

Lifestyles of the rich and famous

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When celebrities like Al Pacino and Jennifer Lopez come to B.C. to shoot a movie or relax at a coastal luxury resort, they hire Learjets from Richmond-based London Air Services.

Fast and luxurious though they may be, even Learjets have their limitations. They can't land at Whistler, for example, and even seaplanes can't land at night or in bad weather when ferrying passengers to any number of resorts along the B.C. coast.

But a helicopter can.

And now the rich and famous have the option of hiring a luxury helicopter from London Air to shuttle them in high style to their favourite resort, golf course or movie location.

The Richmond company officially launched its new Augusta AW139 twin-engine helicopter Tuesday. The *News* was along for the maiden flight.

True to its advance billing, the elegant new \$12-million aircraft proved to be smooth, quiet and quick, with a top speed of 310 kilometres an hour. A run from Richmond to Swartz Bay took 16 minutes. With large windows, it allows passengers to ogle B.C.'s gorgeous scenery as they flit quickly over mountain ranges to places like Kelowna and Whistler.

"Whistler is going to be a big part of the market," says Wynne Powell, president of London Drugs, London Air and Sonora Resort — located on a private island near Quadra Island.

The sleek, powerful machines aren't cheap. Chartering one costs \$4,300 per hour. But time is money in the business world.

"They're business tools," Powell said. "It is expensive to charter these aircraft, but it's cost-effective."

As president of London Drugs, Powell does a lot of flying. The company owns 64 drug stores scattered throughout Western Canada. Visiting them all is time-consuming.

Several years ago, Powell became frustrated with his inability to charter planes in a timely fashion. He turned that frustration into a new business venture.

"The day came when we could not reserve planes when we needed to," Powell said.

The company bought a Learjet. But running a private jet is expensive, so Powell decided from the beginning to also start a charter business.

"To own an aircraft for your own personal use is very expensive," Powell said.

The business took off, and now London Air runs seven Learjets and larger Challenger jets. The company caters to the rich and famous, as well as to oil companies and other corporations that need to maximize time.

"We do a lot of (business with) Hollywood North," Powell

Got \$4,300 kicking around? Rent a luxury chopper for an hour



KYLE HOOBIN/RICHMOND NEWS

It was this big! Wynne Powell, president of London Air, London Drugs and Sonora Resort, gives an animated description of the amount of room inside his company's new \$12-million Augusta AW139 luxury helicopter. The chopper is aimed at the business market. Below: Chief pilot Dylan Thomas navigates the new helicopter around Swartz Bay.

said, adding: "Bill Clinton has been on our planes."

Landing a jet requires a runway, and many helicopters in the market tend to be noisy and uncomfortable. So Powell decided to add luxury helicopters to London Air's fleet.

Made in Milan, Italy, the Augusta AW139 has two Canadian-made Pratt and Whitney engines and plenty of cargo space. It easily handles 600 pounds of luggage and 15 people.

"This helicopter can take off with all those people, all that weight, with one engine, safely," Powell said.

"The power is amazing," said Dylan Thomas, London Air's chief helicopter pilot. "At any time, you can lose an engine and land without hurting anybody."

Another key to the craft's high safety ratings is its instrumentation landing system, which allows it to land day or night in winds up to 80 km/h.

The key to a successful charter firm is availability, Powell said. For that reason, the company will add a second Augusta in December 2007.

