



Five of the Best Onboard Whirlybirds

If you track the spending patterns of a high net worth individual, the first purchase is often the private jet, used for getting around quickly and safely. What follows is more often than not the private yacht, previously an iconic symbol of the sophisticated playboy, now a genuine addition for privacy, security and the ultimate location for entertaining those not easily impressed. And finally, ultimately, comes the private helicopter, with the almost unique ability to take-off and land virtually anywhere, including on the helipad of said private yacht.

But choosing a chopper to suit your purposes, and land easily and safely on the deck of your yacht, is no mean feat. Much should be considered, least of all what make and model to choose. What follows is a rundown of the top five helicopters for yachts, based on some of the more standard requirements of owners currently engaged in this niche industry.

The current "Queen of the Skies" is the EC135, a light, twin engine helicopter from the Eurocopter stable. The EC135 has a compact footprint, making it ideal for the small helidecks generally found on yachts. Even in VIP configuration, the EC135 has passenger seating in the back for five, although it would be rare to travel with such numbers, remembering that there is always a balance between passengers, fuel and power when it comes to helicopters. Up front are two pilot seats, though the helicopter can be flown single pilot,

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creating one more passenger space or allowing an owner pilot to be up front with a professional pilot alongside. The twin engines allow for a level of redundancy in the event of one engine failing during flight, although this is no guarantee that you will not wind up in the water anyway. The “fenestron” tail rotor, which encloses the tail rotor blades and is unique to Eurocopter, adds a degree of safety to people outside of the aircraft, as well as when manoeuvring in confined areas.

A possible contender for the top spot comes in the form of the new Bell 429, which is currently going through the last elements of the certification process. The Bell 429 is another light twin, similar to the EC135, although the footprint will be slightly larger. Thus far, all reports on this helicopter have been positive, and owners will benefit from Bell's high quality aftersales and support service, which is particularly important when operating single helicopter fleets, especially far from home.

The Agusta 109 Grand is again a similar size, and has powerful twin engines affording impressive single engine performance, but is a different style of

helicopter, with retractable wheeled undercarriage and sleek lines designed for high-speed cruising. To many, the Agusta line of helicopters represents an embracing of the Italian flair for design. It is also noteworthy to mention the available interior specification by the design house Hermès.

For the very largest of yachts, a major contender for a VIP helicopter must still be the Sikorsky S76, especially in the C++ form and in time, the D model. This is the choice of both the Queen of England and Donald Trump, probably due to an unbeatable level of comfort, especially with regards to interior noise. Again, the S76 has twin engines and retractable wheeled undercarriage to reduce drag in forward flight, but has passenger seating for up to 12 in a utility form, but six to eight in VIP configuration, which offers ample space.

Our final helicopter, Eurocopter's AS350, fills a slightly different niche, as it is really a helicopter that you could expect to use in a charter application. As a single engine helicopter, the initial acquisition costs and operating costs are much lower than the twins. Even so, the AS350 has an attractive interior and provides a

pleasant ride. Where an owner does not have a private helicopter available, this would be a suitable charter alternative – although whether to allow a charter helicopter to operate to and from your yacht is another discussion altogether.

The decision to purchase a helicopter should not be taken lightly. The purchase decision should be made only after the many elements that determine how the helicopter is intended to be used have been properly weighed up and considered. While flying capabilities are a major consideration, it is the passenger experience that is most important, together with how the chopper will integrate with the yacht. A sensible move would thus be to consult with a specialist, someone knowledgeable in helicopter acquisitions, to lead you through this process.

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