London from above

A HELICOPTER JOURNEY OVER THE CAPITAL AND THE THAMES

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



THE FIRST BALLOON FLIGHT
Vincent Lunardi · 1784

OVER THE THAMES
Departing from Battersea

THE SHARD & BIG BEN
Landmarks from 1200ft

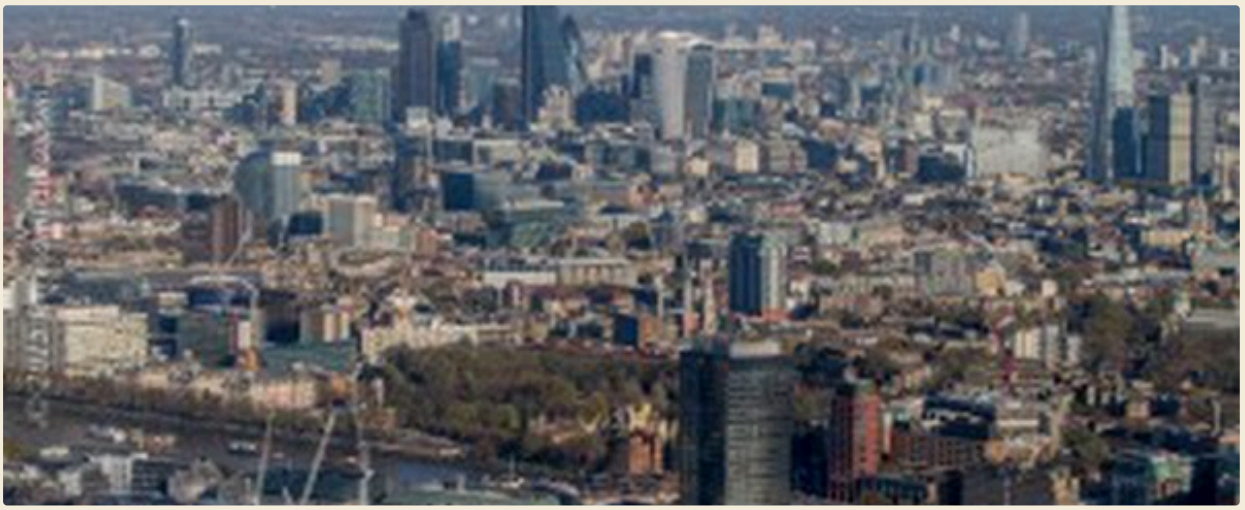
THE O2 & GREENWICH
Cutty Sark & Docklands

OVER LONDON SKIES

London from above

My journey over London skies was unlike any other experience in my life. Seeing the city from the skies in a helicopter is not a usual everyday opportunity for people.

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the true power of the city

I have been living in London for a very long time. If someone asks me how much I know about this city my answer would have to be, not enough. A city that was developed from several small villages around a river in Roman times, is now a complex cosmopolitan city. Beneath the surface of a busy, vibrant, active and modern capital, there are hidden mysteries across its public squares, steep roads, cobbled alleys, mysterious canals and ancient buildings.

People go after their day-to-day business without thinking about the history of the city or the untold stories of the people rich or poor, known or unknown that lived their lives in the making of such a magnificent metropolis built over centuries.

Although I have visited many neighborhoods in London, I only began to see the city when I looked at it through the lens of my camera. My first serious exploration of London was when I worked on a project with 29 other people, “a loose traverse” from St. Paul to Green Park to record our observations. When I walked across the narrow alleys and steep roads, going through hidden courtyards and fountain squares, looking at old buildings, I witnessed the true power of the city.

I

FLYING OVER THE THAMES



a helicopter departing from Redhill in Surrey

I often saw London from above in an airplane with a sense of curiosity. The first time that I floated over London to view it more closely, it was in a helicopter departing from Redhill in Surrey. The flight was a surprise birthday gift from my children. It took only five minutes to pass over the green countryside of Surrey and Kent and the velvet carpeted farmlands of South London before reaching the River Thames and the urban jungle.

The 30 minute flight passed by all too quickly. It was a great pleasure to view a miniaturised city, watching the landmarks from above and capturing images of "toy" buildings.

I felt inspired and momentarily felt like a bird breaking through the winds and the clouds. I enjoyed my first mid-air sightseeing so much that I wanted to repeat my aerial experience again. I returned with my wife for a flight on a sunny Sunday last November. In the midst of an autumn season, the green fades away from the naked trees painting the leaves in yellow and orange. It was autumn but there was a summery feeling in the air with only a few scattered clouds.

We sat in a 6-passenger helicopter plus pilot to fly from Battersea in West London over the skies of the capital. A natural setting of built-up areas has been developed within several parks and gardens, creating one of the greatest cities in the world.

As the captain was getting ready for the flight and before the helicopter smoothly lifted up into the air, I thought long and hard about the miracle of flying.

II

THE O2 ARENA AND GREENWICH



the white dome of O2 centre

Two hundred and thirty years ago, nobody could have imagined that one day everyone could fly so easily. Today, we take it for granted. But in those days, it was an impossible mission. The dreams of conquering the sky, breaking through white clouds like birds, came closer to reality when the first balloon took off from the Honorable Artillery Company's grounds at Moorefield in London on 15th September 1784. The cheering crowd, estimated at 150,000, gathered to watch a historical event unfold by Vincent Lunardi, a man born of a distinguished Neapolitan family. He courageously succeeded in lifting off the balloon with a wooden basket beneath it despite the chaotic gathering on the ground. It was the first man-made flight ever over Britain and marked the beginning of a new era, all of which was shared by the applauding crowd. A cat, a dog and a pigeon in a cage accompanied him in his journey.

In my balloon trip, there were no sounds or crowds to cheer us before our flight, except the noise of the engine and fast turning blades and two ground crew members who were controlling the flight safety.

Air traffic is certainly not as busy as the roads, but it is more sensitive and restrictive and requires constant observation. The helicopter flight over London airspace is not just available to rich business people, and celebrities. Tourists are also able to enjoy aerial sightseeing tours of London but the priority is always given to medical and police helicopters.

III

THE SHARD TOWERS OVER ALL THE OTHER BUILDINGS IN MY EYELINE



dominated by high cranes next to skyscrapers

In our enclosed glass cabin we fastened our seat-belts each of us wearing lifejackets and head-phones. We prepared to go on the same journey that Lunardi made and to have our own bird's eye view of our city. The helicopter rose smoothly from London Heliport next to the Verta Hotel between Battersea and Wandsworth bridges.

We soared over the Thames in search of the impeccable power of this famous waterway following its snaking route which passes through the heart of the city. The city bares itself to us in an angular view from 1200ft up in the air. The objects attenuate gradually as we go higher and higher. Everything appears in a different perspective, seemingly posing a refreshing image. In the far horizon, we can see landscapes and the green belt surrounding the jewel of the city holding it like a ring.

Major railway stations such as Victoria, Waterloo and Clapham Junction look like the nest of a spider spreading cobwebs across a long net. This constantly evolving city is dominated by high cranes next to skyscrapers and construction workers move like ants along the huge columns of steel.

Opposite Westminster Abbey is the golden façade of the Palace of Westminster and the Houses of Parliament with its perpendicular Gothic architecture and bright in the reflection of the sun. The Elizabeth Tower or the famous "Big Ben" is a clock tower towering over the palace.

IV

THE SPECTACULAR VISION OF LONDON AHEAD OF ME



towards the Tower of London and Tower Bridge

At the south of the river across the Southbank, the London Eye turns like a toy carousel next to the Royal Festival Hall, the British Film Institute and the National Theatre. The Shard, a 95-storey skyscraper which is London's newest and tallest landmark at the height of 1004 ft, seems to be just under our helicoptered feet when we pass London Bridge towards the Tower of London and Tower Bridge.

I grow more excited about the energy in the city as we hover closer to the Cutty Sark and Greenwich Park with its outstanding 17th century Royal Observatory. We are halfway through our journey before the pilot makes a turn around the Isle of Dogs and financial district of Canary Wharf, with a distant view of the white dome of O2 centre and the Olympic Park.

We turned back to base after a captivating 20-minute aerial tour. It might be considered an expensive luxury, but it was worth it simply for being able to witness what you normally cannot from the confines of the ground.

PLAN YOUR FLIGHT

A 20-minute helicopter ride from Battersea heliport for £199 and a 30-minute flight for £129 from Redhill heliport in Surrey.

For more information or to book visit www.thelondonhelicopter.com.

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