

BIZ & TECH // BUSINESS

Bay Area super-commuters take to the skies in planes, helicopters

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Voom, an Airbus company offering on-demand helicopter service in the Bay Area, shows one of their helicopters at a private terminal on SFO property in October.

Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

From Sunday evening for eight months, Paul Spence drove his 16-year-old daughter

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her out to the plane, meet the pilot, and watch the preflight security briefing. When she'd

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“Very easy, very fast, no security,” Spence said. It saved him at least 12 hours of driving time a week.

Super-commuting is nothing new to Californians. When Arnold Schwarzenegger was governor, he took a private jet from Sacramento to his mansion in Brentwood (Los Angeles County) nearly every night. Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, who lived in Palo Alto, got the city of Richmond to approve a heliport near his Pixar animation studio in 1997. And with the Bay Area’s cost of living rising, commuters will keep moving farther away.

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Now, startups are meeting that demand by offering plane or helicopter seats for beleaguered commuters and leisure travelers. Apps pool customers together, cutting costs. Local rides range from around \$50 up to \$300, comparable to ride-hailing for a similar distance, but still unaffordable for many.

The cost for Spence to book through the BlackBird app — where private plane owners, pilots and passengers connect to book flights from any airport at any time — ranged from \$40 to \$90 depending on whether other passengers were flying at the same time. He stopped using the service when Hayley found a new school close to home, but he said he would use BlackBird again for work or leisure and even recommended it to friends who commute daily from Sacramento to San Francisco.

“If I was making a decent salary and I want to get home to my kids instead of sitting in a car for three hours on my way home, it may make sense,” he said.

The high cost of convenience raises concerns about accessibility and sustainability as California seeks to cut emissions — but the dream is short-range air travel that’s green and affordable. Executives portray themselves as pioneers in a transportation revolution.

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It has been 116 years since the Wright brothers' flight, "and now we're reinventing ourselves on a smaller scale and addressing issues of urban congestion," she said.



Travelers pay on a per-seat basis, with Voom pooling passengers traveling to the same destination.

Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

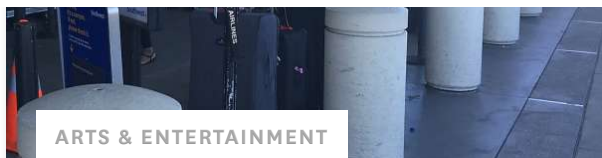
More than 200 electric air vehicles are in design, prototype or manufacturing, according to the Vertical Flight Society, a nonprofit technical organization. Uber's Elevate division plans to start a small fleet of electric aircraft in 2023 in Dallas, Los Angeles and Melbourne, Australia. Airbus seeks to fly 100 passenger electric and hybrid planes before 2040.

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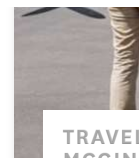
For some, working in Bay Area includes flight plans



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Hurdles to commercialization include certification by the Federal Aviation Administration, noise reduction, and ramping up mass production to cut costs for passengers, said Brien Seeley, president of the Sustainable Aviation Foundation.

Rakas added that commercial flights started by serving only wealthy individuals, and with deregulation, costs dropped. But until electric air vehicles become mainstream, companies are finding ways to tackle the criticisms.

Voom, an Airbus company that introduced group helicopter rides in the Bay Area in September after operating in Sao Paulo and Mexico City, buys carbon offsets for all rides. By pooling together customers, Voom cuts costs by an “order of magnitude” compared with chartered flights, said Cory Cozzens, Voom’s country director for the U.S. Rides range from \$200 to \$270 — still prohibitive for many.

“In the long run, our hope is that the sector of society that we’re able to serve increases continually,” Cozzens said. “The sector we’re leveraging the most today are traveling for business and value the minutes they can save pretty highly and can justify the expense for the time saved.”

Voom’s customers are businesspeople — slightly more male than female, ranging in age from 25 to 45 — in tech, traditional industrial and finance companies, Cozzens said. Through Voom’s app, they can book a ride as little as an hour in advance. Flights run about once an hour to pool customers.

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Pilots Dan Rigney (left) and Jesse Bandelin fly for Voom. Helicopter flights used to be a way executives such as Apple co-founder Steve Jobs traveled to work, but Voom wants to make them more accessible.

Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

At San Francisco International Airport, travelers arrive at a terminal run by Signature Flight Support and walk straight to a shuttle that takes them to the helicopter. Two pilots escort up to four passengers into the lime green chopper, blades already spinning to save time, for a security briefing, and stow bags in side-hanging cargo baskets.

Noise-canceling headphones on, commuters take off. SFO to Napa takes 25 minutes. To San Jose, 20. To Oakland and Palo Alto, only 10.

Other companies that have operated in the Bay Area longer have different models and offer a larger variety of services. In 2013, Surf Air of Santa Monica started group rides between San Francisco and Los Angeles and Santa Barbara on a membership model. Subscriptions start at \$2,000 a month for unlimited rides. CEO Sudhin Shahani said.

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BlackBird of San Francisco began service in 2017 to connect demand for local and regional travel with the supply of private planes and airports. The app links private plane owners and pilots with passengers looking to rent a plane, setting the pickup and drop-off time.

The company advertises rides from San Francisco to Sacramento starting at \$60. Travelers can choose to join or create a flight, which changes the price.

CEO Rudd Davis said using a group service is 80% cheaper than chartering a plane.

“We didn’t invent this category of transportation but are making it today more accessible to more people,” Davis said. “A vast majority has never flown this way before. It’s a testament of how we’re expanding the category, not just for the super-wealthy and one percent.”

BlackBird has 3,000 planes, 500-plus pilots, and more than 300,000 customers signed up for the service, with at least 100 flights a week. The startup has raised \$16 million.

Davis hopes to grow service among Bay Area commuters: “We think it allows people to live further beyond the urban center but without sacrificing urban opportunities.”

He looks forward to incorporating electric planes into BlackBird’s fleet on offer as soon as possible, adding that it won’t just cut emissions, but also prices, because fuel accounts for about a third of flight costs, he said.

But while experts believe in the concept behind electric vehicles, they questioned whether new businesses can overcome practical hurdles.

“I think all of them have the very best of intentions and hopes,” Seeley said. “Many of them are brilliant designs and innovation, but solving the noise issue is the magic key to full-scale production.

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