

The Cloudmaster DC-6

QUEEN OF THE SKIES

It takes something special to upstage a private jet, but when this classic airliner takes to the air again it will transport luxury aviation into a new world

Words Alan Harper

They call her the Cloudmaster, but it's a while since she has been up there in her element, cruising among the white and blue. She sits mothballed at an English airport, proud and perhaps a little wistful, patiently waiting for the next chapter of her life to begin. After a career carrying cargo on both sides of the Atlantic, and in the Middle East, this classic airliner is set for a glittering future as a superyacht of the skies.

In this era of unprecedented growth in private flying, a \$65 million Gulfstream G650 soon gets lost on an apron lined with rows of identikit jets, and even the boss of business aviation, Boeing's 138ft (42m) BBJ3, struggles to stand out. But if you were to turn up in the Cloudmaster at

the Aeroport de Nice during Monaco Grand Prix weekend, or land at London's City Airport for Royal Ascot, you could be confident of getting everybody's attention.

The Cloudmaster company's vision for this elegant example of vintage aeronautical engineering is simple, but ambitious: shared ownership by up to eight partners, each investing £2.5 million. Then will follow a tappets-to-tailfin overhaul, culminating in a complete reconstruction of the interior to the highest standards of private-jet luxury, to designs by the London superyacht studio Bannenberg & Rowell.

"We didn't want the stereotypical bizjet look," explained Cloudmaster's Julian Firth, a 43-year old commercial pilot who clearly has no truck with the bland or the beige.





“We were after a Northern European or British ambience – though without the oak panelling.” The Bannenberg scheme for the DC-6’s interior – which might be narrower than a wide-bodied Boeing Business Jet’s, but it’s taller, and almost as long – will seem familiar to superyacht cognoscenti, with its appealing mix of tones and textures, its intelligent nods towards Fifties furniture design, and its opulent, stitched leather detailing.

The Bannenberg plan shows three seating areas, one of them convertible to a sleeping cabin. There is a VIP suite forward, and a bar, lounge and galley aft. Big cargo doors are a feature no business jet can emulate, and boarding the aeroplane via the aft reception area will feel more like stepping into a swish boutique hotel.

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Realistic renderings of how the Cloudmaster could look, from external paint job to Bannenberg interior.



The Cloudmaster’s restoration and conversion will be overseen by Austrian engineer Thomas Muigg, 49, who is uniquely qualified for the task, having undertaken a similar project on a DC-6 for aviation-obsessed drinks company Red Bull. “Working on classic compared to modern aeroplanes is completely different,” he said. “It is almost a different profession – but more challenging and satisfying. It definitely requires a higher level of craftsmanship.” The 55-year-old airframe will be exhaustively inspected for corrosion. Every part of the aircraft’s aluminium structure can be remanufactured, if necessary. The end result, said Muigg, will be “better than new”.

“Once the airframe and the original systems are restored, the subsequent installation of avionics, VIP interior and additional systems is basically like outfitting a new aeroplane that has just left the factory,” he added.

A direct descendant of the iconic Douglas DC-3 Dakota, the Cloudmaster DC-6 is a powerful and imposing survivor of a vanished age, when civil flying was an adventure and aircraft were symbols of optimism and progress. The type first flew in 1946, although the Cloudmaster was built in 1958. Originally operated in Canada, she was soon registered in Britain as G-APSA and spent much of her early career with Eagle Airways, flying out of London Heathrow on routes all over Europe and the Middle East.

With its relatively simple engineering, an aircraft like the DC-6 is able to go places, and do things, which modern





business jets just can't. Cloudmaster's Julian Firth has 16 years' experience on the type, flying both cargo and charter, and on one occasion taking a group of American guests from Cape Town to Casablanca, landing at bush airstrips. Another more recent trip from Vienna to Madrid saw him taking the aircraft down to 100ft off the Ligurian coast and giving his passengers an unforgettable, low-level flight all the way to the Côte d'Azur. It's the sort of thing for which the DC-6, with its old-school aerodynamics and piston engines, is ideally suited. "There is none of the performance penalty at low level that jets suffer from," Firth explained.

It's fun for the pilot, too: "The philosophy and layout are recognisable to modern pilots, but there is no automation, except for the autopilot, so nothing happens without someone doing something. And when they do, the aircraft responds – there's a fantastic directness to the flying experience, which is missing from modern airliners," said Firth. Jet-age crews who imagine flying a DC-6 to be like

hauling a WW2 bomber around the sky will be in for a pleasant surprise: a system of balance tabs, remarkably advanced for its day, keeps control loads to a minimum. "No force is required," Firth contends. "It's a really beautiful flight control system."

Although seemingly as much fun for both passengers and crew in this modern age of sleek and efficient but rather soulless jets, the Cloudmaster will nevertheless not just be for joyrides. The DC-6 was a serious, state-of-the-art airliner in its day, and with its four, 18-cylinder radial engines bellowing away it remains a mightily impressive machine. It has a 4,000-mile cruising range, and although not as fast as a modern jet it is certainly as comfortable. And for those able to appreciate its aesthetics and understand its historical significance, it has the potential to offer an infinitely more memorable experience.

The Cloudmaster is a rare creature – an aeroplane for those who love flying. That's like a yacht for people who love the sea. It might just catch on.

DOUGLAS DC-6A

Length overall

105ft 7in (32.18m)

Wingspan

117ft 6in (35.81m)

Height

28ft 9in (8.74m)

Cabin length

68ft 9in (20.96m)

Cabin width

9ft 0in (2.76m)

Cabin height

7ft 9in (2.36m)

Max take-off weight

106,997lb (48,534kg)

Engines

4 x 2,400hp P&W R-2800

Cruising speed

275 knots

Cruising range

up to 4,000nm

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