

A large, vintage 1958 Bell 47 helicopter is the central focus, mounted on a blue and yellow transport cart. The helicopter has a distinctive bubble canopy and a tail boom. In the background, a man in a white short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers is walking across a bright, reflective tarmac. The scene is set in a hangar or an open-air aircraft storage area with a clear sky.

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

LUXURY CHARTER TRAVEL FILLS MARKET VOID

BY **SUSAN LUNDY** PHOTOS BY **DON DENTON** AND **HEATH MOFFATT**

TUCKED AWAY IN THE BACK OF a spacious hangar near Victoria International Airport sits a 1958 Bell 47 helicopter complete with gleaming bubble canopy and an exposed-tube tail boom.

“It’s a piece of art,” says Jeff Wolfe, operations manager, VIH Execujet. “Look at the lines on it ... the chrome.”

For Peter Norie, whose family has been involved in the ownership of VIH Aviation Group since the 1970s, the helicopter is part of his personal history.

“I grew up in it,” he says. “My dad bought it when I was seven.”

Sitting in the hangar next to the Bell 47 is Norie’s current ride, a luxurious Cessna Caravan amphibian floatplane, able to set down on both land and water. This is Execujet’s most recent acquisition — an aircraft the company believes will meet the demands of an emerging market on BC’s West Coast and beyond.

Peter Norie and a 1958 Bell 47 helicopter.

A floatplane is shown from a low angle, moving across a vast, deep blue lake. The plane's hull is white with yellow accents, and it's leaving a white wake behind it. In the background, there are dark, forested mountains under a clear sky. The overall scene is serene and scenic.

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As tourists — many of them high-end travellers — flock from around the world to the West Coast, the time is right, Wolfe believes, for a luxury, custom charter flight option. And the Caravan — with its swanky, swivelling leather chairs, minibar, state-of-the-art cockpit and ability to land on water or asphalt — fits the bill.

Clients who arrive at the Vancouver or Victoria airports via first class can fly on the Caravan to remote destinations without sacrificing their upscale flight experience.

“We can pick them up on wheels at the airport and land elsewhere on floats,” Wolfe says. “Right now there is a gap in the first class travel experience for those people.”

Wolfe also points to an ever-increasing desire on the part of travellers to seek out unique situations.

“For example, they’re saying, ‘let’s go to a place where no one has ever fished before,’” he says.

Enter Peter Norie, an experienced fishing guide and pilot, who has been flying the Caravan since 2008 with its original owner, a wealthy American, who loves to fish.

One day, Norie recalls, the two took the Caravan to fish in three separate locations. They touched down at Tofino, Rivers Inlet and Bute Inlet, and “caught fish in all three places.”

The plane is “super fast,” he adds, flying up to 200 miles per hour. “It’s the fastest single engine floatplane in the world.”

It’s also pretty sumptuous and as you climb into it, the overwhelming scent of leather is the first clue that this isn’t your typical floatplane. The cushiony leather armchair-style seats, which swivel and recline, have all been lowered to allow better visibility through the large windows. Tables swing out in

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readiness for the inflight food and cocktail service, and the noise cancelling Bose headphones aren’t really needed, since the plane has been insulated to reduce sound.

“It’s the private jet of floatplanes,” says Norie.

Upfront in the glass cockpit,

one is greeted by a mesmerizing swath of gadgets and blinking screens. A synthetic vision system — a computer-generated reality process that uses 3D and voice warnings — means “you can fly it without looking out the window.”

It’s therefore “very, very safe.”

While he can’t reveal the name of the former Caravan owner, who he still takes flying, Norie has flown a number of top CEOs and celebrities into the wilds of BC and Alaska.

One of his most memorable trips was three days spent with Roger Waters (from Pink Floyd) and the former band manager of Queen.

“Listening to those two talk about the history of rock ‘n roll... I thought ‘I can’t believe I’m hearing all this.’”

The son of Frank Norie — who bought out Bill Boeing Junior to become a shareholder in Vancouver Island Helicopters (VIH) in the 1970s — Norie grew up around planes and helicopters; in fact, his entire family had pilot’s licenses.



Peter Norie in the cockpit of the Caravan.

He spent his childhood in Cobble Hill and later worked at ski hills, before rekindling his love of flight and obtaining both his helicopter and fixed wing licenses.

He worked three summers flying helicopters to remote fishing lodges from a base in Sandspit on Haida Gwaii, five years as a guide and pilot at the exclusive Nimmo Bay Resort, and continues to fly “on-call” with Blackcomb Helicopters, undertaking mountain rescue and heli-skiing runs.

It’s a great job, he says: “You never feel like you have to go to work.”

Once, he took the CEO of Rubbermaid on a run.

“Here he was, all stressed out, telling me I’ve got the best job in the world and he’d trade anytime.”

Now Norie has come full circle, working as a Caravan pilot for VIH Execujet, which is a division of VIH Aviation Group (formerly his dad’s VIH Helicopters).

Currently owned by Norie’s older brother, Ken, VIH Aviation Group oversees five divisions, including Cougar Helicopters, VIH Helicopters, VIH Aerospace, VIH Execujet and YYJ FBO Services.

Although it’s headquartered at the Shell Aerocentre near Victoria International Airport in Sidney, it employs 300

people worldwide and operates a fleet of more than 50 helicopters.

As the fixed wing division, VIH Execujet also charters an executive Challenger 604 jet, which sits, gleaming, in the Victoria hangar beside the Caravan.

With seating for 10 and an intercontinental range of over 4,000 miles, it often whisks people off to Europe or Hawaii, sometimes partially transforming into an entertainment area for kids on a family flight, or a boardroom for executives en route to a conference.

Wolfe says the Challenger has many of the features that high-end travellers want: a six-foot-high, stand-up cabin, luggage that is accessible (it flies in a closet near the lavatory instead of under the plane), the option to sit or sleep on divans that fold down into beds, high speed Wi-fi, and the ability to custom plan everything from takeoff time and catering to ground transportation and hotels.

Back in the hangar at VIH, the positioning of the Bell 47 beside the Caravan is almost serendipitous for Norie, who looks at the helicopter and remembers, “When I was a little kid, I’d go flying in it with my dad in it.”

In fact, it was the first aircraft that he ever flew. Now, piloting the Caravan, he’s come a long way. **B**

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