

Heliops

DELIVERING GLOBAL COVERAGE OF THE HELICOPTER INDUSTRY

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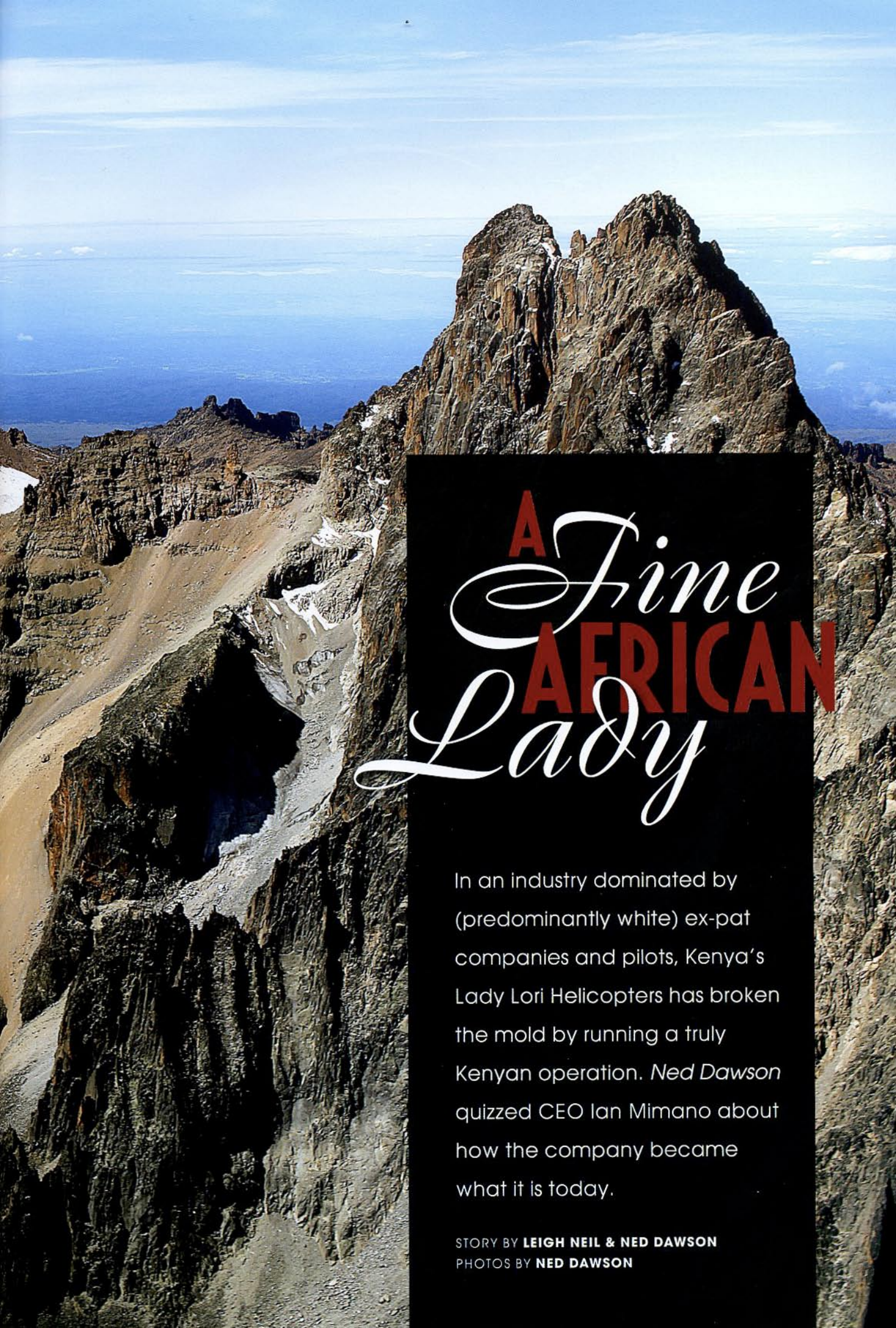
A *Fine*
AFRICAN
Lady

The **PRICE** of
Speed

A Broken **Heart**
Regaining
its **WINGS**



BVM circles around the top of the second highest mountain peak in Africa – Mt Kenya at a height of 17,057 ft.



A Fine AFRICAN Lady

In an industry dominated by (predominantly white) ex-pat companies and pilots, Kenya's Lady Lori Helicopters has broken the mold by running a truly Kenyan operation. *Ned Dawson* quizzed CEO Ian Mimano about how the company became what it is today.

STORY BY **LEIGH NEIL & NED DAWSON**
PHOTOS BY **NED DAWSON**



Flamingos are an amazing sight on many of Kenya's lakes, but also a hazard when they all get airborne.



A Black Rhino is spotted from the EC130 as it darts towards the border with Tanzania.



Lady Lori Chief Pilot Shawn Evans demonstrates a skid toe-in on one of Northern Kenya's impressive sand dunes.

Some twelve years ago, in search of the lifestyle they craved, American couple Jim & Lori De Nooyer moved to Kenya from upstate New York. As part of that lifestyle they operated an AS350BA as their private air transport, employing experienced ex-military pilot Humphrey Carter and setting up Lady Lori Kenya Ltd to own the machine. When Jim saw one of the first production EC130s he loved the look of it and decided he had to have one, so the AS350 was sold and 5Y-GYM came into the De Nooyer's ownership in 2003. Once Jim & Lori had seen most of East Africa they elected to lease the 130 to a commercial operator at Wilson Airport and in 2006 also bought an AS350B3 (5Y-BTW) from South Africa. This was flown to Nairobi by newly employed pilot Ian Mimano – his first assignment for the De Nooyers and the beginning of a particularly fruitful relationship that has led directly to the current state of Lady Lori Helicopters. By early 2008 a second B3 was added to the fleet and with three modern aircraft available, De Nooyer asked Mimano to set up a stand-alone helicopter operation.

A Kenyan through and through and immensely proud of it; Mimano proved to be an inspired choice on De Nooyer's part. He trained as a pilot in England, obtained his JAR ATPL and subsequently flew for a variety of American and South African operators. He is quick to point out that it was this exposure to varied global helicopter operations that enabled him to develop and refine a vision for what he believes the finest world-class operation can offer, seizing on the best aspects from around the world and learning from everything that has proved to be less than ideal. Right from the beginning, Mimano wanted to build up a company that

was truly indigenous, utilizing highly trained, competent African staff and gaining the benefit of their vast local knowledge, contacts, language and deep understanding of the region and its people.

A versatile all-in-one facility was leased – still at Nairobi's Wilson airport – from which Lady Lori Helicopters is able to operate a multi-faceted business that includes an on-site maintenance base, first-class lounge, offices and hangar space; all supporting an ever-broadening range of flight operations. When listening to Ian Mimano it is easy to hear his pride in both the caliber of the personnel the company has employed and the unique, indigenous flavor that this gives to the services the company offers.

There are currently six multi-cultural and extremely competent helo pilots flying for Lady Lori, including 4000hr ex-Air Force colonel Mbaji, with experience on hueys and pumas; Neepe, instructor and ex-Kenyan army MD500 driver with around 3000hrs; Humphrey with 6000hrs, ex-army air corps in Northern Ireland on Lynx and Gazelle etc., and South African Stefan, with over 2,500hrs experience flying the Victoria falls and on AS350/BO105 with the Police. Along with Chief Pilot Sean, a 4000hr Canadian, these professionals were all hand picked by Ian - with over 4,000hrs (including 1,500hrs on hot-air balloons) himself – and were chosen for their experience, exposure, philosophy and attitude.

Mimano's vision involves offering a quality helicopter service with quality equipment and, as he says himself with regard to tourism, "We need to be showing Kenya our way, from the Kenyan perspective. I want to show them what I believe is the real and true Kenya, with a Kenyan company, run by Kenyans the Kenyan way, giving

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Shawn and Lady Lori
CEO Ian Mimano
undergoing a check
flight in the B3.



One of the many Lions
that live on the Loisaba
estate, home to Lady
Lori owners Jim and
Lori Denooyer.



The Painted Desert provides some amazing rock formations that have to be seen to be believed.

As part of the Masai Mara adventure Lady Lori treat guests to a flight over the Mara in a hot air balloon.



The B3 comes across a herd of Giraffe.



Hippos are a common sight from the helicopter.

JWJ is the latest addition to the Lady Lori fleet and is operated for a private owner in Nairobi.



our guests a true Kenyan experience.” To do that for their tourist clients, the company has focused on the very top end of the market. Most of Lady Lori’s customers could be described as the truly ‘elite’, those who have seen and done pretty much everything. Ian explained “They don’t want to be bothered choosing and planning their trips; they like to just turn up and have us tell them what they’ll be doing. We need to decide what experiences to give them. We’re not just a helicopter company, we’re an adventure company.” Backing up his description are two non-rotary additions to the Lady Lori fleet. A Cessna Grand Caravan supplies great short-field fixed-wing services to support the helo operations and a UK built Lindstrand hot-air balloon provides that very special once-in-a-lifetime airborne experience for the discerning tourist.

So Lady Lori clients don’t just go on a safari, they go on a Grand Lux Safari. This entails going to all the ‘sweet spots’, using Lady Lori’s preferred camps and lodges. These are the best of the best in this part of the world and Mimano describes a tailor-made example of a high-end heli-safari of the region. “For a start I would recommend at least three days out of Laikipia/Loisaba, this is ideally geographically located as within one or two hours in any direction you’ve got a sweet spot. These include Mount Kenya, Samburu, the Rift Valley and Lake Turkana – the world’s largest desert lake and also known as the Jade Sea. Lake Turkana is often referred to as the cradle of mankind as archeological discoveries there place it as the possible site

of the very first upright steps taken by ancient humans. We set up meetings and visits with our tribal leaders and drop in on their remote villages. Then to the world’s best game park; the Masai Mara, do the balloon flight before a champagne breakfast, take the wilderness drive and then helicopter back to the camps and lodges – Olarro is the best. That way you’ve seen the entire Mara in one day. After that we’d go to Shompole, a different setting & environment where you drive round at night instead of during the day.” As if that wasn’t enough, Ian then recommends more “After that I’d go to the Indian Ocean or to Tanzania. The beauty of Tanzania is that if the wildebeest are not in the Mara, they’re in the Serengeti and the helo is a tool that lets our clients access that. We take flights up to Uganda to see the chimps and gorillas, Ethiopia for the Simian Fox and the birthplace of Christianity – the Garden of Eden is said to be in Ethiopia – and the source of the Nile. Rwanda is also another option for seeing the mountain Gorillas.”

Despite all that the tourism work offers, corporate and government work has been the principal component of Lady Lori’s business and the company is the government’s preferred service provider. Mimano recognizes the importance of having the right balance between tourism, corporate and the specialist aerial work type operations, which Lady Lori is building up. When it comes to utility, firefighting, long-lining and similar specialist aerial work ops, Mimano sees that there is a shortage of that type of provider in his part of the world. All those



The rooms in Shompole are ranked as some of the best in Africa and regularly play host to the worlds elite.



A nice relaxing breakfast on the Masai Mara after the balloon flight.



The relaxation area at Shompole looks out over the game reserve.



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services have, until now, been imported and he feels it's important to expand and increase the company's capabilities in those areas. Not only is he interested in the benefits to the company, it's obvious that the interests of Kenya itself are important to Mimano. "I want to introduce hydro-seeding to the government. Kenya has suffered extensive deforestation in recent years and that's how I believe we're going to re-forest large areas of our country; everything from mulching and hydro-seeding to transporting thousands of seedlings to every school in that region. The government realizes that it must re-forest ecologically important areas that were de-forested in what were protected national forests areas." He has already planted the seed of the idea by pointedly introducing to the government an article in this magazine, illustrating the Ericson Aircrane dumping huge volumes over forested areas.

Mimano has already begun to expand regionally and is constantly looking for further opportunities. "The Democratic Republic of Congo and the new state of South Sudan have a lot of work and development programs going on and there's a shortage of helicopter capability in Ethiopia. There's definite interest for offshore operations on the East African coast which already shows oil and natural gas reserves. We are well positioned to be at the forefront of that industry in this region and we're planning accordingly. Electrical, geothermal and wind-turbines; these are all areas where we will be able to participate competitively."

None of what Mimano envisages seems overly ambitious when you consider the resources he has to call on. Aside from the talented pool of pilots, Lady Lori employs a full workshop staff, headed by maintenance director Peter Njagi. Njagi holds the enviable record of being the top Eurocopter student in the world, by virtue of his examination results from Eurocopter training in France that year. The company's two engineers are supported by four technicians and four apprentices and, while



Lady Lori recently added a Cloudburst bucket to the arsenal to help in the fight against bush fires that plague the remote areas of Kenya.

Mimano recognizes the importance of having the right balance between tourism, corporate and the specialist aerial work type operations, which Lady Lori is building up.

the short term aim is to focus on the company's own fleet maintenance operation – due to the rate at which the company operation is growing – they can and have supplied maintenance for other operators with the long term plan being to provide a high quality maintenance facility for outside clients. Lady Lori also provides a service whereby they can operate and manage machines owned by their clients. Mimano also says his facility boasts the best helicopter valet service in the region. Rounding out the staff at Lady Lori are the management team that includes Judy, the operations manager, Fred, the QA manager; Mary, the business development and safety manager; Faith in administration and marketing and George, the finance manager.

Succeeding to this level has undeniably required overcoming some hurdles. Mimano reluctantly admits “The African is not expected to make it in this type of modern, technological, highly regulated field. We’ve actually had to exceed everyone else’s standards to prove ourselves.” He’s not just blowing smoke either; the company has only been operating under its own certificate since 1 January 2009, but is one of only two regional operators that have

achieved ISO9001 certification for their quality management systems.

In East Africa, exceeding usual industry standards is even more of an achievement than one might think. With efficiency and ‘transparency’ within governmental and support organizations being somewhat less than routinely found elsewhere, it is often necessary to employ handling agents or ‘fix-it’ people to ensure things run smoothly. Facilities are generally of a poor standard so the professional operator wanting international grade facilities must supply his own, a substantial additional expense over and above the norm. Air traffic controllers are usually well trained and competent but as ATC, navigation, communication and weather facilities across the region are extremely limited, it is already difficult enough to achieve even an ‘average’ level of professionalism and safety. Like all challenges, however, the difficulties experienced over here do also bring their own ‘silver lining’. The lack of support means that those who make it in aviation are a hardy, self-reliant and supremely competent cadre of industry professionals. Pilots, managers, engineers; everyone has to be able to get things done and done well, all without



One of the many remote villages that surround Lake Turkana in Northwestern Kenya

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the back-up from state and industry that we take for granted elsewhere in the world. The pay-back for the additional difficulties is the opportunity to fly here. Some of the best, most stable weather in the world means that flight ops can almost always be carried out as planned. And what spectacular flights they can be! Apart from the huge abundance of wildlife to be seen, the vast diversity of scenery, landscapes and cultures makes this one of the most rewarding places on the planet for a pilot to work.

One of the more recent challenges faced by the company was an accident that incurred some 'bad press' in industry forums and the like. While on a routine scenic flight, one of the pilots had an unfortunate encounter with a flock of birds and ended up crash-landing in the shallows of a desert lake, about 150-200 yards from shore. It was fortuitous that it was a slow-speed event and the passengers all survived with nothing more than minor injuries. At the time it was interesting that

some industry observers questioned the fact that for some time it was not known that they had crashed, but Mimano explains, "It is a spot where we often land to get out and sightsee, so despite GPS tracking telling us exactly where they were, there was no immediate and obvious cause for concern. Unfortunately their sat-phone was destroyed in the crash so the pilot was unable to advise us of the situation. While they crash-landed in the water it was only knee deep. On many occasions it is dry, for instance when recovering the wreck it was on dry land, but by 2pm it was back in water! The ELT did not activate and one wonders why. Perhaps the antenna broke off? Imagine how long it could have taken to affect a rescue and recovery, though, had there been no tracking installed." The crash did, however, provide an opportunity to learn some lessons that have improved Lady Lori's operation subsequently. The whole company is now more safety conscious, the safety manager's role is of even greater importance and procedures have been substantially upgraded. The most important point though? "We're just thankful that no-one perished."

With the helo fleet being exclusively Eurocopter, backup and support is crucial and, while being very complimentary regarding the product, Mimano is ambivalent about some aspects of the support available. He speaks very highly of the backup provided by Eurocopter overseas, describing Eurocopter America as 'great' and Eurocopter France as 'receptive'. This overseas support is vital, though, as he does not feel the local support from Eurocopter South Africa is anywhere near the standard that would be reasonably expected by a multi-helicopter company with millions of dollars tied up in their product. The company has considered other manufacturers in the past, particularly Bell due to their extremely high standard of customer support, but Mimano still believes the AS350 and EC130 are the best machines for Lady Lori's needs. Mimano also stresses that Turbomeca gives them outstanding customer care and support.

So, where to from here for Lady Lori Helicopters? Mimano is already conscious of the need for more space for expansion. He has expanded the FBO side of the business as well, building on the broad range of talent and skills offered by the company's growing pool of staff to offer a greater range of services and facilities, both to clients and other aviation operators. He takes pride in having established transparent business ethics, sound philosophy and respect for the laws of the land; all intended to ensure Lady Lori's permanence in the industry. If he is successful in actively seeking further aerial work opportunities and regional expansion, the future will likely see Ian Mimano heading up the highest profile and largest helicopter operator in East Africa. This Kenyan lady is one class act. ■



Elephant sightings don't get any better than by helicopter.