IRONBIRDPARTNERS

Who Not to Fly With

The three documents to request before you pay, what safety ratings really measure, and a 15-question checklist for any charter, jet card or program flight.

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We provide safety data. We do not vet or guarantee safety.

You are about to pay a lot of money to put your family or team on a private jet. Nobody hands you a report card for the company flying you. This guide tells you what to ask for, and what a good answer looks like.

We provide safety data. We do not vet or guarantee safety. No operator, rating or insurance level makes a flight safe. Good answers lower your risk of a bad surprise. That is all.

The basics: three things to ask your flight provider for

Whoever sells you the flight, operator or broker, ask for these three documents before you pay. A good provider sends them the same day.

1. "Show me the certificate and the D085 this aircraft is operating on."

Charter flights in the US are flown under an FAA Part 135 air carrier certificate. Each certificate comes with operations specifications, and the page called **D085** lists every aircraft the company may fly for paying passengers, by make, model and registration (the N-number on the tail).

- **Check:** the company name on the certificate matches the company that will fly you, and your aircraft's tail number is on its D085.
- **Good answer:** both documents, sent without fuss, with your tail number on the list.
- **Red flag:** "it's on a different certificate", "we can't share that", or a tail number that isn't listed. An aircraft that isn't on a charter certificate shouldn't be carrying you for money.
- **Foreign operator:** ask for the certificate its own aviation authority issued and the list of aircraft on it. Many countries have no public lookup, so you rely on the documents you're given.

2. "Please provide a crew report from Wyvern or ARGUS."

Wyvern and ARGUS are private safety firms. Each can produce a report for a specific trip that covers the operator, the aircraft and the crew, including the pilots' experience. Wyvern calls its trip report PASS.

- **Check:** the report names this operator and this aircraft, it's dated recently, and it shows the captain's and first officer's experience, especially hours in this aircraft type.
- **Good answer:** a current report for your trip, plus confirmation that two pilots will fly you.
- **If they don't have one:** not every operator subscribes. Ask directly for the captain's and first officer's total hours and hours in this type, and get it in writing. Vague answers like "very experienced" are not an answer.

3. "Please provide the insurance certificate showing this aircraft's liability coverage."

- **Check:** the limit per passenger and the limit per accident for the whole aircraft, that this aircraft is on the policy, the policy dates cover your trip, and it covers every country on your route.

- **Good answer:** a certificate of insurance with real numbers, sent the same day. Many operators will name you as an additional insured if you ask.
- **Know the floor:** federal minimums are low. A US air taxi operator only has to carry $75,000 per passenger. A legal minimum is not a recommendation.

If you only do one thing, do these three. A company that answers quickly and in writing is a good sign. A company that dodges them is telling you something too.

Double-check everything you're sent

Today almost anything can be faked: a certificate, an insurance document, a safety report, even an email that looks like it came from the operator. Treat every document as a claim until you've checked it.

1. **Run it past an AI tool first.** Paste the document or a screenshot into Claude, ChatGPT or the AI tool you use, and ask: "Does anything in this look altered, inconsistent or AI-generated? What should I verify?" It's good at spotting mismatched names, dates, tail numbers and wording that doesn't fit. It can't prove a document is real, so treat its answer as a list of things to check, not a verdict.
2. **Check it at the source.** Look up the operator and tail number on the FAA's Part 135 list yourself. Call the insurance broker named on the certificate to confirm the policy. Confirm a safety report with ARGUS or Wyvern directly.
3. **Use contact details you found yourself.** Call the operator on a number from its own website or the FAA record, not the number in the email or PDF you were sent.
4. **Be suspicious of urgency.** A last-minute change to payment instructions or bank details is the classic sign of fraud. Confirm any change by phone before you send money.

If something doesn't match, stop and ask. A legitimate company will understand.

The basics cover the three documents. This part explains what sits behind them: who actually flies you, what the safety ratings mean, the crew, insurance in detail, flying internationally, and a printable 15-question checklist.

Who actually flies you

Two kinds of company sell charter flights.

An operator owns or manages the aircraft, employs the pilots and holds the FAA certificate to fly paying passengers. Federal rules say no one may act as a direct air carrier without the proper certificate and operations specifications (14 CFR 119.5).

A broker arranges the flight but does not fly it. A broker is legal and often useful. Federal rules require a broker's materials to say it is a broker, not the carrier in operational control, and that a licensed direct air carrier provides the service (14 CFR 295.23).

Operational control is the key term. The FAA defines it as the exercise of authority over initiating, conducting or terminating a flight (14 CFR 1.1). On a charter, that authority should sit with the certificate holder. If a company can't tell you who has it, stop.

A broker must also tell you, before you sign, the name of the direct carrier, the capacity it is acting in and the limits of its own liability insurance. On request it must disclose its relationship with the carrier and the total you pay, including fees and taxes (14 CFR 295.24). Any price it quotes must be the entire price you pay (14 CFR 399.84).

How to check a US Part 135 certificate

1. Get the operator's legal name and the aircraft tail number (the N-number painted on the tail).
2. Search the FAA's list of legal Part 135 certificate holders. The FAA publishes one with the aircraft each operator may use for charter. It reportedly added a searchable operator list to its Safe Air Charter website in May 2026.
3. If the operator or the tail number isn't listed, call the local FAA office or ask the operator to explain.
4. Ask to see the Air Carrier Certificate and the D085 page of its operations specifications, which lists the aircraft it may fly for charter. A legitimate operator will hand both over.

If you suspect an illegal charter, the FAA reportedly runs a hotline: 1-888-SKY-FLT1.

If the operator is foreign

The FAA list covers US operators only. For a foreign operator, ask for the certificate its own aviation authority issued and how it is approved for flights to and from the US. Many countries have no public lookup, so you are relying on documents the operator gives you. Be wary of a US-registered aircraft flown by a foreign operator, or an aircraft that isn't on a charter certificate at all. Regulators have reportedly targeted both as illegal charter.

What safety ratings mean

Four names come up: ARGUS, Wyvern, IS-BAO and ACSF. All are private programs. None is an FAA finding. Each is a **snapshot** of an operator at one point in time, measured against that program's own standard.

ARGUS

- **What it checks:** ARGUS is a private rating firm. To be in its charter registry an operator must have held its certificate for at least a year and fly at least one turbine aircraft. Analysts check that flights are crewed by two experienced pilots and search NTSB and FAA records for accidents, incidents and violations.
- **Gold:** earned by passing those checks. It is a records check, not an audit of the operation.
- **Platinum:** a two-day onsite audit of safety management, emergency response, operational control, training and maintenance. Problems must be fixed and accepted by a separate auditor. It renews every two years.
- **Platinum Elite:** for operators with a record of Platinum audits. It swaps the cycle for continuous monitoring, reviews about every six months and an onsite review.
- **Who checks:** ARGUS analysts for Gold, ARGUS auditors for Platinum and above.
- **What it doesn't tell you:** how a specific crew will perform on your day. It is not a guarantee.

Wyvern

- **What it checks:** Its operator standard, called Wingman, involves an onsite audit. Wyvern material reports repeat audits about every 24 months.
- **PASS:** a report on the operator, aircraft and crew for a specific trip, reported to be available from Wingman-certified operators. Parts of it appear to be fed by data sources, such as insurance and flight time, rather than re-audited each time. Wyvern is reportedly expanding PASS in 2026. No release date was found.
- **Who checks:** Wyvern auditors.
- **What it doesn't tell you:** it reflects data on the date it was issued.

IS-BAO

- **What it checks:** IS-BAO is a safety management standard for business aviation, run by IBAC. It is not a charter-specific rating. Stage 1 means the safety system is set up. Stage 2 means risks are being managed effectively. Stage 3 means safety management is fully built in and a positive safety culture is sustained.
- **How often:** an independent audit at registration and renewal, reported to be every two or three years.
- **Who checks:** an accredited outside auditor.
- **What it doesn't tell you:** it covers an organization's systems, not your aircraft or crew on your date.

ACSF

- **What it checks:** the Air Charter Safety Foundation runs an Industry Audit Standard, plus a lighter version for smaller operators. It is aligned with FAA safety management rules and ICAO's Annex 19. The result is "ACSF Audit Registered" status.
- **How often:** the program page does not state the interval. Ask.
- **Who checks:** an ACSF-accredited audit company. The operator must also be an ACSF member.
- **What it doesn't tell you:** how the operator performs on a given trip.

How to use ratings

Ask which rating, which level, when it was last audited and whether you can see the report. A rating can be out of date. An operator with none can still be careful, and one with a top rating can still have a bad day. A rating is one input. It does not make a flight safe.

The crew

Experience in this aircraft. A pilot with 10,000 hours total may have 50 in the aircraft you're boarding. Ask for the captain's and first officer's hours in this type. We did not find a federal minimum for charter pilots, so the answer is yours to judge. Both ARGUS and Wyvern look at pilot experience in their reviews.

Rest. Federal rules cap unscheduled charter flight time at 8 hours in 24 for a one-pilot crew and 10 hours for two pilots, with 10 hours of rest in the 24 hours before the assignment ends (14 CFR 135.267). Ask when the crew last flew and when they started duty. A long same-day round trip after an early start is worth a question.

Two pilots or one. Some small jets are allowed to fly with one pilot. ARGUS checks that flights are crewed with two experienced pilots even where one is allowed. A second pilot is a second set of eyes. Ask for two and ask the operator to put it in writing.

Insurance

Ask for the certificate. NATA, the charter trade association, reportedly says legitimate operators provide a copy of their Part 135 certificate and insurance certificate on request.

What federal rules require. Under DOT financial responsibility rules (14 CFR 205.5), these are the **federal minimums**:

- US air taxi operators: at least $75,000 per passenger, with an aircraft total of $75,000 times 75 percent of installed seats.
- Direct air carriers that are not air taxi operators: at least $300,000 per passenger, times 75 percent of seats.

Which floor applies depends on how the operator is registered with DOT. These are legal floors, not recommendations, and not a measure of what is adequate for your trip. We do not state a "typical" limit because we could not confirm one from a reliable source.

What to ask:

- What is the limit per seat, and what is the limit per accident for the whole aircraft?
- Do passengers get the passenger limit, or something lower?

- Am I, or my broker, named as an additional insured?
- Does the policy cover every country we're flying to?
- If a broker is involved, what are the broker's own liability limits? It must tell you before you sign.

Flying internationally

Permits. A charter flight to another country usually needs that country's authorization for the aircraft and the flight. Ask: "Does this aircraft have the permits for every country on this trip, and who files them?"

Customs on the way home. For the return to the US, the pilot must submit passenger details to US Customs and Border Protection (the eAPIS manifest) no later than 60 minutes before departure and compare each traveler's document against it (19 CFR 122.22). Your job is accurate passport details, early.

You. Confirm passport, visa and entry requirements with the operator and official sources, including the US State Department. Rules and forms change. Ask how immigration will be handled at the private terminal on arrival.

Weather. Ask for the operator's weather cancellation and rebooking policy in writing before you pay, including how and when you're refunded.

One last step

Ask in writing and keep the answers. Good operators won't mind. If you'd like a second set of eyes on a quote, Ironbird Partners will review it: call 844-338-5387 or email info@flyironbird.com.

This guide is general information, not legal advice. Facts checked 6 November 2026. Rules, ratings and airport details change, so confirm what matters to you with the operator and official sources.

Printable checklist: 15 questions to ask before you pay

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#	Ask	A good answer sounds like
1	Which company holds the FAA Part 135 certificate for my flight?	A company name, given right away, that I can find on the FAA list.
2	Is this exact tail number on that certificate?	A tail number, and no hesitation when I check it.
3	Will that carrier have operational control, in writing?	"Yes, here is the confirmation."
4	Are you the operator or a broker?	A direct answer. A broker names the carrier and says it is a broker.
5	What is the total price with all fees and taxes?	One all-in number, with the broker's fee disclosed on request.
6	Will two pilots fly us?	"Yes, two, and it's in the contract."
7	How many hours in this aircraft type do the captain and first officer have?	Specific numbers, not "very experienced".
8	When did the crew last fly, and when does their duty start?	A clear schedule showing rest well inside legal limits.
9	Which safety rating or audit do you hold, at what level, and when was the last audit?	A named program, a level, a date, and a report I can see.
10	What are the insurance limits per seat and per aircraft, and can I have the certificate?	Numbers, a certificate sent the same day, and an offer to name me as additional insured.
11	Does the insurance cover every country on my route?	"Yes," with the certificate to show it.
12	For international trips, does the aircraft have every permit, and who files the customs paperwork?	A clear answer on both, and a list of what I need to supply.
13	If the aircraft has a problem before departure, what is the backup?	A named plan: another aircraft, how fast, and who pays the difference.
14	What is your weather cancellation and rebooking policy?	A written policy with refund timing.
15	If I book through a broker, who holds my money, and when is it refunded if the trip cancels?	A clear answer that matches federal broker rules: refunds within 20 days for cash or check.

Sources

1. 14 CFR 119.5, certificate requirements
2. 14 CFR 1.1, operational control
3. 14 CFR Part 295, air charter brokers (295.23, 295.24, 295.26)
4. 14 CFR 399.84, price statements
5. FAA legal Part 135 holders list
6. AVweb, FAA Safe Air Charter operator list, 11 May 2026
7. FAA charter consumer pages (hotline)
8. ARGUS audit ecosystem
9. Wyvern and second source
10. Wyvern PASS
11. AIN, Wyvern expands safety audit programs, Aug 2026
12. IBAC IS-BAO and second source
13. ACSF Industry Audit Standard
14. 14 CFR 135.267, flight and duty limits
15. 14 CFR 205.4 and 205.5, insurance floors
16. NATA and IRMI on insurance requests
17. 19 CFR 122.22, private aircraft manifest