

Aperol sprint: race for a Euro summer is on

Getaways The power crowd is beating a path to warmer climes.

Samantha Hutchinson and Fiona Carruthers

Paul O'Brien is making a break for it. The businessman who made his fortune through plane charter outfit Avmin has spent the past six months helping clients secure private jets to fly from the European glamour capitals of Paris and London direct into resort towns such as Nice and Mykonos.

Over the past month, he has watched as friends and his extended circle have ditched the Australian winter for a sun-soaked sojourn on the Mediterranean. On Friday, he joined the exodus, heading to Greece's party island of Mykonos.

"There's a feeling that lots of people have headed overseas this year, to the point that we're seeing European parties here [in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane] being put on by places for anyone who's not going overseas," Mr O'Brien told *AFR Weekend*.

"But it's very expensive. Ten months ago, there were good fares, but for last minute it's not uncommon for people to tell me they've spent \$40,000 or \$50,000 on a first-class fare – if they can get a seat."

Mr O'Brien is just one of the corporate set boosting outward-bound passenger numbers in what travel operators say is their busiest northern hemisphere summer in years.

A slew of society weddings and events – including chef Guillaume Brahimi's Paris wedding to chicken heiress and shoe designer Tamie Ingham, and Melbourne restaurateur Chris Lucas' Italian wedding to Sarah Lew – have drawn the power set, including outgoing AFL chief executive Gillon McLachlan, investment banker Matthew Grounds, Seek co-founder Paul Bassat and Sydney hotelier John Ryan, to Europe.

Former PwC boss and Carlton football club president Luke Sayers has also left the country with his family for an extended Italian jaunt.

Airline bookings tell the story, with Italy, France and Germany among the top 10 global destinations. Australians are booking through the Flight Centre Travel Group.

Between January and May, trips to

London comprised almost one in six of Flight Centre's international leisure bookings by Australians, compared with one in every 10 bookings in 2019.

"London is also hot, and the United Kingdom has just surpassed the United States as our No.1 international destination," said FCTG global leisure CEO James Kavanagh.

Commercial flights are expensive, and some clients have been stunned by the nightly rate of some of their favourite hotels, but Mr O'Brien said that had not changed long-held travel plans, even as successive interest rate rises jacked up most peoples' mortgage repayments.

"Most of these holidays were booked in six or eight months ago, and you have to remember that was also six or so interest rate rises ago," he said. "But there is a sense that what had to be an annual European trip is now becoming a once-every-two year thing."

Local tourism operators say the exodus has left them in the cold. Many are looking to lure travellers to domestic winter destinations, including Tasmania and Sydney's Manly Beach, with steep discounts, as the local hotspots weather the softest conditions to hit in three years.

"Things have definitely come off the boil in Tasmania – last year, we were inundated, this year, things are quieter, particularly mid-week, which is when you see some great deals," said Matt Casey, general manager of the Tasmanian-based Federal Group, which owns Saffire Freycinet and MACq 01 luxury hotels.

Tourism Whitsundays is doing its best to turn local tour operators' pain into gain with a fun play on those seeking summer during the southern hemisphere winter.

"Do it without a passport in The Whitsundays," their marketing pitch says.

Media boss Antony Catalano, who is partly based in Melbourne and his Byron Bay boutique hotel Raes on Wategos, is overseas with his wife Stefanie without their children for the first time in three years.

The pair were enjoying a few nights at the Macakizi Hotel on the Turkish Riviera when *AFR Weekend* rang, with plans to travel to Ithaca in Greece's Ionian Islands to help fellow Melburnian Peter Raff celebrate his 60th birthday with 150 others.

"Australians travelled a bit last year but not like this," he said.