

FROM HIS
CUSTOMIZED
707 TO A NEW
ECLIPSE, JOHN
TRAVOLTA
ENJOYS THE
HIGH-FLYING
LIFE. SCENES
(INCLUDING
PHOTOS FROM
HIS PERSONAL
AVIATION
SCRAPBOOK)
OF A LIFETIME
IN FLIGHT.
BY NICK
KOLAKOWSKI



*FLYING
LIFE*



COURTESY OF JOHN TRAVOLTA

ASCENT:

(From top) A young Travolta learns the ropes; Eight jetliners later, the actor mans his cockpit.



Long before he became an Oscar-nominated superstar, John Travolta had a dream. As a 5-year-old sitting in the backyard of his family home in New Jersey, he would watch, fascinated, at the planes departing LaGuardia. At that moment, he says, “My love of aviation was injected into me.” Not content to be a mere hobbyist, he embarked on a lifetime of aviation accomplishment that reads like the résumé of a commercial pilot: flying lessons by age 16, first solo flight at 19, full license at 23, jet license at 27. After that, his celebrity came into play, leading him into business ventures, including serving as spokesman for Breitling, the Swiss watchmaker that has provided pilots with high-quality timepieces for over a century, and potentially, Eclipse Aviation, designers of the new Eclipse 500.

Thirty-six years after that first flight, his favorite air trips are almost too numerous to count. “Final approaches are always interesting. I love the final approach into Hong Kong or into any of the Caribbean islands,” says the 53-year-old star of *Saturday Night Fever* and *Pulp Fiction*. “I have special memories of going into Sydney — those long runways and leading lights beckoning you.” He’s had

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FLEET STREET: (Top) The Eclipse 500, parked in front of Travolta’s Jumbolair home; (right) Travolta’s Qantas 707 and (this page) its interior



IAN SPANIER; TOP: CARMELO DONATO

ample chance to see them all: In 2002, he became ambassador-at-large for the Australian airline Qantas and embarked on an eight-week, 10-country, 13-city “Spirit of Friendship” tour. Stops included Tokyo, London and Los Angeles. Not exactly your typical journey. But then, a lot of possibilities open up when you’ve earned eight different jet licenses.

AROUND THE WORLD

Travolta counts the young Howard Hughes among the aviators he admires (“He designed one of my favorite planes, the Constellation”), which, when you think about it, is a pretty apt analogy: Just as Hughes was a whirlwind of activity, squeezing in everything from flying prototype aircraft to directing award-winning movies, Travolta, too, juggles far more than the average superstar. Not only does he barnstorm across the country to promote his films, of which he has three this year — *Lonely*

Hearts, *Hairspray* and *Wild Hogs*, the last of which has already proved a sizeable hit — but he does so from behind the stick of his own plane.

A few years ago, rather than stay in a trailer or hotel for a movie shooting in Tampa, he chose to commute by air every day from his house in Ocala, Florida. Such back-and-forth might have been something only hoped and dreamed for by the technological visionaries and aviation pioneers in the first decades of the twentieth century. But Travolta thinks general aviation — and parts of the lifestyle that go with it — will only become more widespread in the years to come.

Whether for vacation or business, it seems he’s always in the air. Over the course of two weeks, he’s been to Chicago for an appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* before heading down to Miami for the Super Bowl, followed by quick jaunts to New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Boston for press

duties. He even managed to shoehorn in a short vacation to Cabo San Lucas.

No wonder he sounds a little exhausted during a recent chat — until the topic of piloting comes up. Then that sky-gazing 5-year-old pokes his head out and the fatigue drops from Travolta’s voice. “There’s not a celebrity I know who doesn’t do private flying. It’s everybody’s form of trans-

portation,” he enthuses. “When I got my first jet, nobody owned their own jet; some people might have rented one.”

That’s all changed — and in addition to the sheer thrill of flight and owning your own plane, he adds, the reasons behind the trend are practical. “Once the world started getting more demanding on certain types of people — celebrities, business executives — the

AIR TIME

JOHN TRAVOLTA WEARS BREITLING FOR A REASON: IT’S THE TIMEPIECE BOTH OF AIRMEN AND OF HOLLYWOOD. BY JOHN B. HOLBROOK II



Jerry Seinfeld strapped one on his wrist on nearly every episode of *Seinfeld*. Nick Lachey sports his Crosswind Special in public. And Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson — and spokesman John Travolta — have all worn Breitling watches onscreen and around town.

Breitling might seem like just another flash-in-the-pan hot fashion brand. But it’s proven to have one strong ticker, steeped in a Swiss watchmaking tradition dating back to St. Imier, circa 1884. And no other Breitling timepiece has proven quite as timeless, in terms of its aviation tie-ins, as the Navitimer.

When the Navitimer (short for “navigation timer”) debuted in 1952, its target market wasn’t fashion-inclined poseurs — it was pilots. Historically, few watches have been so closely tied to aviation; with its chronograph and slide-rule bezel combo, the Navitimer was a big hit with flyers of the day. In fact, the Aircraft Owners and Pilot Association (AOPA) immediately adopted the timepiece as its official watch, stamping on its logo for many years. Of course, today’s pilots navigate with much more sophisticated onboard computers. Yet many modern airmen still consider the Navitimer essential gear.

In the decades since its introduction, the Navitimer (today priced at \$5,270) has undergone a number of updates and facelifts. Yet it’s no Joan Rivers: The watch’s current face remains faithful to the classic, boasting stunning good looks, with its ample size (41.8 millimeters in diameter) coupled with a gleaming, highly polished stainless-steel case and bracelet.

With all those slide-rule markings and chronograph registers, the Navitimer may seem to border on information overload — almost to the point of disorientation. Still, the watch manages to be an easy read, with luminous silver hands and markers, along with white chronograph subdials popping clearly against the dial’s black background.

In classic tool-watch tradition, the Navitimer runs via a self-winding mechanism — a COSC-certified 25-jewel apparatus that oscillates at 28,800 beats per hour, backed by a 44-hour power reserve. Layman’s translation and many a historical airman’s necessity: What’s not to trust?



demand to make your own schedule, as well as the demand for privacy, increased. After 9/11, the guarantee of safety became greater.” Private aviation also gives you the chance to escort friends and family virtually anywhere, without the hassle of security check-ins or the worry that the plane will leave without you. “A flight with my brother Johnny is like going to Disneyland for the very first time,” says Margaret Travolta. “It’s romantic, magical and fun, and must be how travelers felt when flying first-class in the 1950s and ’60s. He has always paid the utmost attention to every detail, whether it be ground or air safety, flight training or planning, destination logistics . . . down to the smallest detail in passenger comforts.”

Indeed, even as he’s pondering the future of private jets, Travolta keeps one foot planted firmly in the early glory days of air travel, especially when it comes to plane design. The exterior of his Qantas 707, which he uses for those epic ’round-the-world trips, is elegantly retro, its design harkening back to the early ’60s. “The paint job is a replica from 1964,” says Keith Baird, flight engineer and director of maintenance for the 707, who always accompanies Travolta on his flights. “When John bought the jet, it had the corporate paint job from the previous owner; five or six years ago, he had the idea to put the original job on.”

The classic design originated in a Qantas corporate meeting some 40 years ago, when the company decided to call the plane, which came with then-new fan-powered engines, the V-Jet — the “V” apparently standing for “*vannus*,” or “*fan*”



LIVING HIGH: Whether for business or as a family-time vehicle, planes have provided the backdrop for Travolta’s pivotal life events.

in Latin. Hence that giant stylized “V,” instantly recognizable even on a crowded airfield, rising from the rear fin.

HOME SWEET HOME

Travolta is not a man given to half-measures. His home in Ocala also integrates seamlessly with his flying lifestyle — and not just because he can park his planes practically at the front door. Jumbolair, a “fly-in” community, allows its residents to land on a 7,550-foot runway (America’s largest paved private airstrip, capable of landing a 747) and then taxi onto their property. After landing, Travolta can walk inside via covered walkways.

“Until ’94 – ’95, I lived in Daytona Beach at Spruce Creek, which was a fly-in community,” he says. “I had my Learjet in the backyard and a Gulfstream nearby. I flew out of there every day and loved it, but I wanted more space to fly my 707 and G2, with plenty of runway and bigger areas to build a home.”

As with that Qantas 707, the six-bedroom house and eight-crew quarters evoke aviation’s Jet Age, that romantic postwar period when air travel truly kicked into higher gear. If the building’s sweeping lines and massive windows remind you of Dulles Airport, that’s no coincidence — when designing the place, Travolta borrowed elements from Finnish architect Eero Saarinen, the mastermind behind Dulles as well as the TWA Terminal at JFK. Other architectural influences include Frank Lloyd Wright and Morris Lapidus, creator of the sweeping, colorful Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach. The interior has hints of Art Déco — and, no surprise, plenty of flight

imagery, including a giant mural of a family at an airport (taken from a 1937 issue of *Fortune* magazine) and more than a few plane models. “I thought it’d be a white elephant,” Travolta says, laughing. “But it works because [the architects] are all from the same era.”

“John is very much an aviation buff, he collects aviation history — he’s big into it,” Keith Baird says. “We have to have a pretty good fight over who loves the [707] more, me or John.”

TAKING TO THE AIR

For all the benefits of the good old days, though, sometimes there’s a need for some ultra-modern speed. To that end, Travolta is finalizing a relationship with Eclipse Aviation, builders of the Eclipse 500. The twin turbofan engine craft, with a blistering 370-knot maximum cruise speed and 3,424-foot-per-minute climb rate, has a range of 1,125 nautical miles with four occupants, which strikes Travolta as perfect for his “short legs” around Florida. “I admire the mastery of that little jet,” he says. “I’ve flown it. It’s brilliant, beyond everyone’s expectations — like the Lear 24 but quieter and smoother and more predictable in its behavior. A very smart little airplane.” Operators can upgrade the Eclipse 500 to an LX edition that includes all-leather seats and adjustable lumbar supports, a dual flight-management system with three-axis autopilot and even a laminate work/dining table in the cabin. When it comes to in-the-air performance, the craft has been engineered to meet the design tolerances associated with military aircraft.

COURTESY OF JOHN TRAVOLTA



In the meantime, Travolta still uses his 707 for international flights and around-the-world jaunts and a G2 for smaller groups and shorter distances — to Mexico, say, or Hawaii. Like any true pilot, he’s the ultimate pragmatist when it comes to choosing which craft to take. “There’s a method to my madness,” he says. “How many souls are going, what’s the distance and what’s the cost. I analyze if people are chipping in, or if the studio or a business proposition is paying for it, and I’ll adjust or stretch my wings on it.”

His relationship with Qantas led, inevitably, to his dealings with Breitling, which was looking for a celebrity keyed towards the image of aviation — understandable, considering it’s the company that once supplied major international airlines with their cockpit clocks, among other things. “They’ve always been watches for aviators,” Travolta says. Which is why you’ll see him in his element at the Reno Air Show, pausing for a photo with the top-shelf fliers, generally being the face of Breitling. He follows this up with an ad for both the international and domestic markets — pushing, first and foremost, the lifestyle of being able to take the air at a moment’s notice, effortlessly free to travel anywhere. “I’m just a citizen of the planet,” he says. “I think of the whole earth as my home.”

What, then, would constitute a perfect day for this inveterate traveler? He answers immediately: “Flying in any of my aircraft. Starting a ’round-the-world trip.”

John Travolta’s is a high-flying life, in many more ways than one.