Need a Flying Limousine? Climb Aboard a Boeing 717

When it comes to chauffeuring special groups from here to there, the Boeing 717 is quickly earning a reputation as the perfect airborne limousine.

Nearly 70 children ages 6 to 17 from Make-A-Wish Foundation of America and King's School in Palm Springs, Calif., celebrate an airplane ride aboard a new 717 leased from AirTran Airways.

The smallest commercial jet built by Boeing, passengers love its "big jet" comfort while operators like its unsurpassed cost-effectiveness and ability to fly multiple short flights efficiently.

In addition to being used by many airlines for profitable regularly scheduled flights, it is finding a niche as the airplane of choice for charters as well.

"Boeing engineers set a goal of low maintenance cost and high reliable dispatch performance for the 717 when they designed the 100-passenger jetliner," said Jim Phillips, vice president of the 717 program. "So these factors, combined with the airplane's interior comfort, make the 717 a natural for charters."

A chartered 717 has been used to fly members of the press corps when covering the president's travels in the United States. In fact, the journalists have specifically requested the 717 many times because they like it so much.

A 717 also carried U.S. ambassadors to China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from Long Beach to Seattle. The group was on a tour of major U.S. companies to encourage business opportunities in the ASEAN market.

Another one of the twinjets flew senior Chinese airline executives and other officials from the Boeing Leadership Center in St. Louis to AirTran Airways in Orlando, Fla. The executives were participating in a two-week management seminar at the Boeing Leadership Center to learn more about the operation of several world-class airlines.

AirTran Airways, a carrier flying to destinations throughout the eastern United States, has 50 Boeing 717s in regular service - more than any other airline.

Since 1999, the company has annually hosted groups of children aboard a 717, called the Kids' Flight. In February 2002, for example, nearly 70 children ages 6 to 17 from Make-A-Wish Foundation of America and King's School in Palm Springs, Calif., got a thrill-of-a-lifetime aboard a new 717 leased from AirTran Airways.

For many of the youngsters it was their first airplane ride.

"Awesome; I've never seen anything like it," said 17-year-old Aaron as the jetliner lifted off the runway and carried the kids, their chaperones, Boeing employees and friends east to the Grand Canyon.

On the return flight to Palm Springs, the 717 crossed over Lake Mead, Hoover Dam and Las Vegas. On arrival, hundreds of family and friends greeted the flight, waving American flags and cheering.

In addition, Boeing has used a chartered 717 to transport almost 80 international journalists and their interpreters during annual media tours of Boeing facilities around the United States. In 2002, journalists from 17 countries met with Boeing senior executives during a whirlwind, six-day, four-city tour - a demanding scheduling feat made possible by the use of a dependable airplane.

"It's a good airplane for special operations like flying 70 to 80 reporters across America," said Dror Marcom, of the Globes newspaper in Israel.

Boeing also conducted a media tour of major company operations for more than a dozen Chicago-based business journalists in early 2002, following the company's relocation of its headquarters to that city. A leased 717 picked up the guests in Chicago and flew them to St. Louis, Seattle and Southern California.

"We were proud to have the news media as passengers aboard the 717 for these special tours so they could discover for themselves what all our customers have been telling us - that the airplane is comfortable, efficient and quiet," Phillips said.

The 717 is designed especially for short-haul, high frequency flights. A standard 717 carries 106 passengers in a bright, spacious cabin interior that features five-across seating in economy class, with illuminated handrails and large overhead stowbins.

So far more than 100 Boeing 717s have been delivered to airlines on four continents. In addition to AirTran Airways, other operators include Aerolineas Baleares, Bangkok Airways, Hawaiian Airlines, Olympic Aviation, QantasLink and Turkmenistan Airlines. Midwest Express Airlines, based in Milwaukee, is due to start regular 717-passenger service in early 2003.

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