

www.verticalmag.com

Vertical

THE PULSE OF THE HELICOPTER INDUSTRY

AFRICA BY AIR

ADVENTURES FLYING IN KENYA



AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2012
USA / CANADA \$7.99

AFRICA

A Samburu warrior stands in the center of the frame, wearing traditional beaded jewelry and a colorful wrap around his waist. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. Behind him, a large, colorful EC130 helicopter is visible, with its tail boom and rotor hub in the foreground. The background is a dry, open landscape with some sparse vegetation. The word "AFRICA" is written in large, bold, yellow and orange letters at the top of the image.

A Samburu warrior poses briefly in front of an equally colorful EC130. The author traveled to virtually every corner of Kenya during his time with Nairobi-based Lady Lori Helicopters.

CANADIAN PILOT SHAWN EVANS WAS LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE WHEN HE TOOK A JOB FLYING IN KENYA, AND HE WASN'T DISAPPOINTED. HERE, HE SHARES SOME OF THE CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF FLYING IN AFRICA.

Story and photos by Shawn Evans

BY AIR



Download as wallpaper at verticalmag.com/photography/wallpapers





Piloted by Stefan Grobler, Lady Lori's first EC130 climbs out of the shadows at the 15,000-foot mark on Mount Kenya.



On safari: an EC130 cruises through one of the canyons in the "painted desert."



While flying over the Ewaso Nyiro River, it's common to see crocodiles and other wildlife.

From the exotic beaches along the coastline of the Indian Ocean, to the scorching hot desert in the northern Turkana region and the scenic peaks of the Aberdare Range, Kenya is a remarkable sight from any elevation. This is the beautiful and varied landscape I encountered when I took a job with Lady Lori Helicopters in the capital city of Nairobi — but, as I quickly learned, operating a helicopter in Kenya is not without its challenges.

With extremes ranging from equatorial temperatures to mountains that rise as high as 17,000 feet, Kenya's climate and topography are demanding, to say the least. But so is operating in Nairobi's congested and poorly controlled airspace, or attempting to take off while a politician in back throws fistfuls of money out the window into the surrounding crowd. Sharing your backyard with a bull elephant, meanwhile, is a completely different kind of challenge. The fact is, I had been looking for adventure when I moved to Africa, and Kenya is bursting at the seams with it.

A CHANGE OF PACE

My adventure began in December 2010. I had previously been working for a couple of operators in western Canada, but as winter approached, I found myself laid off for the season and looking for work. It was then that I received an offer to switch continents and move to the east coast of Africa, to fly full-time for Lady Lori Helicopters.

It wasn't my first time on the continent: a few years beforehand I had flown a Bell 212 for the Canadian company VIH Helicopters in the politically volatile West African

country of Angola. I was happy to find that Kenya has a much more secure political climate than Angola, as well as better infrastructure. While Kenya does have an aviation system in place, however, I found it very different from what I'm used to in Canada.

Upon arrival, one of my first tasks was to pass the exam for my Kenyan commercial helicopter pilot's license — no easy feat, because I had no syllabus from which to study. The only way for me to find out what was on the exam was to pay my dues and sit it. Interestingly for a helicopter exam, most of the questions were based on the European instrument flight rules (IFR) fixed-wing model. There was very little, if any, helicopter content. An IFR pilot I am not, but my persistence paid off and I eventually acquired my license.

Kenya's hot-and-high conditions demand aircraft that are up to the challenge (much of the country is over 4,000 feet in elevation). Lady Lori Helicopters has chosen to operate Eurocopter products exclusively, and maintains a fleet of AS350 B3s and EC130s. Most of the company's operations involve high-end safaris, although we also did some work transporting VIPs and politicians, as well as periodic medevacs. This was very different from the utility work I normally do in Canada — I had been over there for a year before I was able to convince the powers that be that it was a good idea to use a helicopter to fight fires, something that had never been done in the country before!

The climate of Nairobi and the surrounding area is relatively mild: the elevation is about 5,450 feet, which keeps



An EC130 banks over Samburu Province in central Kenya.



the temperature at a pleasant 28 to 30 degrees Celsius (82 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit) by day. There is little humidity, and it cools down nicely after sundown. This bustling city of over three million people has two civilian airports: Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, and Wilson Airport, where I was based, which is home to approximately 40 helicopters.

Unfortunately, "air traffic control" in Africa can often seem more like "air traffic chaos." During my time in Nairobi, I experienced close calls and near-misses with other aircraft almost daily. This sharpened my ability to sense when things were coming apart with air traffic control and to compensate accordingly. (Actually, from a traffic perspective, flying in Nairobi is not too different from driving there: the local transportation is dominated by thousands of privately owned minibuses called "matatus," which aggressively jam up every major thoroughfare. I can assure you that matatu drivers are capable of bringing out road rage in even the most sedate church-going folk!)

A casual approach to aviation safety was particularly evident when we flew politicians. The helicopter is a favorite means of transport for politicians throughout Africa — and, unfortunately, also one of their most common means of demise. As a pilot transporting politicians in Africa, not only do you have to worry about what may have been done to the machine while it was out of your sight, you have to be very alert when arriving or departing at any off-airport location. It doesn't matter what was said during the pre-arrival briefing (assuming that there was one) because any guidance is quickly forgotten by the crowds at a political rally.

On one such occasion, just after landing with a prime

minister on board, I was trying to shut down my EC130 when the waiting crowd suddenly ran towards and completely surrounded the machine. Two Land Rovers came through the throng at full speed, stopping right the edge of the rotor disk. A couple of guys jumped out to push the crowd back, while another two rolled out a red carpet to the door of the machine — all before the blades came to a stop! There is seldom proper security or adequate planning for helicopter operations at any political venue, and it's not uncommon to have intoxicated crowd-goers hanging from the skids as you're trying to lift off. Some politicians will throw money out of the door or window of the helicopter just prior to take-off, further compounding the problem.

Medevac missions posed different types of challenges. I spent many a day on medevac standby at the Wilson Airport, as there were frequent requests for emergency assistance on the 19,341-foot Mount Kilimanjaro in neighboring Tanzania. When a call came in, we would file an international flight plan, load a doctor on board, and then fly to an international airport in Tanzania to clear customs. Next, we'd start the climb up to one of the base camps above the 13,000- or 15,000-foot mark on Mount Kilimanjaro. Once at altitude, our task was to locate, assess and load the patient. After refueling in Tanzania, we would return to Nairobi and transfer the patient to a waiting ambulance. An average round trip in good weather took about four hours. At those altitudes and with full medical kit on board, the AS350 B3 was my preferred helicopter for medevac missions, but they could also be done in the EC130.

A stunning ledge on top of the sacred mountain Ol Lolokwe is the perfect place to watch the sun rise.



Download as wallpaper at verticalmag.com/photography/wallpapers



Local villagers show up to inspect a helicopter never before seen in their area of the Loita Hills.

ON SAFARI

Although flying in Nairobi was certainly an adventure, the most enjoyable part of my job was flying on safaris. Kenya's game reserves draw wealthy tourists from around the globe, and flying in the safari role gave me the chance to spend time at some truly world-class resorts and hotels. The clients there would often invite their pilots to join them for meals and such activities as game drives, fishing and even exploring some of the region's remote villages.

I was very fortunate to be based for a few months at a ranch in the Laikipia region called Loisaba Wilderness, which had 61,000 acres of wildlife conservancy... and no fences. With no manmade boundaries to deter them, lions, hyenas and other beasts routinely strolled across my yard. Two elephants displayed a particular fondness for smashing my planters and uprooting trees and shrubs. I had never imagined that I would one day have to tackle an elephant problem in my yard (and saying "shoo!" to a delinquent elephant just doesn't cut it).

Loisaba was our base when providing services to the high-end clients of the lodges and resorts in the Laikipia area, where rates can easily exceed \$1,000 US per person per night — and can run to as much as \$6,500 per night for a private three-bedroom villa. A typical safari for such clients would begin when their private jet touched down in Nairobi, after which they would be whisked away in EC130s to one of the Laikipia area's many world class resorts (the luggage sometimes followed separately in a small Cessna airplane). From the moment the skids touched the ground at their destination, the clients would be diligently attended to, with programs customized to their specific wishes. We frequently conducted aerial safaris that required two or three helicopters — chartered for a week or more — to see the sights and animals.

Depending on what the clients wanted to see, they could be out early on a game drive searching for big cats that were winding down after a night

HOW GOOD IS THE FastFin[®] SYSTEM?



Larry Roberts, Senior VP, Commercial Business, Bell Helicopter

"How good...? We've made it standard on the Bell 412, and I think that speaks volumes."

Providing complete mission solutions is a **top priority** for Bell Helicopter. Adding the FastFin tail rotor enhancement and stability system at the factory or aftermarket delivers an **FAA-certified 1,250-pound** increase in useful load.

How good is **FastFin**? Just ask Bell Helicopter.



davemarone4857@BLRaerospace.com
BLRaerospace.com/4857 | 425.405.4857



for more information.

Scan with your smartphone



Fields of tea plants just north of Nairobi make a rich backdrop for this air-to-air shot.



Although the author spent most of his time behind the camera, he did get in front of it for this shot with a Lady Lori EC130 in the sand dunes of the Suguta Valley in northern Kenya.

of hunting, then back at the lodge in time for breakfast. Afterward, we might take a late morning flight to fish for rainbow trout in a high alpine lake above 12,000 feet. Or, we might head north through the canyons of a “painted desert,” flying over crocodile ponds and lakes full of pink flamingos before landing at the Suguta Valley sand dunes — where I have seen the temperature hit 40 degrees C (104 degrees F) before 9 a.m.!

From the Suguta Valley, we might take an aerial tour over volcanoes, stopping for a full picnic lunch along the shore of Lake Turkana — the largest desert lake in the world, which stretches 290 kilometers (180 miles) and crosses the border into Ethiopia to the north. Our route would then take us down along the lush green mountains of the Mathews Range back to the lodge, where everyone (including the pilot) would be ready for “sundowners”: cocktails that were the perfect way to celebrate the end of another African day.

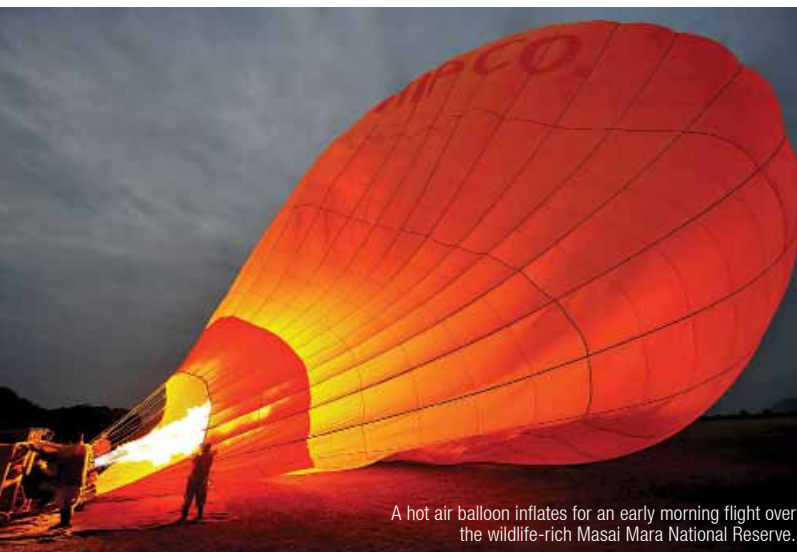
Although there are a number of exceptional game reserves in Kenya, taking clients to the Masai Mara



Luxury, African style: Little Shompole Lodge in southern Kenya is shown here illuminated with lanterns.



Safari guests never lack for things to do. Here, a guest tries out a boogie board on the sand dunes.



A hot air balloon inflates for an early morning flight over the wildlife-rich Masai Mara National Reserve.



A spectacular view greets guests upon waking at the Kiboko Star Beds in Laikipia.

National Reserve in the southwestern part of Kenya was always a special experience. Here, visitors were able to see the “big five” (African elephants, lions, black rhinos, Cape buffalos and leopards) from an open but covered Toyota Land Cruiser with narration from knowledgeable guides. Early the next morning, hot air balloons would take visitors across the reserve for an hour or two, with a champagne breakfast served wherever the balloon touched down.

Another popular early morning flight was over the savanna to the sacred mountain Ol Lolokwe in search of elephants and giraffes, whose heads would occasionally poke out through the tree canopy to watch us fly by. Then, with a gentle pull back on the cyclic, we’d begin a steep, 3,000-foot climb just meters from a sheer rock face. This culminated in a dramatic cliff-top landing on a spot so narrow, the EC130’s Fenestron would be left hanging over the edge — leaving just enough room for guests to sip chilled champagne and orange juice as they watched the sunrise from the cliff edge.

Many of the rich and famous come to Kenya to get in touch with nature, themselves or both, but a number of them also have a strong interest in conservation. Some guests chose to supplement the champagne flights with more action-packed activities, joining conservationists on expeditions to “dart” elephants by helicopter. The tranquilizer darts would put the animal to sleep for a short period, providing us a brief window of time in which to land the helicopter and attach a GPS collar for satellite tracking. This was undertaken as part of an effort to combat poaching, a serious problem in the region.

While having extra passengers



Humphrey Carter, a British national and pilot who has spent many years in Kenya, shows off a prized rainbow trout at Lake Ellis on Mount Kenya.



An EC130 sits ready on the pad for an early-morning flight at Loisaba Wilderness.

along for this type of work isn't always desirable, in this case, the arrangement benefits both sides. Guests who pay for the flight get a once-in-a-lifetime experience, while conservationists get the helicopter time they desperately need at no cost to themselves. When movie stars are on board the benefits are multiplied, because when they see firsthand the value of the work they can become high-profile advocates for conservation efforts.

Some safaris are planned out in every detail up to a year in advance, and the program of helicopter flights, game drives, fishing and gourmet meals can go on as long as clients desire. Even the longest safaris eventually come to an end, however, and so did my time in Kenya. In May 2012, I left Africa and returned home to Canada, where I'm back flying utility work — and ready for my next adventure.

Canadian pilot and photographer Shawn Evans has traveled and worked around the world. To read more of his adventures, visit thedigitalvue.ca.



Giraffes gallop in the wilds of Tanzania.

A British doctor administers medicine before a medevac from the Barranco camp on Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.



Many of the author's medevacs on Mount Kilimanjaro occurred in poor weather, but this one occurred on a rare bluebird day.



Pit stop: a helicopter refuels on a dry lakebed during a tour of the volcanoes of Tanzania.