

How spouses of world leaders travel
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Koh Jun Lin

The prime minister's wife Rosmah Mansor has drawn criticism again over her use of a government-chartered flight to receive an award in Istanbul, Turkey, last month.

The Airbus 319CJ aircraft that she used is on a two-month lease from Emirates Airlines as a replacement for the government's own aircraft, an Airbus 320CJ, while it undergoes maintenance.

But how do spouses of head of governments around the world travel? How does Malaysia compare?

The USA

Perhaps the most iconic example for VIP air transport is a pair of near-identical US Air Force (USAF) Boeing VC-25A, which are colloquially (but inaccurately) dubbed 'Air Force One'.

The first lady of the US and her children get to fly on board this aircraft when travelling together with the US president - whether while on official business or on vacation.

When she travels without the president however, there is still a fleet of other USAF executive transport aircraft to choose from, such as a Gulfstream C-37B, or the Boeing C-32 aircraft that she used during a controversial European holiday in Aug 2010.

This doesn't mean that she gets a free trip at the taxpayer's expense, however, although tax money would still be spent.

"The air force jet she flew costs \$11,351 per hour to operate, according to several reports, meaning a 14-hour round trip would cost nearly \$160,000.

"The first lady would reimburse only the equivalent of first-class commercial tickets for herself and her daughter Sasha, the rest of the seats being occupied mainly by Secret Service. Officials said their friends flew on separate commercial flights," *The New York Times* reported on Aug 6, 2010.

The on-board meals for all of these aircraft are reportedly not free either, and are charged directly from the passengers' personal credit cards, whether they choose to eat it or not.

The UK

The Royal Air Force (RAF) has two BAe 146 short-haul airliners available for VIP transport, and these cater for the British royal family and senior politicians.

British cabinet members including the prime minister tend to use a mix of the RAF jets, scheduled commercial flights, and chartered flights, instead of relying solely on the RAF and depending on their travel requirements.

In 1998, however, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair courted controversy when he took his family on one of the RAF jets for a holiday in Tuscany, Italy.

His office justified the trip, saying Blair had met then-Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi just before the start of the holiday, and thus should not have to pay for his seat.

The fares of the rest of the family had already been paid for by Blair, it said.

Currently, the UK government regularly [publishes data](#) on its cabinet member's overseas trips, including whether any of their friends or family had travelled with them on public expense.

The incumbent British Prime Minister David Cameron, however, is reported to opt for budget airline flights when going on holidays.

Needless to say, his spouse Samantha Cameron does the same.

Australia

Entitlements of Australian officials are spelled out in detail on its Department of Finance's [website](#).

Among others, it says ministers' overseas travels are to be done via commercial flights only. The Royal Australian Air Force's (RAAF) VIP jets or chartered flights are not to be used unless "absolutely necessary" and commercial flights are unfeasible.

The guidelines state that the minister's spouses (if on official business), children, or family members, may travel in business class at the government's expense.

However, it repeatedly states that this should be the exception during special circumstances rather than the rule.

"The prime minister will only approve a minister's spouse or de facto partner's travel where the host country has extended an invitation to the spouse or de facto partner and where an official program of engagements has been organised for the spouse or de facto partner to undertake," it says.

It makes no mention of provisions for spouses travelling unaccompanied by the respective official.

The handbook is also silent on trips by the prime minister's own spouse, and whether this is subject to the prime minister's approval as well.

For domestic travel, spouses are allowed to accompany ministers on chartered flights or RAAF flights if the spouse is travelling for official business as well, provided that this does not incur extra expenses such as requiring a bigger transport.

Canada

When Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his family took a government jet to go on holiday to Saint Kitts and Nevis, it was reported that he would repay Canadian taxpayers the equivalent of an economy class flight for each family member who accompanied him.

According to a *CBC News* report in January, the Canadian prime minister is not permitted to fly in commercial airlines for security reasons, and the decree making him pay for the flight had been in place since 2011.

"Former Prime Minister Stephen Harper in the past also paid economy fare prices for personal travel with his family," said the report.

"Harper issued an edict in 2011, saying he expected all senior officials to reimburse taxpayers for the cost of personal flights on government aircraft, after documents suggested former Chief of Defence staff Walter Natynczyk had spent more than C\$1 million flying on the air force's Challenger jets since 2008, including a flight to St. Maarten."

Malaysia

In a parliamentary reply dated May 27 last year, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Shahidan Kassim said the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the Raja Permaisuri Agong, the prime minister, and the deputy prime minister are entitled to use the government's VIP jets.

According to him, the government has four VIP jets - a Dassault Falcon 900, a Bombardier BD-700, an Airbus 319CJ, and an Airbus 320CJ.

In light of the recent revelations however, it would appear that Rosmah is entitled to use the jets as well, although it is unclear what the terms of use are.

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