



Stately arrivals

The security and logistics involved in arranging travel for a president or head of state are complicated and expensive – but there are benefits for those involved

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According to recent figures, Donald Trump is on course to spend the same on travel in his first year as US president that his predecessor, Barack Obama, did in eight. Most

of Trump's travel so far has been within the USA, with it reported by *Newsweek* that during his first 100 days in office, a quarter of his time was spent at Mar-a-Lago, his golf course and country club in Palm Beach, Florida, which he often calls 'The Winter White House'. The cost of each weekend visit by Trump to his property is said to be around US\$20m to the US taxpayer, according to CNN, with security an obvious expense here – Obama, in contrast, spent just under US\$97m on travel during his eight years as president, according to documents reviewed by Judicial Watch, a conservative government watchdog.

But regardless of who travels the most in this instance, or for what purpose, there is no getting away from the fact that flying a US president – or any head of state, for that matter – is a costly and complicated process. Speed, efficiency, discretion, reliability and safety all need to be considered,



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with the logistics surrounding these magnified according to the size and number of aircraft involved.

“You’re talking wide-bodied aircraft, quite often, like a Boeing 777,” says Charles Gabb, strategic accounts manager at Universal Weather and Aviation. “The Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto, has a Boeing 787 Dreamliner, which cost US\$218m – I think they all try to outdo each other. Aircraft like that, and if there are a few of them, can put a lot of strain on an airport.”

Neal Betchley, Avfuel’s regional director for commercial sales throughout Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA), knows this prospective customer base well, as the FBOs and airports the company supplies need to be prepared. “When you’re talking heads of state and their entourages, you could be referring to presidents, prime ministers or rulers of countries throughout the Middle East,” he says. “These are customers with impressive aircraft full of passengers, like 747s or A380s, coming from long-haul distances. In such cases, the increases in fuel consumption can be significant.”

Gabb cites the United Nations General Assembly, held every September in New York, as an example of when the visits of around 100 heads of state can apply extreme pressure to a destination. “It’s for three weeks. They have preliminary sessions, then the second week is with the foreign ministers, and the third is when the heads of state arrive,” he says. “For that entire period, the police at JFK are working overtime, there is a huge strain on airport

resources, from ground stairs to operation buses, and the FBO staff involved will not be allowed holiday, drafting in people from their other locations, such as Florida or California, and even then finding themselves working between 16 and 19 hours a day.”

Jeppesen’s international trip planning (ITP) team also has experience of working with heads of state, and explains that flexibility is just as important as the overall organization. “Each trip comes with its own sets of challenges,” a spokesperson from the company reveals. “The bottom line is close attention to detail, with zero failures, be that flight planning or ground-handling arrangements. These are also elements to be coordinated not only with the main customer, but also the supporting staff and agencies.”

Arrivals and departures

A head of state will not be able to use a regular passenger terminal when they land, due to potential security risks, but where they exit the aircraft, and how, can vary. “There is a big difference between official and unofficial state visits,”

Main image: **Two VC-25s are used as Air Force One**

Above: **Major international meetings can place pressure on business airports**



“The pomp and pageantry of an official state visit is quite something, with flags, a band and red carpet”

James Walker, aviation consultant

Marble and gold luxury

Most heads of state travel in style, with aircraft equipped to meet their needs. There are often conference or communications rooms, luxury sleeping quarters, and areas for security. Some countries, such as France, Germany and the UK, do not have dedicated aircraft for their leaders, and generally fly them first class on their national airlines or use a former military airplane.

The US president travels on Air Force One. Two highly customized Boeing VC-25s have been in service as Air Force One since 1990, while the Mexican president recently took delivery of a US\$218.7m Boeing 747 Dreamliner. It can carry up to 250 people, features a presidential suite, with a conference room and even a fireplace in a private area.

The ultimate in head-of-state travel is arguably from Qatar. “When I worked there, we took delivery of two brand-new 747s for the royal family,” aviation consultant James Walker reveals. “Each cost US\$300m, and they spent the same again customizing them with a satellite communications room, security room, a cinema, a master bedroom and marble and gold everywhere. It was far superior to any hotel room I have ever seen, with the staff training to match. Best of all, in the lower deck, where you would usually expect to find baggage, there was a complete electric spit-roast, where a chef would prepare a whole lamb.”

explains James Walker, an aviation consultant who used to fly as a pilot for Qatar’s head of state.

“The pomp and pageantry that comes with an official state visit is quite something, with flags, a band and a red carpet, and the arrival might be into a royal or VIP terminal, possibly the FBO, or you would go to a remote spot at the airport, the steps and limo would appear, and the head of state would walk down. An unofficial visit, like a shopping trip, would be low-key, and require far less planning and security – maybe 10 days as opposed to three months.”

To get the head of state out of the airport quickly, reducing the security risks further, their arrival is streamlined as much as possible. “They aren’t taken through immigration or anything like that, and all of the diplomatic clearances are prepared in advance,” Walker confirms. “They can be away and on the road mere seconds after landing.”

Universal, which has helped to organize the trips of many heads of state to the US, explains the process involved. “We get the schedules and the particulars of the aircraft from the operator, and then we send it to that country’s embassy in Washington DC, who will talk directly to the State Department,” says Gabb. “We aren’t allowed to talk to the State Department ourselves, so clearance is handled and relayed back to us via the embassy.

“Separately, we deal with US customs at the arrival location, sending them as much information as possible, including everyone’s passport details.”

Even with everything pre-arranged, there is still much to get right on the day of the visit itself, especially if traveling a

Above: **Speed and security through the airport are paramount for VIPs**

long distance. “If you’re flying into Washington DC, the US Secret Service will specify an exact time, and you’ll be given a grace period of plus or minus 30 seconds either side,” says Walker. “And that’s to be on the ramp, lined up with the red carpet. It’s only one chance, you can’t get it wrong, and if your flight time to get to Washington DC is 16 hours from Qatar, that’s an incredible challenge.”

Domestically, it seems that the planning of trips can be a bit more spontaneous. “A prime example of this is election season,” says Ben Spence, logistics manager for Avfuel, referring to politicians involved in the US presidential election. “Candidates quickly change their campaign trail plans based on poll results and projections. It’s imperative for them to go to key states as new information is revealed.”



But it is while the head of state is in the air, nearing the airport, that many of the security checks will begin. “I’ve been at airports before where there are around 120 vehicles, mostly BMWs and Mercedes, waiting for the head of state and their entourage, and all of them need to be screened,” says Gabb. “About three hours before, the military will take the cars off in groups, opening and closing the doors, the hood and the trunk, using sniffer dogs all over and mirrors to look underneath. It’s a huge process.”

Despite tight controls on security and arrival times, last-minute changes can still occur. “The heads of state might want to leave earlier or later,” says Gabb. “Later is fine as you get more time, but if it’s earlier, the first people I tell are the catering companies. They have to prepare a lot of different meal choices, so as much notification as possible is needed. And after the head of state leaves, his entourage may want to start leaving 15 minutes apart, so a revised schedule would need to be organized.”

Who benefits?

Huge operations, such as heads of state visits, require equally large sums of money to make them happen. “Budgets vary wildly depending on the purpose of the visit and each country’s requirements around security,” a representative at Jeppesen’s ITP explains.

But despite the hard work it leads to, there can be substantial gains for companies and businesses local to the airports involved. “Whole communities can benefit,

Above: Arrivals of heads of state are often accompanied by a guard of honor

depending on where a head of state is flying into,” Gabb confirms. “Hotels, cafés, restaurants and even shopping malls will all see a surge in profits.”

Catering and limousine hire companies are also among those offering their services. “You’ll get businesses that are set up to cater to this type of client,” says Walker. “I know of a limousine company at Heathrow with a stunning collection of vehicles, including armored Range Rovers and all sorts. We’d call them up and tell them, ‘We’re in London for 21 days, we want your vehicles on standby 24 hours a day for that time.’ And the drivers have to be ready, and the cars polished and valeted, to go at any time.”

An obvious benefit for FBOs and airports generally is the large increase in fuel sales; conversely, there are large costs associated with handling such flights and the logistics vary for each occasion, explained Spence. “If an FBO is able to handle such large aircraft, then it will most likely have the necessary fuel supply. We would be notified either during the visit or straight after in order to supplement or replace the used fuel.” ○

Planning a head of state visit

Jeffrey W Briand, senior vice president, global trip support, World Fuel Services (WFS), presents his personal checklist:

Runways get crowded ✓

“At big international events like the G7 Summit, World Economic Forum or Paris Air Show, with multiple heads of state arriving and departing at once, crews should consider longer taxi times and also significant holdings for landing.”

Parking can be an issue ✓

“I’ve seen operators bumped from their reservation before, just because another dignitary arrived before them. Even with lots of planning, aircraft repositioning or using a different airport is not uncommon.”

Know the rules ✓

“Rules and regulations can vary from one location to another, also year after year. Planning in advance is vital. The sooner service requests are submitted, the better the chances of a successful trip.”

Big events take big planning ✓

“An event like the FIFA World Cup or the Olympics will stretch over a longer period and involve several locations. Each has their own set of challenges, expectations and increased sales, both for fuel and trip support services.”

Control change ✓

“Any change to a plan will cause a ripple effect, which needs to be contained. At key events, parking, transportation and hotel accommodation will be limited due to high demand, so this needs to be managed.”