



# SKY SHUTTLE HELICOPTERS

Story and Photos by LUIGI VALLERO

## SHUTTLING IN STYLE ACROSS THE PEARL RIVER ESTUARY

*Scheduled helicopter services, dreamed of since the 1950s, have seldom proved to be economically viable. Hong Kong and the Pearl River estuary cities of Macau and Shenzhen are among the few destinations in the world where an operation like this can be profitable. And Sky Shuttle Helicopters (3E) has become expert at providing excellent value for its customer base.*

**T**HE ORIGIN of the company goes back to 1988 with the establishment of Macau-based East Asia Airlines Limited (EAA) to provide regular helicopter operations between Hong Kong and the Macau ferry terminal. Using a couple of Portuguese-registered Bell 222 helicopters, EAA made up to six daily round trips.

The former British and Portuguese colonies, roughly 40 miles (65km) apart, had enjoyed an aerial service between 1948 and 1961, when Cathay Pacific (CX) (*Airways*, May 2015) operated from Kai Tak Airport in Hong Kong to Macau's Outer Harbor Terminal. However, the sedimentation of the harbor from silt flowing in from the Pearl River and the lack of an airport in Macau led to the end of the service in October 1962 in Macau and the sedimentation of the harbor from silt flowing in from the Pearl River. The colony was left without any scheduled air transport link until EAA launched its helicopter service.


Nine years later, in 1997, Helicopters Hong Kong Ltd (trading as HeliHongKong) was established. Its aim was to provide ad-hoc sightseeing and charter flights, aerial work, and external load-lifting operations, and to work closely with the Hong Kong Tourism Board and local tour operators to offer sightseeing packages. In 1998, HeliHongKong partnered with EAA to form the largest joint commercial helicopter operation in the region: Heli Express.

The new company upgraded the fleet from the Bell 222 to larger Sikorsky S76C+ helicopters. EAA gradually increased its scheduled 'HeliShuttle' service between the helipads on top of the Hong Kong and Macau ferry terminals and, in 1992, launched a new route connecting Macau with Shenzhen's new Bao'an International Airport (SZX).

On June 21, 2007, while marking its 10th anniversary of operations in Hong Kong, EAA's chairman, Stanley Ho, unveiled expansion plans, including a complete revamp of the passenger lounge facilities, set for completion in 2009, and an ambitious helicopter fleet renewal program, switching from the Sikorsky S76C+ to the new generation Agusta Westland AW139 type.

The announcement of the heliport upgrade came after the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) had awarded the company the tender, which came with a 18-year lease contract, to develop the existing facility—at the Shun Tak Centre, in Sheung Wan on Hong Kong Island—as the centralized intermodal facility for air-sea transportation between Hong Kong and Macau.

In November 2008, HeliShuttle revealed a completely new brand identity, livery and commercial name: Sky Shuttle Helicopters Limited (Sky Shuttle). According to then CEO Cheyenne Chan, the new name reflected the company's renewed spirit.



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The rebranding culminated in April, 2009, when Sky Shuttle opened a stylish, award-winning, and utterly luxurious 6,000sq ft passenger lounge at the rejuvenated Hong Kong heliport (HHP) at the Shun Tak Centre, coinciding with the introduction of commercial service of the first of six AW139s. Passengers immediately liked the new type, which offered technologically advanced avionics, improved onboard comfort and noise levels, and much better payload/range and reliability performance.

The final phase of the commercial heliport infrastructure development was completed in October 2009, with the opening and official commissioning of the second helipad on the western side of the rooftop of the Hong Kong-Macau Ferry Terminal building's Inner Pier. By the end of the month, all six AW139s had been delivered and the fleet upgrade was complete. The airline made similar improvements to the lounge facility at Macau's Maritime Terminal Heliport (XZM).

Traffic to Macau, the 'Las Vegas of the Orient', has been growing steadily, with more and more tourists and gamblers flocking to the mushrooming casinos. Passengers can get there from Hong Kong in about an hour by Jetfoil and fast ferry, but the ride by helicopter is just 15 minutes in daytime (over 20 minutes at night due to a different route), making it the preferred choice for business commuters and corporate and high-end leisure travelers. The Macau to Shenzhen route is about the same length.

Sky Shuttle carries more than 100,000 passengers every year. Those traveling from Hong Kong are mainly residents of the former British colony, followed by mainland China travelers. On the Macau-Shenzhen market, mainland Chinese account for the most of the traffic.

The winter 2015-16 schedules show service between HHP and XZM running 21 times a day in each direction, providing a proper 'shuttle' every 30 minutes between 10:30 and 22:59. Flights between Macau Ferry Terminal and Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport operate six times per day each way. Service is usually increased during the high-demand Chinese New Year and Macau Grand Prix periods. And Prices aren't cheap. A standard one-way fare from Hong Kong to Macau starts at around US\$550, with a \$65 surcharge applied at

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2 PHOTO: PENDING

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**“The robust local economy should still be able to support such an exclusive service...”**

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3 PHOTO: PENDING

peak weekend periods. From Macau to Shenzhen, tickets start at \$760. Sky Shuttle offers special rates such as Happy Hour, Seven-day Early Bird, and Child or Senior Citizen with up to 40% discounts.

The carrier also offers charter services around the Pearl River estuary, connecting Macau (MFM), Guangzhou Baiyun (CAN), and Check Lap Kok (HKG) International Airports. Passengers get the convenience of an exclusive private helicopter service along with the use of the luxurious VIP rooms at the HK and Macau lounges.

## VERTICAL RELIABILITY

Regularity and punctuality are two of the company's key selling points. Whenever a flight has to be canceled due to weather, passengers get total refunds and are immediately provided the alternative of fast sea transportation completely free of charge. And such high standards of service have been recognized. From 2010 to 2015, Sky Shuttle was named 'Best Caring Company' by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service.

Sky Shuttle currently employs a staff of more than 200 people recruited from all over the world, who work as a team and share a passion for excellence and detail. The Pilots, who average more than 8,000 flight hours, have expertise in all facets of the helicopter industry, including VIP passenger flights, public transport operations, offshore oil exploration, search and rescue, and heavy lifting.

Each year, the company organizes Charity Helicopter Flights for Kids in Macau, in partnership with a local charitable center. Last

year, 18 children aged six to 12 experienced the thrill of a scenic helicopter flight over Macau.

Round-the-clock maintenance is provided by a fully owned subsidiary, SkyTech Aircraft Engineering Limited, at its Macau-Coloane base. As the leading helicopter-approved maintenance organization within the East Asian region, it employs a highly skilled and multi-cultural workforce of over 50 staff, maintains a full Quality and Safety Management System, and strictly adheres to manufacturer procedures and airworthiness regulations. Standard line checks are performed pre-flight, along with turnaround inspections. Comprehensive daily checks take place at the Macau-Coloane maintenance base, a short hop from the Macau ferry terminal, where the fleet overnights.

Since its launch, 27 years ago, as EAA, Sky Shuttle Helicopters has grown to become the sole cross-boundary commercial helicopter operation in the rich Pearl River estuary area. The service is comfortable, safe, and reliable, and, although the opening of a causeway bridge, slated for the end of 2018, is sure to affect the travel pattern between HK and Macau, the robust local economy should still be able to support such an exclusive service.

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## THE SKY SHUTTLE EXPERIENCE

Entering the multifunctional HK Macau ferry terminal at Shun Tak Centre at peak time is an interesting experience in itself. You feel the typical hyper-dynamism of this vibrant Asian city, while airport-style electronic billboards display all the ferry and helicopter trips departing the terminal.

As Macau is considered an international destination from Hong Kong, all passengers—traveling either by ferry or helicopter—have to go through immigration before reaching their departure gates. After security screening, they take an escalator leads to the lounge entrance. There, they are welcomed by a smiling attendant, weighed, and then invited to relax in the vast lounge. Sculpted ceilings, rounded walls, stylish carpeting in subdued hues of gray and black, a relaxing water pool, high-quality furnishings and comfy armchairs, along with an unmatched view across Victoria Harbour, elicit a ‘James Bond’ feeling. Private parties can use two VIP rooms that are even more exclusive. Whiling the time away in such comfortable conditions is easy. There’s a hot and cold buffet and bar area, with dishes rotating across the day, for a snack or even a substantial meal before the flight. Safety briefings in preparation of the flight are highlighted on screens throughout the area.

Upon flight call, passengers take a short escalator to reach the aluminum heli-deck, where a dispatcher and ground assistant assist with the boarding. The nice-looking AW139 cabin, fitted with 12 comfortable light gray leather seats arranged in three rows, looks spacious and airy thanks to three large tinted

windows. The feeling of being on a posh private helicopter is highlighted by the cabin furnishings.

My outbound flight, leaving at 09:30, was operated by Hong Kong-registered B-HKN, which bore a special scheme promoting the Grand Lisboa Casino. Besides myself, there were only three other passengers. Vertical takeoff was quick, and we immediately headed to the southwest through the still hazy morning atmosphere.

Daytime flights between Hong Kong and Macau usually level at 500ft (150m) and follow an instrumental route passing just south of Lantau Island, providing enchanting views of the numerous lesser islands that surround Hong Kong. Night flights operate at the higher ceiling of 1,000ft (300m). Inside, cabin noise levels were relatively limited—passengers could anyway don the earplugs provided by Sky Shuttle before boarding—and conversation was possible.

We landed in Macau and came to a complete stop on-time, and were soon whisked to the lower level lounge, where the immigration formalities were completed. For the return trip, I opted for the 19:30 flight back to Hong Kong. Although less modern and hip than the one found in Hong Kong, the Macau lounge provided a classical luxurious and relaxing atmosphere. Both flights together were very pleasant, with the constant feeling of being truly treated like VIPs. Sky Shuttle provides an excellent service which could easily be replicated in other mega-cities around the globe. ✈️