

NEWS

How do different world leaders approach air travel?

BY ALISON RATCLIFFE | 25.11.2015

Political private jet facts and stats

As the Strategic Defence and Security Review reveals, PM David Cameron will get a private plane's accompaniment on official trips, so let's look at other key figures in the world of private aviation.

- 87** Planes on Air Force One, the US President's presidential Boeing 747
- 1936** Edward VI of England was the first head of state to fly in a plane made specially for him: a single-engine de Havilland Dragon Rapide G-A100.
- 2019** The earliest date the security commission set for Air Force One, a Boeing 747-8, could fly the next US president.
- £2,000** Estimated cost per flying hour for Cameron's new 94ft Voyager. Sources say the Royal Sovereign charter flight cost £2,700 per hour.
- £10m** Amount spent in 2010 on buying the new Airbus Voyager G-VRD for the Royal Air Force.

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To hire or to buy? David Cameron is hardly the only world leader to grapple with this politically delicate aviation issue.

In Monday's Strategic Defence and Security Review, the government announced the conversion of a Royal Air Force Airbus Voyager A330 fuel tanker for senior ministerial use, at a reported cost of £10 million. The plan is designed to save £775,000 a year in chartering costs, according to the *BBC*, but new jets are always awkward when presented alongside public spending cuts.

Chartering can lead to unexpected embarrassment: in June the Arsenal-supporting Queen touched down to a 21-gun salute in Berlin in Daniel Levy's Tottenham Hotspur-initialled Embraer Legacy 650. Though it might seem prudent, the costs of chartering may exceed that of ownership. Chinese president Xi Jinping, keen to show his public a more austere style of political leadership, charters Boeing 2447 and 2472s from Air China, which are temporarily fitted with a presidential suite. A month's notice is required for security checks and selection of flight crew.

Political kudos can be won at the expense of security and convenience: Finnish president Sauli Niinistö took a scheduled Turkish Airlines flight to Ankara last month. Uruguay's frugal former president José Mujica often flew economy class on government business and once hitched a ride on a Mexican presidential plane with Enrique Peña Nieto, whose Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner, acquired last year, is one of the most expensive presidential aircraft ever built. Price estimates vary widely but, excluding associated costs and interest on the 15-year payment, plausible estimates of \$485m caused uproar in a country suffering from poverty and hurricane damage.

Saudi Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal had no such qualms when he bought his \$500m Airbus A380 in 2012 (since sold), complete with concert hall and grand piano, Rolls-Royce parking space and prayer mats automatically adjusting to face Mecca.

Lavish interiors can cost more than the aircraft: when L-3 Communications Holdings converts a \$368m Boeing 747-8, the cost may be double that of the plane, when you take into account advanced secure communications systems, self-defence, satellite and long-range internet connections. America's Domsday planes, for the president's use in case of emergency, can withstand nuclear and asteroid blasts and stay airborne for a week.

Thrifter governments look to quick-conversion kits. Embraer has produced quick-change ERJ135s for several countries, including Belgium, whose split configuration – VIP forward section, with economy-style rear seating for journalists and staff – is typical of a presidential layout.

Temporary refits enable leaders like Xi to fly on more up-to-date planes than the US president, whose VC-25 versions of the Boeing 747 were delivered in 1990, making it progressively tougher to find replacement parts. These are the planes most associated with the Air Force One call sign (used for whichever aircraft the US President is on). Barack Obama's successor will fly in colossal Boeing 747-8s, but such jumbos are falling out of fashion, with the more fuel-efficient two-engined 777X sibling favoured.

Few heads of state derive as much pleasure from their aircraft as King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands. A qualified pilot, he flies the royal family's planes and, to maintain his licence, the occasional KLM flight. However, the chances of Cameron reaching for the controls of his plane appear slim.

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