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Helicopters, or “air tenders” as they are increasingly known, are the well-dressed yacht’s best accessory

# Sky’s the Limit

By Marilyn M. Mower

IT IS 10 O’CLOCK ON A MID-DECEMBER MORNING and Eugene Dean, director of aviation for the Washington Corporations in Montana, is scrolling through e-mails for a status report from the yacht *Atessa*. He finds the message from Captain Carter Corey, westbound from the Canary Islands. Skipping past the chat, Dean gets to the item that interests him: sea state. He relaxes a bit. “The captain reports four- to six-foot following seas. Piece of cake,” he says. It’s not the comfort of the delivery crew aboard 226-foot *Atessa* that’s on Dean’s mind. Rather, it’s the comfort level of the crown jewel of tenders stored on *Atessa*’s club deck: the custom Eurocopter 130B4 helicopter. On this date, *Atessa*’s bird, her rotor blades removed and stored in crates below, is a mute swan, bundled up, de-fueled and strapped down in the shelter of the superstructure.

*Atessa*, the 2006 ShowBoats International Award winner for Best Refit/Reconfiguration (*ShowBoats* Dec./Jan. 2006), and her air tender belong to Montanans Dennis and Phyllis Washington. >>



Neil Rubinstein (2)





Atessa's Eurocopter 130 rides aft of the alfresco dining area on the skydeck, providing guests with dinner and a show.



## Air Tenders



Originally a builder of fixed-wing aircraft, Agusta began building helicopters under license from Bell in 1952. Today Agusta controls design and manufacture of the aircraft bodies, the rotors and blades, and the transmissions. The Agusta Grand, left, is a twin-engine, six-passenger aircraft with a 150-knot airspeed and a range of 450 miles.

Selecting the Eurocopter 130 was the result of developing a detailed mission statement for the aircraft, according to Dean. It's an exercise every yachtsman contemplating the purchase of a helicopter should undertake.

Unlike most helicopters, which have as their primary purpose the workday commuting needs of corporations or private individuals, *Atessa's* air tender is dedicated to the yacht. "The helicopter and her pilot, David Rose, live aboard full time," says Dean. Owner Washington spends considerable time on his yacht, but often just a few days at a stretch, so minimizing the transit time between airports and the yacht's often remote location was of great importance.

The previous *Atessa*, Washington's refit of the 142-foot Feadship *Impromptu*, shoehorned a helipad for a four-passenger Bell 206 JetRanger in among the tenders. On the substantially larger, newer *Atessa*, there is a dedicated landing pad for the bigger EC 130. "This helicopter not only provides a very luxurious, comfortable ride for six passengers, but it also provides great views for sight-seeing," says Dean.

Perhaps equally important is what the helicopter doesn't do—disrupt the neighbors. "This type of aircraft with its Fenestron [enclosed tail rotor] minimizes disturbance to nearby yachts during take-off and landing. It's very popular with tour operators in the Grand Canyon, for example, because it creates less side wind. It is also a much quieter machine."

Another important consideration in selecting the EC 130 was the wheels-versus-skids issue. "We don't like wheeled helicopters; they roll and slide on deck. They are best for owners who are always going to land at an airport and taxi to a garage," Dean says. Skids also distribute weight more evenly and allow the installation of either fixed or inflatable emergency flotation, a safety item that is desirable on air tenders, especially on single-engine craft like the EC 130.

"Today's helicopters are quieter and more comfortable, but there are still better places to be. ..."

Yacht broker, captain and helicopter pilot/owner Mark Elliot of International Yacht Collection (IYC) weighs in on the debate: "If you think you might ever want to take that helicopter adventuring or land on a remote beach, you'll want a helicopter with skids. Of course, a helicopter with retracting wheels typically flies faster."

Ah, the speed factor. "Most helicopters are used only on short hops," says James Frean, a former UK Royal Navy pilot who partnered with Nigel Watson's Côte d'Azur-based helicopter consultancy HeliRiviera to open HeliRiviera LLC in Fort Lauderdale. By "short hops," Frean means less than 30 minutes. "Today's helicopters are quieter and more comfortable, but there are still better places to be," he says. "So if your typical scenario is going to include a fair distance from the airport to the yacht, you are going to want a faster helicopter. An Agusta A109 is a fast helicopter, and it's a beautiful machine. But it's a bit Ferrari-like, with high operating costs, and it looks ugly if you try to fit it with skids. The Sikorsky S-76 is also an amazing machine."

The entry-level air tender is a Robinson R44—the sort of utilitarian helicopter Frean says you might see on a shadow vessel. This is a piston-driven aircraft that uses gasoline as fuel, as opposed to turbine-powered craft that use Jet A, a fuel similar to diesel or kerosene.

According to Frean, a helicopter typically is an ego-driven purchase. "Sometimes a guy begins the process saying he wants to buy a particular machine because that's what someone he measures himself against has, even though it may not be the right helicopter for his needs. Our job is to get the right helicopter for the application," he says.

"Right now, a lot of people think they want the twelve-passenger EC 155 because it matches their total number of guests and might make their yacht more competitive for charter," says Frean. "For the few times that might be an issue, the increased structural requirements to carry >>>





Bell's JetRanger III helicopter, above, is a popular turbine model that offers plenty of room for four passengers and one pilot. This Eurocopter 130, right, shows the enclosed tail rotor design called the Fenestron, which reduces wind issues in crowded spaces. The EC 130 is a single-engine, turbine-powered helicopter designed to be flown by a single pilot. Depending on the interior configuration, it can carry up to seven passengers.



Shane McCutcheon (top)





Jim Raycroft



Frank Robinson founded his helicopter company in 1973 to provide a light, inexpensive piston helicopter for general aviation and since has delivered more than 6,000 machines. This single-engine R44 Clipper series helicopter, right, has fixed utility floats. Cruising speed for the four-passenger machine is about 113 knots.



that helicopter versus a six- or eight-passenger model is probably not worth it to most owners.

"It's not just the weight of the helicopter but also the crash load requirement, which increases it by a factor of 2.5. The EC 155 has a static weight of 11,023 pounds, but the yacht's deck must be strong enough to support a crash load of nearly 28,000 pounds."

In addition, new MCA rules that took effect this summer require that the landing pad for charter-yacht helicopters be equal in diameter to the rotor diameter. For a Bell JetRanger, that's 40 feet. Still, Freaan expects a flood of inquiries about the impressive new 15-passenger Agusta AW139 model—despite its huge 55-foot-diameter pad requirement.

Even the EC 130 with its 35-foot rotors and 3,020-pound weight (empty) posed significant engineering challenges for *Atessa's* refit. "You could say the rebuild was planned around this helicopter," says Dale Jenkins, general manager of Vancouver Shipyards, a Washington Corporations facility in British Columbia that was the site of *Atessa's* rebirth. What Jenkins refers to is no small task, considering that *Atessa* not only carries the helicopter but also its fuel, which significantly raises the bar when it comes to meeting yacht classification and certification rules.

Can an aircraft that costs anywhere from \$1 million to \$9 million—not counting the helipad—be a practical addition to a yacht?

Yes, says Freaan, who notes that quality helicopters, like pedigreed yachts, maintain their value. "The small Eurocopter that may cost 1.2 million dollars today will probably sell for a million dollars two or three years from now. Many models have a waiting list," he says. "The owner who can pay seventy million for a yacht probably doesn't want to use chartered helicopters and unfamiliar pilots."

Yes, says IYC's Elliott. "[Helicopters] save time. Guests can

scout an island and in ten minutes see all of the suitable beaches and anchorages and make their choice. If it's rough and you need to make a passage, a helicopter lets the owner and his guests stay ashore and enjoy a nice lunch while the yacht slogs to the next destination. If there's a medical emergency, you can immediately fly the sick or injured person to shore or directly to a hospital."

Elliott knows that the cost of a fully equipped helicopter, as well as onboard fueling capability, may cause clients to wince, but he matter-of-factly states: "I wouldn't build a new yacht without a helipad, and I keep a list of yachts that are good retrofit candidates. Everybody is going to want helicopters in the future."

He recommends against the inexpensive touch-and-go helipad, arguing instead for structure and equipment that enables the yacht to legally travel with the helicopter on board. "It's a little more expensive, but it gives so much more freedom. Traveling to different island nations in the Caribbean, for example, if the helicopter is on board, you just clear it through like you would an inflatable. If you park it ashore, you have to clear it through customs at the airport of each island group before you can use it.

"The nicest thing is probably the extra dimension helicopters bring to yachting," he says. Perhaps no one understands this better than *Floridian's* former owner Wayne Huienga Sr., whose helicopter fleet includes an EC 155 and two Bell 430s. "The [smaller] Bells are useful when guests are coming and going in different directions. His guests water-ski off the French Coast in the morning and snow ski in the Alps that afternoon. It's the ultimate," says Elliott.

"With ultra-high-net-worth individuals, the jet comes first, because that investment really delivers a lot of value," says HeliRiviera's Freaan. "Then comes the yacht, because that's really an expression of the individual. And then they buy the helicopter, because that's really the last link in complete freedom and security of movement. That's the cherry on top of the whipped cream." **T/T**

Can an aircraft costing \$1 million to \$9 million be a practical addition to a yacht?