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From the Jacksonville Business Journal:

http://www.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/news/2017/01/31/new-jacksonville-tech-startup-providing-rides.html

New Jacksonville tech startup providing rides sharing to private planes

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Jan 31, 2017, 8:00am EST

A Jacksonville tech company is looking to make air travel simpler, quicker and a little more luxurious.

Whooshfly is an app that works much like Uber, providing ride share options for private planes flying in and out of small- to medium-sized regional airports.

The service lets users book a private plane, rather than have to risk flying commercial, which can be delayed, and connects them with FAA-approved pilots. Customers can share rides with friends or people in their area to split the cost and aren't charged until a flight is ordered and confirmed, said Founder Joel Relova.

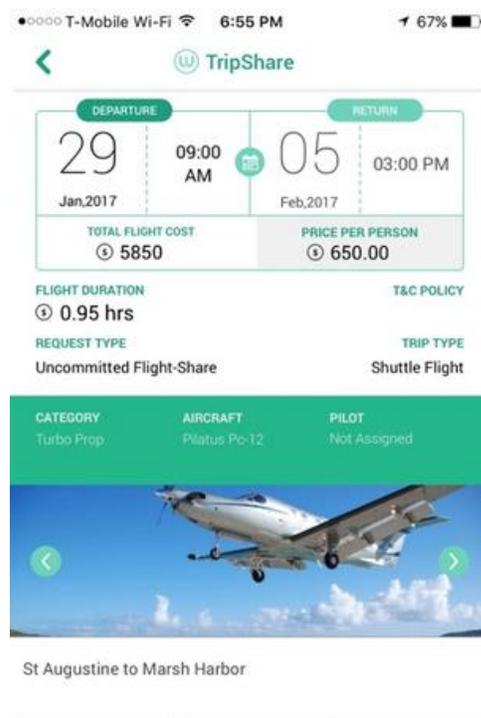
The company launched its beta version around Thanksgiving, and is now going through testing for its official launch this summer.

Relova said their flights are ideal for destinations about 250 to 500 miles away — too far for someone to want to drive, but close enough that the flight price won't be so cost prohibitive no one will go. On average, flying on Whooshfly would be equivalent to buying a business or first class ticket, but has the benefit of saving time by being faster than a commercial airline and having less wait time at a smaller airport.

"There's a lot of benefit to having time saved," he said.

Relova said it's ideal for bachelor parties, birthdays or any event where someone might not mind paying for the experience of flying like a VIP.

Relova said he first thought of a business model using private planes when he was in business school in 2005. But it wasn't until Uber and the sharing economy became common place that he was able to really put something together, which became Whooshfly.



SPECIAL
Whooshfly is an app for providing ride share services to private flight.

Relova showed his idea off at One Spark in 2015, and in January 2016 the company hired developers and created the app, which launched late November.

Although Whooshfly isn't the only company out there doing this — larger companies like Surfair, Jetsmarter and even some local competition— also offer rideshare for planes. But Relova said his company is at least a little different, in that they don't force a membership fee, like Jetsmarter, and is specializing in flying in the Southeast first.

"We're really targeting the leisure and adventure traveler and want to bring this type of travel more mainstream," he said. "Everyone has a different business model. I don't see them as competitors, I see them as co-players. Having more people trying this is better for building the industry."

Those that are interested in the service can try it now — this weekend, the company is announcing direct charter flights from St. Augustine to Marsh Harbour, Bahamas, using Boomerang Air. Weekend flight will be available March through September and can be ordered through the app.

Looking ahead, Relova said he plans to continue to build the framework for the app and build its network of private plane operators — which have a utilization rate of about 10 percent right now, Relova said.

"We're not just a listing service with them," he said. "We approach them and partner up. We understand their business."

Jensen Werley

Reporter

Jacksonville Business Journal

