Frozen oasis – just a helicopter ride away

By Kathryn Reed

Hover. Just hover. Go back. Lower, please. And then it was all over – and way too quickly.

If only I had been able to commandeer the helicopter or shout commands.

But the memory of flying over Emerald Bay and near Desolation Wilderness, that will last forever even if the 30-minute flight wasn't long enough. (I'm not really sure how many hours would have been required before I would have been satiated.)

Three of the area's most iconic waterfalls – Eagle, Cascade and Horsetail – at the same time lost a bit of their majesty and gained even more. All of this because of a helicopter ride.

A helicopter tour reveals a frozen backcountry lake west of Lake Tahoe. Photos/Kathryn Reed

They were magnificent, but something about hiking to them – the time that it takes, the views, the sound – is such a classic way of viewing them. But this eagle's view, well, it

gives a different perspective to all that rushing water.

Water is flowing strong now down the falls. The whir of the blade replaces the thunder of the water.

The waterfall tour is one of six that Reno Tahoe Helicopters provides for those who want to see the Lake Tahoe area from a different perspective.

“I would have never known all of those lakes were there,” Cheryl Johnston of Atlanta said when touching down at Lake Tahoe Airport. The ride was one of the highlights of her first vacation to the area.

The pilot says there are about three dozen lakes to see on this trip. Some are recognizable to a local – Eagle, Echo, Cascade, Fallen Leaf.

Others are ones found on summer hikes – the Velmas, Susie, Heather, Aloha.

Oh, those frozen ones. That is a sight not seen on a hike. The icy blue looks like something out of Alaska. Mesmerizing, chilling, spectacular, otherworldly – find a superlative and it’s bound to fit.

With snow in abundance in the higher elevations, much of the terrain was a winter wonderland last Monday.

This is the slow season for the helicopter company, despite its being the height of waterfall season. Though, the waterfall tour is the most popular right now.

On a busy summer Saturday they could make 20 tours.

The pilot said there is no rule about how high they must be, but they are usually at 8,200 feet. The reason is to not be a noise polluter, so to speak, for those who are on the ground.

Claudio Bellotto, who has been flying out of the South Shore

since 2005, gives a bit of history while flying over the Tahoe Keys, then Emerald Bay and beyond into the backcountry.

The Bell Long Ranger IV has a window seat for the five passengers it can seat. Three helicopters are in the South Tahoe fleet, with two others now operating out of the Truckee airport.

A fly fishing guide out of Truckee arranges for helicopter rides for his clients – landing at a resort near Markleeville so they can cast along the Carson River.

It's not just tourists – or the occasional local – who buckle into the bird. Pilots have taken film crews around the area for various shoots. This winter a helicopter was in the air for five hours to film the Freeride ski event at Kirkwood. A cineflex was attached to the nose.

Range Rover hired a pilot to shoot aerial shots for a commercial. Boeing is coming up soon – but the helicopter company hasn't been told the exact assignment. National Geographic has been a repeat client.

After the 2007 Angora Fire, a pilot took a crew up with infrared devices to look for smoldering hot spots.

In addition to the scenic and commercial flights, Bellotto operates a helicopter flight school. It's the highest elevation flight school in North America.

More information about Reno Tahoe Helicopters may be found online.

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