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Sky Leviathans

By Michelle Seaton

Soaring Expenses

The Airliners best suited for conversion have seen very little commercial service. They have had just a few owners who took meticulous care of them and can prove it with their record-keeping. For obvious reasons, these aircraft are almost impossible to find.

Greg Raiff, President of Private Jet Services Group in Hampton, N.H., thinks he has found such a plane for one of his clients, a hedge fund manager who spends \$1 million annually in chartering fees but would rather own a jet comfortable enough to fly him home to his family in Europe several times a year. Raiff has found a 12-year-old 737 that has seen limited commercial service. The asking price is \$5 million to \$6 million, according to Raiff, who adds that he can help his client recondition the interior for another \$5 million.

The key to saving money, Raiff says, is to recycle other interior designs. "I can show you existing airplanes and cobble together an interior that I will promise you will like for \$5 million." The pieces of the interior, including the couches, bathroom fixtures and galleys will have been pulled from other aircraft plans that have already passed FAA inspection.

An average conversion for a VIP airliner will cost between \$10 million and \$25 million, and at least half of that cost is expended on engineering: Components must be designed and created with the weight and balance of the aircraft in mind, as well as safety. The seats cannot block exits. Fixtures cannot block access panels for maintenance or emergency equipment. All materials must be flame retardant and able to resist 9 gs of force without falling apart. Designers and engineers typically work together to create these designs. They are paid usually very handsomely - and by the hour- to keep both aesthetics and FAA regulations in mind.

"You can take that \$10 million in engineering costs down to \$500,000 if you are smart about how you do it," says Raiff, who admits that a bargain interior will not include perks, such as soft touchpanels that instantly darken windows, or entertainment screens that fold away into cabinets.

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