



Finest Five Choppers

Our favorite rotorcraft to get you to work

By Mark Huber

AS GOES THE PRICE OF OIL, SO GOES THE CIVILIAN HELICOPTER market. That's because a good portion of new-chopper production goes to satisfy demand from the offshore oil-and-gas industry, and the continued depressed price of crude has put a damper on things—and created the best buyer's market for new rotorcraft in nearly a decade. But which helicopter is right for you and your commute? Here are our finest-five picks:

LARGE-CABIN: Sikorsky S-92A Helibus
Price: \$32 million (with typical executive interior)
Passengers: 9-19 **Top speed:** 190 mph **Range:** 620 miles
Runner-up: AgustaWestland AW101

Want a conveyance fit for a head of state or an uber-billionaire? This is your ride. Sikorsky's twin-engine zips along while weighing in at 26,500 pounds. The S-92A, aka the Fat Hawk, builds on the military's Black Hawk, but adds more-powerful engines, longer main-rotor blades, a six-foot-tall cabin, private lavatory, wet bar, galley, and very roomy seating. There's also 140 cubic feet of baggage space—more than most private

jets—and a quiet, jet-smooth ride. More than 250 have been produced since 2004, mostly to service deepwater oil rigs. Highly modified S-92s are slated to become the new presidential Marine One at the end of the decade, and they already convey the leaders of 10 other countries. The blue-and-white Fat Hawk you regularly see over New York is whisking billionaire investor Ira Rennert to his \$248 million Sagaponack, N.Y., manse.

SUPER-MEDIUM: Airbus H175
Price: \$19 million **Passengers:** 8-16 **Top speed:** 184 mph
Range: 690 miles **Runner-up:** AgustaWestland AW189

Airbus Helicopters (formerly Eurocopter) delivered its first H175 twin-engine last year, and it's winning accolades, thanks to its low vibration and exterior-noise levels, long range, and reliability. The H175 tips the scales at a 16,535-lb. maximum takeoff weight, which translates into a 423.8-cu.-ft. cabin, plus another 81.9 cu. ft. of space in the baggage hold. Standard comforts include a two-zone environmental-control system, an individual air gasper (ventilation nozzle) over each passenger seat, and panoramic cabin windows. Besides being comfy, it's also fast and climbs like a rocket: The H175 has already established several time-to-climb records, including 19,685 ft. in a mere six minutes, 54 seconds.

Courtesy of Airbus Helicopters

The Airbus H175, left, seats up to 16 and costs \$19 million. The \$32 million large-cabin Sikorsky S-92, with its jet-like interior, is seen on the right. For a light twin-engine rotorcraft, we like the \$6.8 million Bell 429WLG, bottom.

MEDIUM:

AgustaWestland AW139

Price: \$15.2 million

Passengers: 5-15

Top speed: 190 mph

Range: 777 miles

Runner-up: Sikorsky S-76D

This is the helicopter that levitates the pope. While occasionally flying the pontiff may be the AW139's most famous mission, its twin-engine versatility has been winning fans since deliveries began in 2003. More than 900 AW139s have been ordered by 220 customers in almost 70 countries. From firefighting to search and rescue, law enforcement to medevac, offshore energy to executive transport, the AW139 seems to do everything well, offering a near-perfect balance of power, speed, range, and cabin size. Its 282 cu. ft. yield a capacious executive interior, which can be designed by Italy's Pininfarina or Germany's Karl Lagerfeld. The Pratt & Whitney Canada engines make the AW139 a real hot rod, packing 1,679 horsepower each, nearly twice as much as some other medium-size twins. And AgustaWestland is constantly making improvements, including recently certifying the AW139 to a higher maximum takeoff weight of up to 14,100 lbs.



LIGHT TWIN: Bell 429WLG

Price: \$6.8 million **Passengers:** 4-7

Top speed: 175 mph **Range:** 474 miles

Runner-up: Airbus H135

When former President George H.W. Bush went skydiving on his 90th birthday last year, his jump master chose the Bell 429 because it has big cabin doors—he didn't want the president getting hung up on the way out. That's just one of the attributes of this 7,000-lb. speedster that comes with a maximum range of 474 miles. Last year, Bell began delivering the 429WLG with retractable-wheel landing gear that makes it both aerodynamically slicker—adding about eight miles per hour to its top cruise speed—and significantly easier to move around in crowded

airport environments. Bell can outfit the 204-cu.-ft. cabin with a variety of executive interiors, and has collaborated with the Italian aircraft-interior specialist Mecaer to develop a particularly plush VIP variant.

SINGLE: Bell 407GXP

Price: \$3.2 million

Passengers: 4-6

Top speed: 161 mph

Range: 388 miles

Runner-up: Airbus H125

Bell has been building its Model 407 single-engine helicopter for 20 years; more than 1,200 are in service worldwide. Recent options include glass-panel avionics and synthetic vision—a system that combines GPS data and computerized moving maps with terrain depictions displayed

on the pilot's instrument screen. The technology makes it easier for the pilot to navigate safely when visibility is poor. New 407s also come standard with a rear-facing camera that the pilot can use to see the tail boom and rotor on his cockpit display screen—very useful when landing close to a tree or wall. This year, Bell unveiled an updated 407GXP model that can carry an additional 50 lbs. of payload, thanks to a 49-hp goose on the Rolls-Royce engine, which also enables the 407 to perform better in hot temperatures and at higher altitudes. Nice, but what really keeps customers coming back is the relatively modest price tag and the 54.8-inch-wide cabin. ■

MARK HUBER is a private-jet pilot who reviews aircraft for Business Jet Traveler.



Courtesy of Flying Colours Corp., top; Bell Helicopter Textron Inc., bottom