part of this one-off event, the person said.

Producers are required to get the cast and crew tested under a return-to-work

agreement with entertainment industry unions. Some shows like CBS' "The Bold and the Beautiful," one of the first major series to restart filming, [initially struggled to get reliable](#) processing for hundreds of tests, but more labs have since opened to give producers a better choice of services.

Some businesses have profited from the growing popularity of private jet travel.

"We initially lost a lot of business due to cancellations but ended up booking more than twice as many flights in 2020," said Richard Zaher, chief executive and founder of Paramount Business Jets, a Leesburg, Va. -based charter broker that arranges private jet flights, including out of Los Angeles.

Zaher, 46, estimates that sales more than doubled over the last year, to more than \$25.5 million in 2020.

He attributes at least some of that to entrepreneurs, corporations and wealthy individuals who'd never flown privately before but now do so because of the pandemic.

Zaher says the entertainment industry accounts for a small but growing share of his sales.

At the end of December, a production company filming a Super Bowl commercial decided to charter a private plane to transport the crew and stars from L.A. to Milwaukee and Green Bay, Wis., Zaher said.

"People in production houses are also thinking about safety of their staff, just like everyone else, so yes, we are definitely seeing an increase in demand in that regard," Zaher said.

One studio client wanted to lease a private jet to transport COVID-19 test samples,

while another celebrity client used private jets so her assistant could travel from L.A. to visit family in December, he added, without naming his clients.

The hourly cost of renting a private jet varies from \$2,000 to \$10,000, Zaher said.

Flying from Van Nuys to Teterboro, N.J. — one of the most popular routes — costs \$26,000 to \$32,000 one way, depending on the plane, said Zaher. Flying private can cost at least five times as much as flying commercial, he added.

Studios are already nursing billions of dollars in losses from pandemic-related shutdowns in 2020. COVID-19 has meant productions can take longer, as working hours are now limited on set under new safety measures agreed upon with unions. These also require productions to pay for the additional costs for testing and sanitization of sets and gear. That can [add \\$1 million](#) to a regular movie budget.

While flying private may seem like an extravagance, the downside of a key crew member like a director or actor getting COVID-19 is an extremely costly production shutdown, which can lead to losses exceeding \$100,000 a day.

Some Hollywood studios [own or lease](#) their own jets, which are also used by executives. Stars like [Oprah Winfrey](#), [Jim Carrey](#) and [John Travolta](#) have their own.

With big budget films, requests to fly private are not unusual. Warner Bros. flew Keanu Reeves by private jet to the “Matrix 4” shoot in Berlin last summer, according to person familiar with the situation who was not authorized to comment. A representative for Reeves declined to comment.

Some producers are instead offering perks like LAX’s [private terminal](#) service. The terminal, on the outskirts of the airport, allows VIPs to check in for their flight, relax in their own room with access to refreshments and showers, clear security and get driven to their plane without setting foot in an LAX terminal.

A boost in demand from the entertainment industry has created a new layer of revenue for the Private Suite at LAX, frequented by the stars such as Gabrielle Union and Jamie Foxx.



“Major studios and even smaller production companies are requesting entire terminal buyouts for their production travel,” said Amina Belouizdad, co-chief executive of PS at LAX. “This allows the whole team — talent, camera crews, etc. — to have our private terminal completely to themselves when flying commercial.”

Times staff writer Wendy Lee contributed to this report.

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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

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