

meet the ROBINSONS

Freo aviation photographer Jon Davison almost got more than he bargained for during a round-the-world odyssey for a new book on the remarkable Robinson helicopter. **text** norman burns « **images** courtesy jon davison

Jon Davison expected high adventure during a round-the-world assignment – but he didn't count on being stuck up a tree, in the pitch dark, with a leopard for company.

Kiwi-born Jon's three-month odyssey took him from Auckland, to Arizona, to Alaska and many exotic locales in between to capture the thrills and beauty of the Robinson helicopter for his book, *Robbie, The Robinson helicopter experience*.

The result is a spectacular collection of shots, from cherry-red Robinsons framed against rugged Alaskan peaks to the tiny, ultra-maneuvrable and affordable choppers zipping over flowing lava in Hawaii. But it was on the South African leg of Jon's trip, shooting Robinsons being used to tranquillise and capture wildlife for the game park and hunting industry, that things got a little hairy.

"We were out on the savannah and I'd noticed, about a kilometre from us, a leopard. The pilot had left me to go back for fuel. He said if anything happened, go and wait up a tree.

"And it did. He had problem with the rotor and I was left there for a few hours. It got dark, so I went up the tree. The stars were amazing but then I heard a rustling noise... I turned my phone on and right in front were two yellow eyes staring

straight back – there was a leopard sprawled on a branch. Luckily, it looked buggered! I thought 'this is it' and started texting my girlfriend and friends. She thought I was joking..."

The approach of lights on the horizon signalled the repaired Robinson's return and when Jon turned, heart-in-mouth, to see what his tree-dwelling "companion" was doing, the leopard had vanished as silently as it arrived.

Up-close-and-personal with a leopard was a first for Jon but so was working with the nimble Robinson chopper, surprising considering his vast experience in aviation photography, a passion triggered when he was growing up in New Zealand.

"In the 50s in New Zealand you had the beautiful green countryside and all these old warbirds – Corsairs, Venturas – sitting in fields or playgrounds. I was about six or seven in the country when I saw a magnificent white Avro Vulcan come down the valley. That, and the clear Pacific light, made an impression."

He's gone on to self-publish 18 books on topics as diverse as air shows to submarines (his father was a submariner) to a tome on Oxford University and has contributed to 150 *Lonely Planet* travel guides. As an aviation snapper with a penchant for air-to-air (A2A in the lingo) work, Jon's fulfilled many a



FLIGHT CLUB: A Rotorvation R44 Raven II flies off Cottesloe Beach. Right: Fremantle photographer Jon Davison gets ready to take to the air. Below left: An R22 operated by Bassair skims towards a tranquillised eland, the world's largest antelope, in the South African savannah.



schoolboy's dream (mine included) with trips in seriously cool aircraft such as the F-4 Phantom, the FA-18 and other boy's-own adventures, including high altitude parachuting. So what makes the Robinson helicopter so special?

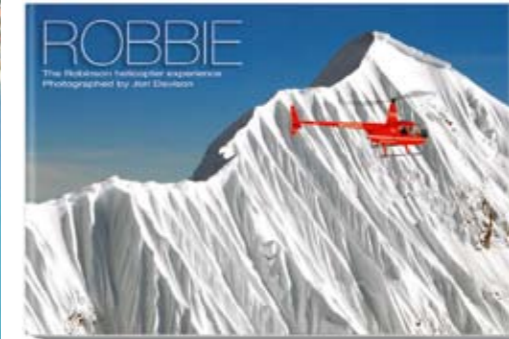
"Before the Robinson, a helicopter would cost you two to three million dollars. But Frank Robinson wanted to make a helicopter that anyone could own; he was turned down by a lot of people before deciding to make his own," says Jon.

The American's dream evolved into the two-seat R22 and four-seater R44. The company is now a world leader in the civilian helicopter market. The "birds" cost in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, not millions, and says Jon have revolutionised the tourism industry. Their "toy-like" appearance (they are a piston-driven helicopter, unlike their turbine-driven, much costlier, cousins) belies their incredible agility, says Jon.

"They are tricky to fly but once you master them, they can do just about anything. They're very practical, logical and cheap."

The Robinson factory in Torrance, California, now produces hundreds each year, many destined for TV stations, law enforcement authorities or tourism operations. A jet-powered five-seater, the R66, is on the drawing board. Next up for Jon is a sequel to *Robbie*, this time centred around the little chopper in action at the wonders of the world, the pyramids, Peru's mysterious Nazca Plain lines and the like. And as Jon enthuses, there's nothing like being strapped into a harness and shooting another aircraft just metres away with nothing between you except the big, open, blue sky.

"I make some kind of link, an emotional connection, to the aircraft I'm photographing. It's the most intimate, most rewarding thing... it's a moment of clarity," he says. *Eyeinthesky.com.au*, (08) 9433 5541.



YOUR CHANCE TO WIN

Scoop has three copies of Jon Davison's great coffee-table book, *Robbie*, to give away. To win one, answer the following:

Q: The Robinson helicopter is made where:

- 1: Utah
- 2: New York
- 3: Alaska
- 4: California

Send your name, address and contact phone number (one entry per person, thanks) to: win@scoop.com.au

Entries must be received by Friday, April 30. Thanks to Jon Davison and Eye in the Sky photography.

SPORTS WATCH

Autumn 2010

ATHLETICS

WA's own Beijing Olympics gold medallist and world champion pole vaulter Steve Hooker will be the big drawcard when the Australian Athletics Championships return to Perth for the first time in 22 years. Hooker has been offered \$100,000 if he can break the world record (Ukrainian Sergey Bubka's 6.14m mark) on home soil during the event at AK Reserve, Mt Claremont, from April 16-18. Call (08) 6272 0480 or see waathletics.org.au for details.

AUSTRALIAN RULES FOOTBALL

Can the Dockers make the AFL finals? Can West Coast get their "mojo" back? The 2010 AFL Premiership season promises another titanic contest. West Coast travel to Brisbane to play the Lions on Saturday, March 27, at the Gabba while the Dockers will be looking to send Port Adelaide packing in their clash on Sunday, March 28, at Subiaco Oval. Port returns on April 3 for the Eagles' first home match. Meanwhile, top-grade local footy in the WAFL gets underway on Friday, March 19 when South Fremantle face East Perth at Fremantle Oval. See waflonline.com.au for

WAFL fixtures and news and afl.com.au.



FOOTBALL

The Hyundai A-League reaches its grand final climax on March 20 and then all eyes will turn to South Africa for the FIFA World Cup. Can the Socceroos go all the way in the world's biggest sporting event? *FIFA World Cup, June 11 – July 14, South Africa.*

RUGBY LEAGUE

Top-grade NRL action returns to Perth when the South Sydney Rabbitohs take on reigning premier Melbourne Storm at ME Bank Stadium on Saturday June 26. And check out the local Tooheys Cup First Grade, which this year sees Kalgoorlie's Goldfields Titans join the action. See warugbyleague.com.au.

RUGBY UNION

The Western Force are in full swing with the Super 14 competition during March, April and May (the final is on May 29) but in June England take on the Wallabies at Subiaco Oval. *Australia v England Test, Subiaco Oval, June 12. For more on the Western Force, see rugbywa.com.au.*



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