

## Air Charter

# Finding a broker you can trust

*By Jennifer Harrington - April 2009*

One of the easiest ways to book a charter flight is through a broker. Charter brokers often have access to hundreds of aircraft and can offer services such as catering and ground transportation that small charter operators aren't able to provide. The downside, however, is that of the hundreds of brokers in existence, no two have the same safety standards or business ethics.

The most important thing to consider when selecting a broker is that the industry is completely unregulated. In other words, while operators must adhere to strict Federal Aviation Administration rules, brokers don't even have to register with the FAA or the Department of Transportation. In fact, some aren't even familiar with basic aviation regulations and operate with just a simple Web site and no office or phone line, according to Wayne Rizzi, president of Air Royale International, a Beverly Hills, Calif.-based charter broker. David Rimmer, executive vice president of charter operator ExcelAire, agreed, saying the industry includes "a handful of real lowlifes," some of whom have been known to steal customers' money.

"It's time that the government realizes that this is a real business and needs to have regulations," Rizzi said. "I'd like to see the charter broker become a licensed entity with the government; this would weed out the bad apples."

Those bad apples notwithstanding, however, many charter brokers are excellent. "These are the brokers who know who the good charter operators are and who know the basic regulatory requirements," explained Mike Nichols, vice president of operations, education and economics for the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA). "They really do add value to their customers in finding the right aircraft and the right operator."

So how can you ensure that the broker you choose will be one of the good ones? One of the most important steps you can take is to verify a broker's business practices through an aviation safety auditor such as Wyvern or Aviation

Research Group/U.S. (ARG/US).

Wyvern has compiled a list of approved brokers that provide their customers with a Wyvern Pilot & Aircraft Safety Survey (PASS) report for each trip. These reports “verify pilot experience levels and ensure that the operator, aircraft and crew are in full legal compliance for the duration of each mission,” said Wyvern CEO Jim Betlyon.

Wyvern-approved brokers also have aviation experience and affiliations with organizations such as the NBAA, Betlyon said. “Brokers should be upfront about their background and be willing to share how long they’ve been in business and their qualifications and education that are specific to aviation,” he added. *[Not part of this article, but noted from Air Royale President Wayne J. Rizzi: Air Royale is a Wyvern-approved broker with air safety being the priority.]*

Unlike Wyvern, ARG/US doesn’t have an approved-broker list. “We started a program to certify brokers in a similar way that we certify air carriers and charter companies,” said Mark Fischer, the company’s executive vice president, “but we found that in an unregulated environment, there was too much variance and no hard facts on which to base a rating. Typically, we look for written documentation of policies and procedures. None of that exists in the broker industry.”

However, ARG/US does offer suggestions for finding a good broker. “The only thing we can stand behind is when a broker fully discloses what a customer is getting,” Fischer said, adding that a good broker would provide documentation such as the ARG/US CHEQ report for each flight, which reviews the safety record of U.S.-based charter operators. “Make sure you’re using a broker who tells you exactly what you’re getting,” Fischer advised. “What type of airplane is it? Is there a relationship between the broker and the operator? Who would [you] call if something goes wrong?”

Fischer also suggested not using price as a determining factor when choosing a broker. Some brokers offer low-cost charter flights, sometimes at the expense of safety. In some cases, they book flights with operators that don’t have the best safety records, merely to make a sale. “Price is not the best selection criteria, especially these days,” he said. “In a down economy, you never know who’s cutting what. Is a company cutting training? Maintenance? Pilot quality? I wouldn’t price shop open-heart surgery. Why would I price shop a trip on an airplane?”

The most important thing, Fischer said, is to find out what the broker's safety and customer-service standards are and to verify that those standards have been documented in some way—even if only in-house. "In the worst case, the broker is a middleman who's just trying to make money," Fischer said. "The best brokers are representatives of the buyer. They have standards and ensure that the standards are met."

You should also get a recommendation from industry organizations such as the NBAA, the Air Charter Association of North America (ACANA) or the U.S. arm of the Baltic Air Charter Association (BACA), which is headed by Air Royale's Rizzi. The NBAA posts a special section on its Web site devoted to charter brokers ([www.nbaa.org/ops/part135/brokers](http://www.nbaa.org/ops/part135/brokers)) and is working with legal teams to draft regulations for the industry. The goal of BACA and ACANA, meanwhile, is to raise the industry's standards. "Charter brokers are a valuable part of [business aviation], and operating in an ethical, transparent manner is what we'd like to promote," Rizzi said.