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Where Bezos's jet flies most — and what it might say about Amazon's HQ2 winner



Flight data examined by The Post show that Jeffrey Bezos's luxury jet has embarked on more than a dozen flights a month in 2018, many of them leaving or returning to Seattle, Amazon's current home. (Pascal Rossignol/Reuters)

By Jonathan O'Connell and Andrew Ba Tran - November 2, 2018

Amazon.com executives toured all 20 of the finalist locations the company is considering for its second headquarters and its 50,000 jobs.

But how many of the cities has company founder Jeffrey P. Bezos visited himself in search of the best site for his company?

It's impossible to know for sure. But Bezos, the world's wealthiest person and the owner of The Washington Post, travels frequently aboard his own jet, a Gulfstream G650ER.

Flight data examined by The Post show that the luxury jet has embarked on more than a dozen flights a month in 2018, many of them leaving or returning to Seattle, Amazon's current home.

Flight records are sometimes imprecise, and they do not show who is aboard the plane, but they do correspond closely with Bezos's public appearances in 2018, including his arrival in Palm Springs, Calif., in March for his invite-only "summer camp for geeks" conference, in Dallas in April for a speech and in the Washington area in September to appear at an Air Force conference.

And based on the movements of his plane, Bezos has not been to more than half of the cities on Amazon's list since it announced the 20 finalists in January — a sign that experts say does not bode well for those cities.

In that time, the jet has touched down in the Los Angeles area more than a dozen times and made multiple trips to Boston, Dallas, Miami, the D.C. area and the New York City area. Amazon named three D.C. area locations (the District, Northern Virginia and Montgomery County, Md.) finalists and two in the New York area (New York City and Newark).

The plane has not been to 11 other finalist cities. Some of those were considered long shots from the outset, among them Columbus, Ohio; and Indianapolis.

But experts say it could signal disappointment for other cities that were considered strong possibilities, such as Chicago, Atlanta and Austin, if Bezos did not travel to those places some other way. They say it is very rare to see a chief executive choose a new headquarters site without looking at it personally, even if he or she is not involved in the early or middle stages of the project.

"Typically, the CEO and the senior staff actually visit the specific sites late in the process," said John Boyd, a New Jersey relocation consultant who has advised companies that include PepsiCo and Dell.

"I think that eliminates any city he hasn't gone to," said Arthur G. Greenberg, a broker from the firm Savills Studley who has advised Marriott International and other companies. "I can't think of any big headquarters move without the CEO being intimately involved, and I don't know how he could do that without seeing it."

Jeff Bezos's flight logs could offer a clue to HQ2

Since the finalists for Amazon's second headquarters were announced in January, Bezos's jet has flown into airports near nine of the proposed sites.



Los Angeles, 15 flights

Bezos made the most trips here – but it is not considered a strong contender. He has other interests in L.A., including Amazon Studios and a home in Beverly Hills.

Dallas, three

Considered a strong contender for its workforce and low cost of doing business. Bezos's space company, Blue Origin, is in rural West Texas.

Miami, two

Considered a long shot by some analysts, Bezos created a stir when he was spotted at a Miami nightclub last summer. He also went to high school nearby.

D.C. area, six

Bezos owns a home and a newspaper in Washington and has made a number of public appearances here in recent months. Amazon Web Services is also headquartered in Northern Virginia.

Boston, two

Amazon is expanding in Boston already, and its robotics unit is headquartered here.

New York City area, two

Both Newark and New York have reportedly received second visits from Amazon's search team. Amazon's audio book division, Audible, is also headquartered in Newark.

Source: Amazon, FlightAware and ADS-B Exchange

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An Amazon spokesman said Bezos's travel had no relation to the company's search. The company says it plans to make a decision on a second headquarters before year's end.

The data examined were culled from FlightAware, an international flight tracking company, and ADS-B Exchange, a online source of flight data for aviation enthusiasts.

Amazon, which has 563,000 employees worldwide, makes hundreds of real estate decisions every year that would be considered major choices for much smaller companies. Top-level executives, especially Bezos, could not possibly scout locations for all of them.

But a second headquarters, which the company expects to employ 50,000 people in 10 to 15 years, would require an estimated \$5 billion in capital spending — the sort of investment that could reshape a region's economy.

"It would be hard to imagine they would make a decision this big without him seeing" the site, Greenberg said. "We're not talking about a back office somewhere. This is the second headquarters. I can't imagine he wouldn't want to see it."

Bezos has alternative reasons to visit each of these locations. Amazon has existing business in many of the cities. For instance, experts do not consider Los Angeles a strong contender, but it is home to Amazon Studios, the company's television production company, and Bezos owns a home in Beverly Hills.

Amazon is already expanding in Boston, where it has more than 1,000 employees and plans to add nearly 3,000 more. Amazon's audio book division, Audible, is based in Newark, while its cloud computing business is in Northern Virginia.

The plane's more recent flights — including to the District, Miami and the New York-New Jersey area — could be more significant, experts said.

John Schoettler, who oversees real estate for Amazon, has been with the company nearly two decades and oversaw its expansion in Seattle, which may have earned him some independence.

But perhaps not complete independence.

"It sounds like it's a very small team that's actually involved in this process," said Chris Volney, site selection expert at Newmark Knight Frank, a commercial real estate services firm. "Usually if it's a smaller team, the CEO is likely to be more involved."

So what does Bezos think?

Speaking Thursday at a conference in New York, he acknowledged that there was a lot of information to take into account. Ultimately, he said, "you immerse yourself in that data, but then you make the decision with your heart."

Which place does he love best? It's anyone's guess.