

10 Tips for Buying Your Ideal Private Helicopter

Private buyers seeking to purchase a pre-owned turbine helicopter can find it challenge to select the right one notes Mark V. Clancy. Following are his top tips for landing the ideal private rotorcraft for you...

Initial visions for helicopter ownership may include room for a pilot, family, luggage for a big trip, and perhaps a dog. High-value decisions and long-term commitments like these can be daunting and require more than just looking on the internet and going it alone in hopes of acquiring the best helicopter.

If you've never purchased a helicopter before there's much to understand. If you currently own one and are seeking to upgrade, you may be facing some similar challenges. Here are some tips to ensure you get the value you want from a helicopter you intend to purchase.

1. Does a single or twin-engine helicopter meet your interest, needs and budget?

Determine which helicopter makes/models offer the cabin size, performance, and weather capabilities that best meet your interests and needs.

A range of attractive pre-owned Airbus, Bell, Leonardo and MD single-engine turbine powered helicopters (\$350,000-\$2,000,000) are available versus new (\$3,000,000-\$4,000,000) and may prove to be interesting to private buyers interested in flying under visual-flight-rules (VFR), and with their families, friends and business associates.

Airbus, Bell, Leonardo and Sikorsky twin-engine helicopters offer a larger cabin seating, are faster, carry more cargo, and can fly under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) or in adverse metrological conditions but they require a seasoned IFR capable pilot, maintenance service center support, and a budget substantially more than single-engine turbine helicopters.

There are a variety of late model and legacy corporate configured twin-engine helicopter models available at a lower price (\$350,000-\$3,500,000) versus new prices (\$5,000,000-\$10,000,000) that may require, or you may desire, varying degrees of refurbishment, Maintenance Repair and Overhaul (MRO), and avionics updates (\$100,000-\$1,500,000).

You could also consider reconfiguring available utility, offshore, or law enforcement and commercial helicopters for private use and that would likely require similar MRO, refurbishment, reconfiguration and avionics updates. It may be a challenge to envision converting a former commercial helicopter into a private/corporate role, but great deals are often available on late model and legacy commercial helicopters.

Once complete, the helicopter will enter a "second life" custom configured ready to provide years comfortable, safe and reliable service.

You may want to create helicopter capability/performance/maintenance/reconfiguration update/cost-benefit analysis matrix. This will take some effort and recommend you retain the assistance of an experienced helicopter sales agent and service center to help you weight the advantages and disadvantages before deciding on the right helicopter.

2. Model Year, Total Time, Optional Equipment, Maintenance Status, History, Condition and Asking Price Matter...

Once you've selected your ideal make and model, you can begin your search of available helicopters for sale. They'll be advertised in various industry digital and print publications and aircraft sales web sites by owners, exclusive and non-exclusive brokers or agents, dealers, and at domestic and international helicopter trade shows.

Keep in mind that some sellers are more informed than others and none represent the buyers' interests.

Gather initial helicopter specifications including a list of installed optional equipment, maintenance status summary and photos, and inquire if the helicopter is actively being flown or run. You should also determine if there has been any damage history and, if so, who performed the repair and returned the aircraft to service.

What airframe and engine service centers provide maintenance support? How long has the helicopter been 'for sale' and has the asking price changed since on the market. This information will help you narrow the field of prospective helicopters.

3. Understand equitable comparisons

Too often we see private buyers "price shopping" for helicopters as if they are commodities and seemingly unaware of how to make equitable comparisons. The devil of helicopter value is in the component details, and buyers are advised to develop an analytical comparison process of assessing the major component values.

Buyers should request the full maintenance tracking report from sellers. Substantial value may be excluded from your consideration if you only utilize the summary. Create a spreadsheet of line-items of retirement, overhaul, and calendar components and major inspections for the airframe and engine(s). This process is involved, and your helicopter agent and service center will help you understand the current values and costs.

There are also direct maintenance cost software programs available to assist in developing your analytical process. In addition, future component costs can be projected in your spreadsheet analysis based on anticipated hourly/annual utilization.

4. Hire the right helicopter maintenance service center mechanic or engineer

Selecting the right helicopter maintenance service center or mechanic/engineer is one of the most important aspects of purchasing a helicopter.

A trusted service center mechanic experienced in maintaining the particular make/model helicopter you intend to purchase will assist you in identifying minor and substantial issues during a pre-purchase inspection, provide estimates for any MRO, refurbishment, reconfiguration, avionics updates and ensure continuous helicopter airworthiness on your behalf.

Create an itemized budget for these categories and consider how an anticipated work scope schedule coordinates with the commencement of your flight operations.

5. Domestic and international acquisitions differ

Helicopters purchased domestically, or regionally within one airworthiness authority, are less complicated and easier to relocate, but do not always provide the best acquisition opportunity. Sometimes, the most favorable helicopter acquisitions are located oceans away, where governmental airworthiness authority bi-lateral agreements may not exist, and where installed optional equipment may not have Supplemental Type Certificates (STCs), thus requiring removal prior to obtaining airworthiness approval in your country.

These hurdles and challenges can be worth the effort, but you may need some assistance. Your service center will be able to help.

You may also need to locate an independent designated airworthiness representative able to guide you and perform an acceptable aircraft inspection and issue a civil standard airworthiness certificate prior to the helicopter being exported or following import to your home country.

6. Make sure you buy the helicopter correctly

Once you have collected data on all available helicopters of interest, completed your analytical assessment of installed equipment, determined current component values and projected component costs; estimated any anticipated MRO, reconfiguration, refurbishment and relocation expenses; made helicopter valuation assessments and comparisons; and decided on the most interesting helicopter, you're ready to commence owner or owner agent negotiations.

The more informed and prepared you are, the more likely you will be able to negotiate a favorable price. The next step is the drafting the Helicopter Purchase Agreement (HPA) which can be complicated without a helicopter sales agent or broker and/or an aviation attorney to guide you as they are generally written by sellers.

HPA's typically range from eight to fifty pages, cover a wide range of terms and conditions, and can be the one of the most challenging aspects of buying a helicopter. Once a mutually-acceptable HPA is approved you are on your way to the helicopter inspection and in closing your transaction.

7. Be thorough with the pre-purchase inspection

Typically, once a written agreement is reached with a seller and a refundable escrow deposit is placed in escrow, a helicopter Pre-Purchase Inspection (PPI) is performed with your experienced mechanic and helicopter sales agent at the seller's location.

A PPI typically requires one to two days depending if the helicopter is a single or twin-engine model and the age as older helicopters have more data to review. One day is typically spent reviewing and assessing the log books, records and documents and the second day is generally required to perform a physical aircraft inspection and flight test.

You may also want to perform an engine borescope inspection and may need to hire an engine service center with the correct equipment and training to complete the engine inspection properly and determine if there are any issues that are required to be addressed.

A flight test is performed with the seller's pilot to verify helicopter functionality and engine performance as they need to meet OEM maintenance manual criteria.

Upon conclusion of the PPI, there could be major or minor airworthiness issues that need addressing. Your service center mechanic will identify the important issues to be resolved by either you or the seller.

8. Relocate the helicopter using professional ferry flight pilot/freight forwarders

Once you have completed the helicopter inspection and acceptance, it's time to decide on how to relocate the helicopter to your facility or service center. If you will be flying the helicopter over a substantial distance, you should consider engaging a professional ferry flight pilot experienced in international air operations.

If you will be shipping the helicopter, obtain a quote from the seller's service center to properly dismantle and prepare the helicopter for land/sea or air freight shipment. You will also need an experienced international freight-forwarder with good knowledge of the export/import process, and a load master to ensure proper loading and unloading of your helicopter.

Helicopter ferry flights can cost \$800 per day, plus expenses. Helicopter service center shipping preparations can cost \$5,000 to \$10,000, and freight shipping charges typically range from \$25,000 to \$100,000 depending on the helicopter, location, shipping method, distances and other circumstances. Note that most aircraft insurance policies do not cover ground/sea/air freight shipping, so be sure to include this with your helicopter shipping.

9. Take advantage of the 'professional agent difference'

In an increasingly changeable market, and to assist you in selecting the right helicopter, assemble a team of support professionals, and help you navigate the process, you may wish to engage the services of an experienced helicopter sales agent committed solely to representing your acquisition interests.

The right professional helicopter buyer agent has: In-depth knowledge of the various helicopter markets; unique knowledge of the makes and models being purchased; maintains fleet data, 'for sale', and historical sales databases; is able to identify on- and off-market helicopters for sale; performs detailed valuations; can offer recent sales insight; prepares buyer-oriented HPA's; is experienced with international transactions; and offers extensive experience for the clients' exclusive benefit.

Helicopter Buyer agents work similarly as seller agents but exclusively represent buyer's interests, saving clients a multiple of their earned commission; ensuring their clients buy wisely; and update and customize their helicopter seamlessly, and provide a trusted team of support professionals that will be with and guide them during their term of ownership.

10. Enjoy the buying process

Buyers love to buy but hate to be sold to. Buying your own private helicopter correctly is especially important. High-value assets like helicopters can be a challenge and complicated to acquire, especially internationally.

By identifying all helicopters available on the market, implementing an analytical comparative assessment and cost projection process, and by securing a trusted support team you are certain to identify, acquire, and begin enjoying the best value helicopter anywhere as expeditiously and smoothly as possible.

About the Author

Mark V. Clancy is an aerospace engineer and founder of HelicopterBuyer, Inc, a USA-based full-service helicopter buyer and seller agent services business with 32 years' extensive expertise with helicopter and engine sales, valuations, MRO, reconfigurations, and operator support. Contact Mark at +1-763-753-3700 or via e-mail at mark@helicopterbuyer.com. He welcomes your comments, suggestions, and/or perspectives.