

Opening door to private flights

Promotion could save high flyers thousands of dollars before Xmas, writes **Grant Bradley**

A recently launched private jet firm is knocking 25 per cent off flights within New Zealand to boost business in the lead-up to Christmas.

NZ Jet says the 10-day promotion will save passengers thousands of dollars on flights.

Co-owner Sofia Ambler acknowledges that even with the discount rates, prices are out of reach of many, but are less than what many aspiring customers think.

"It could be feasible for a lot of people who thought a private jet is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to go anywhere," she said.

She and husband John have built the private jet business during the pandemic, soft launching it to domestic travellers but already attracting high-end international tourists who are fuelling a recovery in the luxury tourism market.

NZ Jet's eight-seat Cessna Citation Ultra can fly to smaller airports throughout the country. One-way GST exclusive prices for the plane for Auckland (Ardmore) to Hawke's Bay or Kerikeri are \$6995; to Blenheim \$10,250 and to Wanaka \$15,995.

"I know that sounds like a lot of money for a lot of people – but in relation to what it should be costing it's not."

"We should be adding on a fuel surcharge which we haven't done because we're mindful and want to keep it, you know, feasible for people."

Since launching, the most business has come from domestic business clients flying staff around for meetings.

"We anticipate the international market will grow over time, as international visitors normally plan six to 12 months in advance."

Next summer would be busier for this market, in spite of economic uncertainty around the world.

"We have found that demand is particularly strong for connecting visitors between destinations not currently operated by larger commercial airlines, like arriving on a flight from Australia that does not connect with a domestic flight to Taupo or Kerikeri."

But there are economic headwinds.

"I think that next year is probably going to be quite a difficult year for many and it's probably not going to be as good as it could have been for us, either."

Historically, the top end of the travel market was more recession-resilient, said Ambler, who is also chief executive of the New Zealand Luxury Network.

"We believe in New Zealand as a bucket-list destination, especially for the higher-end segment, and we think the demand will be there even as the global economy seems to be facing its fair share of obstacles in the coming year."

One luxury lodge the Amblers work with in Wanaka has extremely strong future bookings and is at 100 per cent occupancy for the first six months of the year. High-end hunting trips are sold out for the next two years.

Airlines report near unprecedented demand for premium cabins to and from New Zealand.

"Most of the people that we would be looking at can still afford to travel, and the exchange rate means it's great value for them at the moment."

She was optimistic about the return of wealthy visitors – the target of New



Sofia Ambler inside NZ Jet's Cessna Citation Ultra which is based at Ardmore and offers trips to luxury spots such as Craggy Range (left). Photos / Dean Purcell



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Sofia Ambler, NZ Jet

Zealand's tourism push. The reopening of China, now closer as Covid-19 restrictions ease there, will provide another big source of potential well-heeled visitors.

During the past week, research unveiled at the International Luxury Travel Market in France showed the market was now growing at around 11 per cent a year and on target to reach US\$2.7 trillion (\$4.6t) a year by 2029 as many

among the ultra-wealthy prioritise experiences over possessions.

She said while the core clients were so far travelling for business, leisure passengers could enjoy lunch at Craggy Range, a game of golf at Kauri Cliffs or go ice climbing on Aoraki-Mount Cook as the jet can get them close to those places.

They can drive up to the door of the jet at airports and be up within minutes.

During the pandemic there had been a global boom in private aviation and New Zealand hadn't missed out.

"I think a lot of people are after that flexibility. During Covid they just didn't want to stand in line, and the security screening, and they don't want to sit in the lounge."

The Amblers built up Heletranz before branching out into NZ Jet. The business is fully staffed – including John Ambler who flies the plane.

The Amblers rapidly built up Heletranz when they bought it in 2012 from a fleet of two helicopters to 14.

John Ambler is a former Cathay Pacific captain who flew Boeing 747s, and is also an experienced helicopter pilot. In New Zealand, he started flying private jets, from the Bombardier Global 6000 to lighter jets like the Citation Ultra.

Early in 2020 Heletranz merged Inflight but retained a 25 per cent stake.