

By R.Randall Padfield

IN THE 1980S, MANY chief pilots of America's largest companies received beautifully packaged boxes containing a VHS video titled *Sikorsky S-76—The Time Machine*. The video was the idea of documentary filmmaker David Hoffman. "Harry Gray, the CEO of United Technologies, had bought Sikorsky Aircraft and [had learned that] the S-76 helicopter was a difficult sale to the corporate marketplace," Hoffman says. "The CEOs wanted a corporate helicopter, but their CFOs were concerned about the cost."

Gray, who appears in the film, hoped that the pilots would pass the video to their companies' senior management. "Most did," Hoffman says. As a result of this film, "several dozen Sikorsky helicopters were sold to corporate leaders." (To see the clip, go to "Corporate Execs Like Their Helicopters" on YouTube.)

Calling helicopters "time machines" is hyperbole, of course, but helicopters can shave valuable minutes and perhaps hours off car-travel times in metropolitan areas, and even reduce flight times over some routes, compared with airplanes. The six cherry-picked helicopters on Penta's list range in price from \$4.2 million, for a pre-owned Bell 430, to \$14.5 million, for a new Sikorsky S-76D.

All the listed helicopters have two engines. Some single-engine models, such as the Bell 407 Long-Ranger and Eurocopter AS350, have found popularity among companies and individual business owners. In this article, however, we're focusing on twins, because we believe that corporate boards—and the executives' families—would feel more comfortable with senior management flying in twin-engine helicopters. Turbine-engine failures are rare, of course, but when the failure happens in a twin, an airplane or helicopter continues to fly. This is a big reason for there being no certified single-engine business jets, although many manufacturers have tried to bring them to market.

You can expect the cabins in today's top-of-the-line helicopters to be just as comfortable as those in jets of similar size—and have simi-



## The Best Choppers for Busy Folk

lar amenities. Most VIP helicopters provide club seating, from two to four across, perhaps with a beverage cabinet replacing a seat. You'll find large doors on both sides of the cabin, sliding or hinged, and cabin windows larger than any jet's. The lower altitudes that helicopters fly give a view of the Earth that planes can't match.

As with many business jets, the helicopters covered here aren't tall enough for an adult to stand up in. Helicopter cabins have little storage; you'll have to stow most of

your luggage in baggage compartments that may be inaccessible in flight. They're also noisier than jets. While the newer helicopters are quieter than earlier models, you still may want to wear a noise-canceling headset or at least earplugs.

That doesn't seem to be a problem. "Executives love" helicopters because of their greater visibility, claims Mike Dwyer, managing director of Guilford, Conn.-based Guardian Jet, a broker of both jets and helicopters. "It's almost like

flying inside a bubble. They're an amazing ride."

So what are the top helicopters for corporate and VIP use? The Sikorsky S-76, at least since the time of its debut video, has been "the poster child of executive travel," according to Ron Bower of Bower Helicopters in Austin, Texas. Sikorsky has delivered more than 800 of the model over the past 34 years, introducing several versions, including the latest S-76D (just certified on Oct. 12 this year). Four turbine-engine models and their variants adorn the series, with many of the original S-76s later modified with the newer engines.

Although the S-76 remains the undisputed king of corporate helicopters, you'll find other worthy contenders in the ring. The AgustaWestland AW139 is gaining ground on the S-76 because of its greater power, larger cabin, faster speed, and longer range. So it's not surprising that a few corporate flight departments have already made the switch from S-76 to AW139, according to Dwyer. AgustaWestland is part of Italy's Finmeccanica.

**The top-flight twin-engine helicopter, Sikorsky S-76.**

"If your choice is about the aircraft, the 139 wins," says Dwyer. "If it is about the company, Sikorsky wins."

He's referring to Sikorsky's superior product support and the East Coast location of its main manufacturing facilities.

The EADS Eurocopter EC155 B1, similar to the S-76D but less costly, is more popular in Europe than it is in the U.S. It's most recognizable in the U.S. as the bright orange HH-65 flown by the U.S. Coast Guard.

The smaller EC135 has a long pedigree going back to the mid-'80s, but the latest versions of the helicopter are offered with a choice of engines, from either Pratt & Whitney of Canada or Turbomeca of France. Eurocopter is even marketing a spiffed-up luxury version with an interior designed by Hermès.

The AW109 series, a smaller AgustaWestland product, can still seat five in comfort and is half the price of the S-76D. Known for its 154-knot (177 mph) maximum cruise speed, sexy VIP interiors, and large cabin-door windows, the AW109 has gone through several takes since its 1976 launch.

Bell Helicopter, a Textron company, designed the comfortable Bell 430 primarily for the corporate market, though the Fort Worth, Texas, company manufactured only 136 from 1996 to 2008. Nevertheless, the Bell 430, "though half a class below the S-76," according to Dwyer, has found popularity among several helicopter-charter operators and company-flight departments.

The 430 is no slouch, either. In 1996, Bower, of Bower Helicopters, and a Bell test pilot, flew a Bell 430 around the world in 17 days, 6 hours, and 14 minutes, breaking the record for such a flight in a helicopter.

Time machines all, these whirlybirds. Try them and enjoy the ride. ■

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### SIX OF THE BEST The Sikorsky helicopter has strong competition.

Helicopter Manufacturer	Model	VIP Passenger Seats	Max Speed (knots)	Max Range <sup>†</sup>	Price New (mil)
Eurocopter	EC135 P2e/T2e	5	140	254	\$5.30
AgustaWestland	AW109 Power	5	154	380	6.25
Bell Helicopter	430	5	140	n/a	4.20*
Eurocopter	EC155 B1	6	151	373	12.50
Sikorsky Aircraft	S-76D	6	154	325	14.50
AgustaWestland	AW139	8	165	460	13.85

<sup>†</sup>30-minute reserve. \*Used price (model out of production). Notes: Helicopters are listed in order of maximum takeoff weight. Prices include an adjustment for a typical VIP interior and equipment for flight on instruments.

Source: Conklin & de Decker, Orleans, Mass.