

An MD 902 Explorer of Heliservices soars over an urban area of Hong Kong. The company flies three such aircraft that are available for scenic flights. (Photo: Heliservices)

Helicopter tourism in the Asia-Pacific region is a booming business, with single-engine platforms dominating the market. **By Gordon Arthur**

ROTARY RAMBLES

Scenic flights and aerial tours make up an important, though small, sector in the Asia-Pacific civil helicopter market. Indeed, such operations tend to be concentrated in a limited number of countries within the region.

Nadav Kessler, director of sales and business development at Asian Sky Group, said: 'I believe tourism is most established in Australia and New Zealand, and China shows the largest potential.' Those three nations top the list in Table 1, which contains exclusive data provided by the Asian Sky Group, showing the number of helicopters available for aerial tours.

Nevertheless, Kessler told *Shepherd* that aerial tourism is not a large sector, even among operators that fly multiple types of missions. Furthermore, he does not believe it is expanding in Asia-Pacific. 'For many [operators] I wouldn't say it's an area that they're looking at for growth, for development or [investment],' he said. 'Tourism is fairly stable and, while economies are getting better, we're not seeing much more demand for new

operations and new missions to countries in the area. I wouldn't say it's growing.'

Kessler highlighted places like Cambodia, where, even though there are few helicopters, a sizeable proportion (33%) are dedicated to tourism for flights over places like Angkor Wat. Perhaps surprisingly, neither South Korea nor Taiwan registers a single air tour helicopter among their fleets.

Light, single-engine rotorcraft tend to dominate this specialist sector, with very few twin-engine models used due to their greater operating costs. Kessler highlighted the Airbus H125, H130, Robinson R44 and R66 as popular platforms in this area.

While safety is always critical, Kessler believes the aerial tourism sector is not more closely scrutinised than any other. 'Safety-wise, there shouldn't be any differentiation between these missions,' he said.

He added that tourist flights are among the simplest to perform because they often follow routine flight paths, do not go far offshore and are not undertaken at high altitudes.

To be successful, Kessler suggested that operators need to be able to fly ad-hoc to

meet demand, be close to a high-volume scenic attraction and have relatively low operating costs in order to attract enough tourists to pay for the service. They must also be able to fly year-round.

Another boon would be a flexible civil aviation regulatory environment, although Kessler said that most countries in Asia-Pacific are 'accommodating and supportive'. Tourism flights tend to fly at lower altitudes, so this requires more effort from operators to get the necessary permits, for example.

Experiences down under

Underscoring the maturity of the sector, Australasia tops Asian Sky Group's list of tourism operators, with 104 helicopters in Australia and 157 in New Zealand. Interestingly, tourism constitutes only about 5% of the former's 1,907-strong rotary-wing fleet. One major operator is Heli Experiences, part of the Experiences Group, which was established in 2007.

Heli Experiences offers two types of tour: short, scenic flights over cities that typically last 20-30 minutes; and half- or full-day ►



An H130 of GVHL flies through a valley in north-western India. The transportation of Hindu pilgrims is now a major part of the firm's business. (Photo: GVHL)

excursions that range from 4-6h in length. The latter generally visit a site of interest, such as wineries/vineyards, the Great Ocean Road in the state of Victoria or the Blue Mountains in New South Wales.

Nikolai Heaphy-Page, director of the Experiences Group and head of marketing for the Ausjet Aviation Group, told *Shephard* that tourism accounts for 70-75% of its operations. The company is also involved in specialised aerial work such as photography/videography, marine passenger transfer, surveying (land survey/power pole scanning), mainstream media and private charters.

Heli Experiences' fleet of 12 helicopters is spread across two bases in Melbourne and Sydney and includes the Robinson R44, which is used exclusively for tourist flights. Other platforms used for sightseeing are the Bell 206 JetRanger, 206L LongRanger and Airbus H125. These models double up to perform other tasks such as charters and aerial work.

'We have found that the tourism industry has continued to grow, with the helicopter niche increasing in popularity over the last six to eight years. Growth opportunities are now heavily focused on the international market – interest with international group travel being a large driver,' Heaphy-Page said.

He highlighted the fact that there are unlimited destinations around Australia to visit via helicopter, since accessibility

is not too restricted. He also pointed out the unique attraction of such tours: 'Helicopters are cool!'

However, occasional challenges remain, such as weight restrictions and gaining landing permissions, especially when permits are hard to obtain from local councils. Heaphy-Page feels that civil aviation regulations support the company's operations 'as long as we respect and abide by the safety standards enforced by the Civil Aviation Safety Authority'.

'The government does support our operation as we are part of the tourism industry accounting for local and international interest in the country. However, local councils can hamper our operations as helicopters can impact on noise pollution at certain times of day/night,' he added.

Heli Experiences is very positive about the future. 'Australia-wide, as a company, we have huge opportunities for growth and expansion within the tourism industry, leveraging new locations and partnerships. As a national market in general, the future shows promising growth, with opportunities opening up in line with the increased interest in Australia from international markets,' Heaphy-Page said, and he even hinted at plans for the company to expand beyond the nation's borders.

For New Zealand, 20% of the helicopters in the country are dedicated to scenic

flights or to the tourist industry. There is no shortage of sights, with bountiful scenic spots such as Auckland's cityscape, the Bay of Islands, various volcanoes in the North Island, the Southern Alps, lakes, fjords and glaciers and even opportunities for whale watching off the Kaikoura coast.

Another popular use for rotorcraft in New Zealand is for adventurers to take part in 'heli-hike' or 'heli-ski' excursions in remote areas. This type of activity is somewhat unique to the country.

Going strong in Hong Kong

According to figures provided by the Asian Sky Group, China operates 58 piston-engine helicopters, 43 single-engine turbine platforms, four light twin Airbus H135s and three gyroplanes in the tourism sector.

Among the piston-engine aircraft, 49 are Robinson R44s and an additional six are R22 Beta models. In the single-turbine category, there are five Avicopter AC311s, ten Airbus H125s and 11 Enstrom 480Bs. It is notable that domestic models from Avicopter are yet to break through in this market, certainly in terms of tourism.

'China does have high or decent demand for aerial tourism, and it has a lot of scenic sights that would be good for such tourism – there's plenty of domestic tourism in China and they do use helicopters for this,' Kessler explained.

'The issue for China is that regulations make it difficult to operate freely and allow creativity to adapt to the requirements of tours to show them what they want to see. It is getting better, but I'd say that's one country where there should be growth but it's not growing as fast as it could because of hurdles in regulations.'

Focusing specifically on Hong Kong, the territory's harbour, urban skyscrapers and country parks provide an ideal canvas for viewing from the air. The only company authorised to offer scenic flights in the area is Heliservices, which was established in 1978 as part of the Kadoorie Group. The operator describes itself as 'the sole and premier provider of rotary-wing services in Hong Kong'.

A spokesperson told *Shephard* that Heliservices 'offers a complete range of aviation services, including aircraft charter for sightseeing and VIP services, filming and photography, lifting work, power line

maintenance and methodical inspection'. It even provides UAV rentals.

The company has various options for tourists, covering standard sightseeing routes over Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and geoparks, as well as customised flights, ranging from 15 to 45 minutes depending on the package.

Kessler described Heliservices as a very established tourism flight operator, although its helicopters will from time to time be reconfigured for other work such as cargo lifting and construction. The company has three MD 902 Explorer light twin platforms for scenic flights and was Hong Kong's first operator of this tail-rotorless aircraft.

The Heliservices spokesperson commented: 'We have been in the tourist market for more than 20 years. The market has been growing steadily as more and more tourists would like to try something different than the traditional activities in Hong Kong.'

The company believes such flights offer an 'unforgettable experience'. It warned

that most big challenges 'come from the weather in Hong Kong that may affect the operation of flights', with hazards including humidity, mist and typhoons.

Heliservices spoke glowingly of the support offered by Hong Kong's Civil Aviation Department, which has given permission for the company to rent the Convention and Exhibition Centre helipad in Wan Chai on the edge of Victoria Harbour, sharing the facility with the Hong Kong Government Flying Service.

'Also, in regards to routine and special permits for filming and survey inspection and other related business matters, Heliservices can easily apply for the permits according to the timeline set by the government,' the spokesperson added.

Regarding the future of the scenic flight market in Hong Kong, Heliservices is 'positive'. The company believes such helicopter experiences will be an unquestioned method for tourists to quickly and easily explore the area, especially as the government aims to

attract more inbound visitors from all over the world.

Pride of the Philippines

Of the 206 helicopters in the Philippines, seven are listed by the Asian Sky Group as being dedicated to tourism. PhilJets Aero Services, which also has operations in Cambodia, performs approximately 80 scenic flights per year. In the past, about 30% of its activity comprised tourism-related flights but that percentage has recently dropped.

Shepard spoke to Thierry Tea, the founder and MD of the company, who revealed: 'We entered the tourism market in 2013. We have encountered a slight drop in tourism flights as we grew our business flights. However, tourism has increased in the Philippines so there are more opportunities.'

PhilJets is the largest operator of Airbus platforms in the country, with ten in total, including the H125 and H130. Three of these are used for tourism flights, according to Tea. ▶



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The H130 accommodates up to six passengers, offering them Bose noise cancellation headsets, Bluetooth smartphone connectivity for onboard phone calls, MP3 audio plug-ins and the ability to connect iPads with outdoor GoPro cameras for maximum customer enjoyment. This technology allows passengers to take photos of the scenery at any time whilst listening to music.

Popular tourist destinations for PhilJets flights are Taal Lake, the volcano Mount Pinatubo, the Banaue rice terraces, the white beaches of Puerto Galero, the resort island of Boracay and the Chocolate Hills.

Catering to tourists is not always straightforward, however, according to Tea: 'Tourism flights are challenging as they are one-time clients and more demanding than local clients. However, it is interesting as it pushes us to improve our services and customer satisfaction orientation. Our team feels very proud to show foreign tourists the beauty of the Philippines, its pristine waters and wonderful islands.'

PhilJets spoke positively of the national aviation authorities: 'We are very appreciative of the initiatives and efforts made by the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines in recent years. There are still some improvements required, but the will to uplift the standard is felt and PhilJets is glad to support the regulators and to contribute,' said Tea.

One might expect that Thailand, which has a huge tourism industry like the Philippines, would be a good breeding ground for scenic flights too. Surprisingly, however, only one or two companies offer such experiences, since the country has few multi-mission helicopter operators.

“What looks to be a staple part of the helicopter industry in Australasia is likely to be replicated in the emerging aerial tourism markets in Asia.”

Table 1: Number of aerial tour helicopters by country in the Asia-Pacific region.
(Source: Asian Sky Group)

	Total fleet	Aerial tours fleet	Percentage of total
New Zealand	769	157	20%
China	952	108	11%
Australia	1,907	104	5%
Japan	788	14	2%
Nepal	30	10	33%
India	309	9	3%
Malaysia	163	8	5%
Indonesia	216	7	3%
Philippines	206	7	3%
Fiji	12	4	33%
Papua New Guinea	104	4	4%
Cambodia	9	3	33%
Vanuatu	58	3	5%
Guam	16	2	13%
Thailand	116	1	2%
New Caledonia	22	1	9%
Bangladesh	19	1	5%
Hong Kong	23	1	4%
Laos	10	1	10%
Myanmar	17	1	6%
Palau	1	1	100%
Singapore	9	1	11%
Sri Lanka	15	1	7%
Vietnam	34	1	3%

Thailand's rotary-wing fleet is dominated by the government and oil and gas sector.

Shuttle to the shrine

The Asian Sky Group records nine helicopters used for tourism applications out of India's total fleet of 309. Actually, India offers an interesting case study, since one of the most popular forms of private flight is what could be termed 'religious tourism'. Many Hindus in the region undertake pilgrimages to sacred sites,

and these are often in remote areas and over inhospitable terrain.

For example, the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine is the second-most visited in India, attracting more than 10 million pilgrims annually. Travelling from the town of Katra to Sanjichhat near the shrine takes 5-6h on foot or 4-5h by pony. However, by helicopter, the journey is reduced to just four minutes. The Katra helipad is situated at an altitude of 2,800ft, while that at Sanjichhat sits at 6,200ft.

One company offering flights to Sanjichhat is Global Vectra Helicorp Ltd (GVHL), which also happens to be India's largest private helicopter company. Established in 1998 and publicly listed from 2006, it averages 25,000 flight hours annually.

AJ Baker, CEO of GVHL, explained: 'We provide dedicated, year-round pilgrim shuttle services at the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine... This service sees two H130 helicopters operating, on average, eight hours of flying every day.'

'GVHL also provide dedicated, seasonal services at a number of other important religious tourism sites across northern India, with an additional four H125 helicopters conducting operations at these higher-altitude venues between May and October each year.' Baker said that tourism flights are a 'very significant element of our business, accounting for over 4,000h of flying each year'.

GVHL also supports the oil and gas industry and runs a range of VIP, corporate and utility operations. 'In India, the religious tourism sector is incredibly important and, as such, support to helicopter services is given due priority from the aviation regulator,' Baker added.

The company currently has a fleet of 29 helicopters, comprising the Bell 412EP and AW139 for oil and gas services; the AW169, H135 and a 412EP for VIP and corporate work; the H125 for both tourism and utility work (for example, surveys and power line inspections); and the H130 for dedicated tourism services. The latter is heavily used for religious tourism, able to carry seven passengers at a time in forward-facing seats.

Baker noted that GVHL has been involved in shrine flights for almost ten years. Such is its popularity that it evolved over the past five to six years to become a focal element of the business. 'We see the sector as being relatively stable, with incremental year-on-year growth, and this trend is expected to continue,' he said.

Baker went into more detail regarding the operational difficulties. 'Our tourism operations are a significant sector of our business and provide our company with a positive and reliable revenue stream, but, indeed, these services have their share of challenges,' he told *Shephard*. The first challenge Baker mentioned is operating in



PhilJets is the largest operator of Airbus platforms in the country, with ten in total including the H125 and H130, shown above. (Photo: PhilJets)

very remote locations, 'so simple logistics such as maintaining fuel supplies and obtaining suitable accommodation for staff at the seasonal sites always requires special attention'.

Secondly, the helicopters are generally flying at higher altitudes, 'so constant weather changes are a daily factor, and coordinating hundreds of passengers around changing schedules requires a lot of work from our ground staff'. Weather conditions can change swiftly, and fog, rain and monsoons affect flights.

Looking to the future, Baker said: 'The religious tourism sector is quite mature and relatively stable but, even so, there will likely still be modest increases to helicopter services in the years ahead as the improving Indian economy allows more and more people who visit the various sites to take advantage of the time-saving benefits that the helicopter services provide.'

Adventure super-boom

Tourism helicopters make up just 2% of Japan's 788-strong rotary-wing fleet. One operator is Japan Flight Adventures (JFA), which offers what it describes as 'rotary rambles into every prefecture and pristine patch of scenery or soaring skyline in Japan'.

JFA operates from Okinawa in the south to the tip of Hokkaido in the north, offering custom charters, aerial filming, theme flights for families and corporations and even marriage proposals or movies.

A JFA spokesperson told *Shephard*: 'We plan to add more products, creative route offers and combo land and air packages to

exclusive or remote Japanese territories.' However, charters for simple point-to-point transport or emergency meetings comprise more than 50-60% of JFA's day-to-day service scope.

The JFA fleet relies on the Bell 206 and R44, with other models subcontracted where demand warrants. 'Currently, we use and despatch about 12-20 aircraft throughout Japan on a regular basis and more on a rare basis,' the spokesperson noted.

'Tourism has seen an exponential rise in a major way from about four years ago and, with the easing of visas and the upcoming [summer] Olympics [in Tokyo in 2020], it is looking to "super-boom"... There is a great big luxury market for Chinese travellers who can more easily get visas and that is on everybody's minds, but everybody from everywhere seems to want to visit Japan now,' they continued.

The greatest challenges to flight operations in the country are primarily cost and competing with excellent ground transport options, as well as ATC restrictions and government regulations. Referring to the authorities, the spokesperson added: 'They are very strict and getting stricter up to the Olympics, and so they generally hamper more than help currently.'

As for the future of helicopter tourism in Japan? 'It will soar higher and higher for sure, and we'll have many more passengers in the upcoming two to three years – and more competition.'

What looks to be a staple part of the helicopter industry in Australasia is likely to be replicated in the emerging aerial tourism markets in Asia. ■