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Hare-Force One: Boarding the Playboy plane

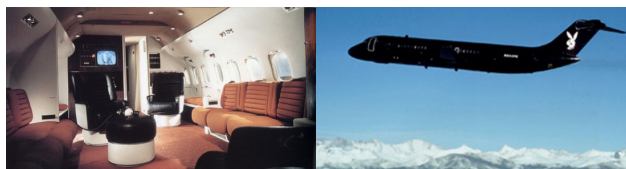
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From ferrying a prized ape to a widowed mate, to rescuing refugees from Vietnam in Operation Babylift, Big Bunny – or Hare-Force One as it was otherwise known – served Hugh Hefner and the Playboy family for five years. No doubt it had its fair share of ‘mile-high’ flying exploits...

At its peak, over a quarter of all male American college-goers picked up Playboy magazine every single month. And what does the patriarch of this booming empire, idolised and hated in equal measures by both men and women the world over, do to cement his status as the kingpin of the media world? He buys a private plane; and we’re not talking about a Cessna 172. Nope – in the birth of the hugely exciting jet age, Hugh Hefner bought an airliner for use at his (and several significant others’) convenience.

Taking the maiden flight



In February 1970, Hugh Hefner took his maiden flight aboard the Playboy plane – a brand-new McDonnell Douglas DC-9-32, bought for an alleged USD 9m (a simply colossal sum at the time). This particular DC-9, though, was worlds away from its commercial brethren. In typical Playboy fashion, it was packed to the rafters with flamboyance and excess. Painted jet-black with Playboy rabbits adorning the tail fin, it was crammed with lavish décor and then-state-of-the-art technology. Those wanting to rest and relax could do so in the 12 folding sleeper chairs, while those in the mood could choose from several recreational activities – dancing in the discotheque or catching a film in the onboard cinema, for example.

Where the magic happened

Mere mortals (playmates and celebrities) entered the jet through the front staircase, while Hugh's personal boudoir – complete with Tasmanian opossum-fur-covered elliptical waterbed – was entered via a private folding staircase at the rear of the fuselage. There's no doubt that here is where the proverbial magic happened. It wasn't all fun and games aboard Big Bunny, though, and with air travel comes serious risk and responsibility, hence Hugh took the liberty of officially training several playmates as air-stewardesses; though the rabbit ears and bushy tails were dispensed with, in favour of knee-high boots and white aviator scarves.

Vietnamese babies and a gorilla named Baltimore Jack



Aside from shuttling Hefner and world-famous celebrities (Elvis, and Sonny and Cher, to name but three) from city to city, Big Bunny took some unusual excursions in the name of publicity. She not only rescued Vietnamese babies following the fall of Saigon, but also ferried a gorilla named Baltimore Jack across America to meet a recently widowed mate. Jack reportedly took a liking to Hefner's waterbed; make of that what you will. But all good things must come to an end and, in 1975, Big Bunny was gutted and sold to a Venezuelan airline. Of the thousands of passengers who subsequently flew on her, we wonder how many knew of the earlier goings-on aboard Hare-Force One.

Photos: Getty / Taschen

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