

## Coronavirus: Chinese students paying £20,000 for seats on private jets to escape US as death toll rises

Window for chartered flights closing fast as countries impose further travel restrictions to combat spread of Covid-19

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Chinese students are paying tens of thousands of pounds for seats on private jets to escape the US, as the country's coronavirus outbreak threatens to spiral out of control.

With the number of deaths and cases in America rapidly accelerating — more than 780 people have died so far — the World Health Organization has warned that the US could establish itself as the new epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic.

In a world of closed borders and grounded commercial planes, those people with the means to are now fleeing the country in anticipation of a nationwide lockdown that would further restrict movement in and out of the US.

Rather than making the long 60-hour journey home via a series of transit hops over the Pacific, wealthy Chinese students are using private planes to ensure their safe return home.

Annelies Garcia, commercial director for Private Fly, a global booking service for charter flights, said education agents and American schools were typically “making contact on behalf of the Chinese families looking to group together to arrange a private charter, given the lack of airline flights”.

Whereas the first two months of the year saw a spike in private jet flights out of China to the US, Australia and elsewhere, the phenomenon has since been flipped on its head as the pandemic takes root in the West while Asia slowly returns to normality.

Earlier this month, Hong Kong international airport reported one of its busiest days on record for private jet activity, as wealthy residents and Chinese visitors rushed back to the region.

ForwardKeys, a travel analytics company, has estimated that as many as 3.3 million seats on transatlantic flights alone are disappearing, while aviation data provider VariFlight recorded that 3,102 out of 3,800 planned commercial flights to and from China were cancelled on Tuesday.

Jeff Gong, a lawyer in Shanghai, said his daughter, a high school student in Wisconsin, had “begged” him to fly her home after he asked whether she wanted 180,000 yuan (£21,440) as pocket money or a one-way ticket on a private flight.

“My daughter begged me to get her back home ... She said ‘No papa, I don’t want the money, I want to go home,’” Mr Gong told *Reuters*.

Richard Zaher, CEO of a US-based private jet charter, said that while his usual clients were “flying as they normally do”, his company had seen a surge in queries from people who had never flown private before.

“Inquiries have gone through the roof,” he told *AFP*, noting his company Paramount Business Jets had seen a 400 percent increase in queries, with bookings up roughly 20-25 percent. “It is completely coronavirus,” he added.

But even the window for chartered flights is closing fast, further elevating prices. Beijing has banned all chartered flights from overseas and Shanghai is expected to follow suit soon. Hong Kong and Macau have meanwhile blocked transit flights.

To complicate matters further, air charter providers have been notified informally that private jets registered in the US are not allowed to land in China, and vice versa, according to *Reuters*.

Some companies, such as US-based Air Charter Service, which can fly passengers from Los Angeles to Shanghai for about \$23,000, are circumventing the restrictions by either getting planes from other countries to run the US-China routes or arranging transfers in Tokyo

Logan Ravishkansar, chief executive of MyJet Asia, a Singapore-based private jet firm, said it was far simpler to charter planes during the Sars outbreak of 2003: “We also saw huge demand back then but it was a lot easier to fly in and out of countries. This time around, governments have put on more controls.”

*Additional reporting by Reuters*

