

Jet Set: The People, the Planes, the Glamour, and the Romance in Aviation's Glory Years

By William Stadiem

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In October 1958, Pan American World Airways began making regularly scheduled flights between New York and Paris, courtesy of its newly minted wonder jet, the Boeing 707. Almost overnight, the moneyed celebrities of the era made Europe their playground. At the same time, the dream of international travel came true for thousands of ordinary Americans who longed to emulate the “jet set” lifestyle.

Bestselling author and *Vanity Fair* contributor William Stadiem brings that Jet Age dream to life again in the first-ever book about the glamorous decade when Americans took to the skies in massive numbers as never before, with the rich and famous elbowing their way to the front of the line. Dishy anecdotes and finely rendered character sketches re-create the world of luxurious airplanes, exclusive destinations, and beautiful, wealthy trendsetters who turned transatlantic travel into an inalienable right. It was the age of Camelot and “Come Fly with Me,” Grace Kelly at the Prince’s Palace in Monaco, and Mary Quant miniskirts on the streets of Swinging London. Men still wore hats, stewardesses showed plenty of leg, and the beach at Saint-Tropez was just a seven-hour flight away.

Jet Set reads like a who’s who of the fabulous and well connected, from the swashbuckling “skycoons” who launched the jet fleet to the playboys, moguls, and financiers who kept it flying. Among the bold-face names on the passenger manifest: Juan Trippe, the Yale-educated WASP with the Spanish-sounding name who parlayed his fraternity contacts into a tiny airmail route that became the world’s largest airline, Pan Am; couturier to the stars Oleg Cassini, the Kennedy administration’s “Secretary of Style,” and his social climbing brother Igor, who became the most powerful gossip columnist in America—then lost it all in one of the juiciest scandals of the century; Temple Fielding, the high-rolling high priest of travel guides, and his budget-conscious rival Arthur Frommer; Conrad Hilton, the New Mexico cowboy who built the most powerful luxury hotel chain on earth; and Mary Wells Lawrence, the queen bee of Madison Avenue whose suggestive ads for Braniff and other airlines brought sex appeal to the skies.

Like a superfueled episode of *Mad Men*, *Jet Set* evokes a time long gone but still vibrant in American memory. This is a rollicking, sexy romp through the ring-a-ding glory years of air travel, when escape was the ultimate aphrodisiac and the smiles were as wide as the aisles.


Praise for *Jet Set*

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“What a book William Stadium has written. . . . The Kennedys, the Rat Pack, Frank Sinatra, and early financiers like Eddie Gilbert are dealt with in depth. . . . I lived intimately through it all in the ’50s, ’60s, ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s and I am yet to find a mistake in author Stadium’s amazing book. Order it now. All the players are here.”—**Liz Smith**, *syndicated columnist*

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Editorial Review

Review

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“An interesting, entertaining read, full of colorful characters and the author’s thoughtful contemplation of the world of aviation.”—***Publishers Weekly***

“An intoxicating spin through an era of supreme elegance and dazzling innovation, *Jet Set* more than lives up to its turbocharged title. With a sharp eye for detail and a knack for sparkling prose, William Stadiem re-creates the heady days when artists, tycoons, and viscounts sipped Canadian Club and dined on lobster thermidor while zooming across a new frontier. In doing so, he pays homage to the true American visionaries who made that luxurious travel possible—the engineers and entrepreneurs who understood just how much the long-range airplane could transform our world.”—**Brendan I. Koerner, author of *The Skies Belong to Us***

“The only thing more delicious than the idea for this book is William Stadiem’s execution. Rich in incident, set among the glitterati of America’s most glamorous era, *Jet Set* is first-rate history that reads like a novel.”—**Karen Abbott, author of *Sin in the Second City* and *American Rose***

“*Jet Set* is a fast-paced, jauntily written excursion back to a more glamorous era, when people dressed up for airplane flights and onboard meals might include fois gras and champagne—the historical moment when Americans first began to think of themselves as citizen-travelers. William Stadiem provides a knowing account of the pioneering airline executives who built the planes that made luxury affordable, and high-flying gossip-column staples like Frank Sinatra, Ian Fleming, and Jackie Kennedy. You’ll never look at air travel the same way again.”—**Matthew Goodman, author of *Eighty Days***

“*Jet Set* is a fascinating social history of the glory days of the boldface-names crowd in Europe and the United States since World War II. William Stadiem’s engrossing story is elegantly propelled by the engines of an equally interesting parallel account of how the innovations of modern aviation forever changed the tone and texture of tourism (think ‘mass over class’). Political intrigue, spy stories, Hollywood hijinks, and wryly

chronicled bed-hopping make this the rare page-turner that's also witty and very well written.”—**Alexander Lobrano, author of *Hungry for Paris* and *Hungry for France***

About the Author

William Stadiem is the author of such bestsellers as *Mr. S: My Life with Frank Sinatra*, *Marilyn Monroe Confidential*, and *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond*, as well as such acclaimed works of social history as *Too Rich: The High Life and Tragic Death of King Farouk*. He writes for *Vanity Fair* and has been the Hollywood columnist for Andy Warhol's *Interview* and the restaurant critic for *Los Angeles Magazine*. A Harvard JD-MBA and former Wall Street-based international lawyer, Stadiem is also a screenwriter whose credits include Elizabeth Taylor's last starring vehicle, Franco Zeffirelli's *Young Toscanini*, and the television series *L.A. Law*.

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The Flying Châteaux

T

he poster boy for the Jet Set had a big secret. Frank Sinatra was afraid of flying. His 1958 album *Come Fly with Me* had become the soundtrack for the new jet age that had kicked off that same year in October with Pan Am's 707 service between New York and Paris. Yet Sinatra wouldn't be caught dead on Pan Am or TWA or even Air France, no matter how good the meals, catered by La Tour d'Argent, were supposed to be. "Dead" was the operative word for Sinatra, that most distrustful of all superstars. He simply didn't believe the airlines were careful enough. That was why he had his own plane, a big dual-prop Martin 404 called, in those days before political correctness, *El Dago*. Before the advent of the jets, the Martin was state-of-the-art, air-conditioned, pressurized, and customized for his hard-drinking Rat Pack show-business buddies, with a piano and a central bar almost as long as the one at Chasen's. Hollywood felt at home here in the air, though for the nervous Sinatra, the *El Dago* bar was a necessity rather than a status symbol.

Aside from insisting on war-hero private pilots, Sinatra obsessively had his valet, ex-navy man George Jacobs, spend even more time checking weather reports and communicating with all the airports on their prospective routes to make sure there would be no nasty surprises, than Jacobs did in arranging starlet assignations for his master. Sinatra once threw a fit when Jacobs arranged a post-dinner screening of the classic airline near-disaster film, *The High and the Mighty*, notwithstanding John Wayne's saving the day—and the plane. And he confided in Jacobs that he had a recurring nightmare inspired by *The Glenn Miller Story*, wherein the big bandleader disappeared over the foggy Channel on a flight from England to Paris. Moreover, Sinatra was still haunted by having bailed out, at the last second, of a 1958 cross-country flight with *Around the World in 80 Days* impresario and Elizabeth Taylor husband Mike Todd on his plane *The Lucky Liz*, which went down in a fireball in a New Mexico cornfield.

Such high anxiety was not the stuff of American legends, especially that of the swaggering, carefree, ring-a-

-ding variety that Sinatra apotheosized. He knew he had to get with the program, the jet program. After all, he was supposed to *be* the program. Accordingly, in 1962, when the ocean liners were still carrying more passengers across the Atlantic than the new jets, Sinatra did more than anyone thus far to emblazon the jet fantasy in the still--sedentary imagination of America. His high-profile grand gesture was chartering his own 707 for a three--month round--the--world tour to benefit children's charities in the countries he would visit. He would fly from L.A. to Tokyo, to Hong Kong, then across the globe to Israel, Greece, Italy, France, England, a swinging, speedy update of the grand tour for the Sputnik era.

What the world didn't realize was that, for all his ostensible altruism, Sinatra's charity began at home. The new commercial jets may have needed passengers, but Sinatra needed something, too: a makeover of a Mafia image occasioned by his guilt--by--association relationship with Chicago Mob boss Sam Giancana. While Giancana may have been instrumental in stealing Illinois, and the presidency, for John F. Kennedy in 1960, it was a debt that Attorney General Bobby Kennedy was intent on wiping from the ledger, even if that meant obliterating the playboy friendship between Sinatra and his brother. Bobby was so down on Sinatra, who had reconstructed his Palm Springs compound to become JFK's own Western White House, that he pressured his brother into rejecting the Sinatra hospitality and bunking instead chez Bing Crosby, Sinatra's archrival and an even archer Republican.

Humiliated, Sinatra, at the advice of his master--strategist lawyer, Mickey Rudin, decided to get out of Dodge—all the way out to Tokyo, as far as a 707 would take him. His entourage wasn't comprised of the usual Jet Set suspects, ultra-mobile international legends like Onassis, Agnelli, Rubirosa, or even Jacqueline Kennedy herself, whose high--profile Francophilia was proving to be a greater gesture of Franco--American comity than the Statue of Liberty. No, instead, of the global nomads, Sinatra filled his 707 with his regiment of musicians and his best local buddies. The latter included his favorite Beverly Hills restaurateur, "Prince" Mike Romanoff, everyone's favorite charlatan, on whom Sinatra counted to get him the best tables on earth; his personal banker, Al Hart, head of Beverly Hills's City National and the man who financed Sinatra's comeback film, *From Here to Eternity*, to pay the freight; his songwriter and sexmeister Jimmy Van Heusen, himself an accomplished pilot, to get the girls; and legendary New York Giants baseball manager Leo "The Lip" Durocher, to provide all--American ballpark ballast amid the anticipated dislocations and alienations of the long foreign journey.

While not exactly the Ugly American, Sinatra provided plenty of his own homegrown ballast. For all his previous international performances and global exposure, Sinatra had almost no interest in foreign cultures, except for the women. He couldn't have cared less about the Louvre or Versailles, classic architecture or haute cuisine. In fact, he had George Jacobs stock the 707 with a three--month supply of his favorite snack, Campbell's franks and beans, which he would devour cold, straight from the tin. This was soul food, Hoboken--style. God forbid Sinatra would have to ingest sushi or chop suey or foie gras or, even on his ostensible home turf, spaghetti alla vongole. Even in Italy, the star invariably rejected the *alta cucina* grand--hotel fare of Rome's Excelsior and Milan's Principe di Savoia. Instead, he insisted that Jacobs, an accomplished navy cook whom Sinatra's mother Dolly had taught to "do" bridge--and--tunnel red--gravy transplant--*paisan* food, prepare his Jersey favorites in the kitchen of his suite.

Sinatra left for Tokyo in April 1962, perfect for cherry--blossom time. His tour instantly generated massive

worldwide news coverage, just as lawyer Rudin had promised. Every day the still--powerful syndicated gossip columns, led by Hearst's "Cholly Knickerbocker," the nom de plume of the worldly and genuine Russian count Igor Cassini, featured breathlessly glamorous dispatches on Sinatra's mix of good deeds and high life, visiting a Buddhist monastery on Mount Fuji, endowing a youth center on the Sea of Galilee, cruising the Mediterranean on Onassian yachts, serenading his *High Society* costar Princess Grace at a series of "Chinchilla and Diamonds" concert benefits at the Sporting Club in Monte Carlo designed to soak high rollers for the benefit of poor kids.

Sinatra had *El Dago* flown over to Europe to replace the 707 for short intercontinental hops, though in a nod to his quest to sanitize his escutcheon, it had been renamed the *Christina*, after his younger daughter. He posed with blind children in Greece and crippled children in Italy and orphans in England. He sang everywhere, from the Mikado Theater in Tokyo, to the Parthenon in Athens, to the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, to the Royal Festival Hall in London. He was feted by everyone from the emperor of Japan to Princess Grace to Princess Margaret (whom he tried, unsuccessfully, to bed) to General de Gaulle, who got over being not invited by Prince Ranier to the Monaco gala and decorated Sinatra as a chevalier of the Order of Public Health, an ironic honor given the unsalubrious post--concert orgies being carried on in the entertainer's imperial suite at the Hotel George V. The fantasy trip of a lifetime, Sinatra's "one man, one world" extravaganza underscored, as nothing before it, the jet--age miracle of making the planet seem, if not small, then certainly accessible.

The Sinatra coverage was proving an inspiration to another group of travelers who were planning their own trip--of--a--lifetime spring adventure to Europe, an odyssey that would be as long on culture as Sinatra's would be short. The Atlanta Art Association, which constituted the art-- and music--loving elite of the capital of the Peach State and the symbol of a South that was rising again, was chartering an Air France 707 to take its members on a very grand tour of the Old World for the month of May. Just as the Sinatra world tour would become the most--reported--on celebrity superjunket of the sixties, the Atlanta art excursion would become the most--reported--on tour of "real people," although for entirely different reasons, as will be seen.

Sinatra was fantasy, Atlanta reality. Both captured the public imagination. The Art Association trip would be featured on the cover of *Life* as a paradigm of how the new jets were opening up the Old World to America's burgeoning middle class, and how travel was becoming both an affordable luxury and, for Americans in the Camelot era that prized sophistication, a cultural necessity. The Atlanta tour thus provides valuable insight into how Americans traveled at the dawn of the jet age and the joy it brought them. Sadly, the main reason it made *Life* was death, for the tour, realizing Sinatra's darkest fears, became the greatest disaster in aviation history.

In 1960, following its own assemblage of a jet fleet to compete with Pan Am and TWA in the war for the Atlantic, Air France had established a sales office in Atlanta. Its local manager was a suave and dashing Frenchman named Paul Dossans, who proved enormously attractive to the local country--club set who were Air France's target clientele. Dossans started small, donating a free jet round--trip ticket to Paris to the Art Association's 1960 charity auction. The prize turned out to be such a hit that Dossans decided next to go for not one seat but the whole plane. He joined forces with the local American Express office to assemble a tour and charter package exclusively for the Art Association.

Exclusivity, embodied in the Piedmont Driving Club, which had a large overlapping membership with the Art Association, was everything in Atlanta. The boom town was still suffering from the century--old inferiority complex vis--à--vis the “Yankee” metropolises occasioned by General Sherman’s having burned it to the ground. Atlanta didn’t have anything like the Metropolitan Museum or the Metropolitan Opera, but it did have a *Gone with the Wind* gracious mystique, it had the global colossus of Coca--Cola, and it had a huge amount of new money that wanted to burnish itself with an “artistic” patina. It was a perfect target for Air France, and in teaming up with an Art Association grand dame named Anne Merritt, Paul Dossans hit the Dixie bull’s--eye.

In return for a free first--class ticket, Dossans got Merritt, the wife of a Harvard--trained fertilizer broker, to fill up his plane with 120 of her society friends. Merritt was already a world traveler, though doing so from pre--707 Atlanta was a major pain, requiring numerous stopovers and basically twenty--four hours to reach Europe. That the new jet could do it in eight, with only one stop at New York’s Idlewild, was a technological marvel, a magic carpet that Merritt couldn’t wait to experience. As someone who loved to go places, she knew it would change her life.

Many of the women Anne Merritt recruited for the trip were Jackie Kennedy wannabes, her Yankee--ness notwithstanding. Few American women, north or south, east or west, had failed to be captivated by Jackie’s accompanying JFK on a state visit to France, and the rest of Europe, in June 1961. The trip was extensively televised, and everyone was riveted. From the minute Jackie descended the gangway from the new 707 that had become *Air Force One*, and rode into Paris in her pillbox hat in a gleaming Simca cabriolet, it was clear that she had stolen the show from her husband. JFK admitted as much in his famous self--deprecatory introductory quote to the French, “I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris.” General de Gaulle was so taken by Jackie’s Miss Porter’s--perfect French and her grasp of the culture that at the Élysée Palace, he gushed, “She knows more French history than any Frenchwoman!”

In light of such glorious flattery, Jackie was unable to resist the siren call of French couture. Pressured by her husband to “dress American,” she had brought with her a gown by Oleg Cassini, the fashion designer big brother of gossip lord Igor. However, while preparing for the grand ball at Versailles’s Galerie des Glaces (Hall of Mirrors), Jackie was emboldened by a speed--laced “vitamin” injection from the family’s Dr. Feelgood, the New York physician Max Jacobson, who traveled everywhere with the Kennedys, dispensing medicinal fixes the way George Jacobs dispensed culinary fixes for Frank Sinatra. Suddenly, recalling the de Gaulle encomium, Jackie decided she had to play to the local audience, as well as to her French Bouvier bloodlines. Accordingly, she switched to her backup rhinestone--studded white satin gown by Hubert de Givenchy. When she rose at Versailles in Givenchy splendor to sing the French national anthem, it was the most rousing performance “La Marseillaise” had gotten since it stole the show in *Casablanca*.

That Givenchy moment stuck in the mind of the Atlanta belles, who were easy marks for Anne Merritt. Some of her friends had, like Jackie, gone to Vassar. More had attended Agnes Scott, the Vassar of the South, outside of Atlanta. Even if they hadn’t done their junior year in Paris, a year that made Jackie obsessed with all things French and fine, the ladies of Atlanta saw themselves as *culturati*. After all, they

were the Art Association. Jackie *spoke* to them. Their good--old--boy husbands, a lot of whom were “rambling wrecks” from Georgia Tech or ex--big men on campuses like Charlottesville and Chapel Hill, may have preferred to stay home and play golf at Piedmont. However, they took a cue from President Kennedy and accepted the conjugal imperative. Merritt filled the charter in short order. Besides, the package—which the Art Association named “Trip to the Louvre”—was a good deal. Dossans, his airline, and American Express had come up with a bargain price for the monthlong tour, which included London, Paris, Amsterdam, Lucerne, Venice, Florence, Rome, and their own special visit to Versailles, for a rock--bottom \$895. Normal first--class fare alone would have been \$1,100.

For the independent travelers, who eschewed anything packaged and were confident to rely on that Bible of upper--bourgeois independent voyaging, *Fielding's Travel Guide to Europe*, Dossans offered the Atlantans an air--only price of \$388, compared to the \$632 economy fare of the day. The independents would still get the inside track at the Louvre and Versailles, meeting up with their fellow Atlantans at the end of the trip for a Paris blowout. Arthur Frommer's *Europe on 5 Dollars a Day* may have been infra dig for the Atlantans. But Fielding, basically *Europe on 50 Dollars a Day*, spoke the language of ritzy Peachtree Street. At \$5 a day, the trip would have cost under \$600, including airfare. That would have been beyond the dreams of the average American, whose median annual income in 1962 was \$6,000. At the deluxe level of \$50 a day, the monthlong trip would have cost \$2,000. Coca--Cola executives were earning upward of \$25,000 a year, as were the doctors and lawyers of Peachtree Street. At the top, then, these prices, for the trip of a lifetime (even factoring in inflation), were well within reach. Any way one went, travel then was a great deal, compared to the bank--breaker it would become. It paid to be a pioneer, a jet-setter even without one's name in the columns.

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From reader reviews:

Joy Hanson:

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