

## New York City

### Helicopter tours popular, but numbers mixed on risk

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Double-decker buses or the Circle Line are fine, but helicopter pilots swear nothing beats the view of New York from a chopper.

"You don't really get a full aspect of what the sights are if you're not in the air," said pilot and aeronautical consultant Raymond A. Syms.

Tourists agree. Fear of flying, or crashing, notwithstanding, about 200,000 visitors are expected to take chartered helicopter flights around the city this year, a trade group estimates.

That number eclipses pre-Sept. 11 levels and does not include executives ferried on helicopters in and out of the city, according to the group, the Eastern Region Helicopter Council, based in Yardley, Pa.

Despite the large number of passengers, helicopter accidents in the city are rare. Yesterday's accident in the East River was the third in the past 10 years, according to a newspaper search.

Of those, one person was killed, Craig B. Tate, 51, of New Canaan, Conn., an executive at Colgate-Palmolive, who died shortly after an April 15, 1997, crash in the East River.

"In general, the technology has improved a great deal in the last two decades," said Maxine E. Lubner, director of the CUNY Aviation Institute at York College.

Matt Zuccaro, special adviser to the Eastern Regional Helicopter Council, said an independent study done in 1999 for the city found that helicopter service here had a safety record that was seven times better than the national average. That study could not be confirmed last night.

Still, nationwide, helicopter crashes represent a disproportionate number of accidents on

chartered flights, according to National Transportation Safety Board statistics from 2000, the most recent available.

About 12 percent of those trips were on helicopters, but choppers represented about 20 percent of accidents. Most of those crashes were not fatal, Lubner added.

Zuccaro said that in New York City, three or four companies operate tour services, including Helicopter Flight Service, the charter that owns the copter that ended up in the East River yesterday. Tours with that company range from \$129 per person for a 15-minute tour to \$275 per person for 30 minutes.

David Leader, a former NYPD aviation unit pilot who is familiar with the companies, said they typically offer glimpses of Central Park, the George Washington Bridge, Ground Zero and Yankee Stadium.

"All the popular sights in New York," he said.