

noon thunderstorms that plague the mountain in spring. Your guide will know best how to avoid the avalanche-prone areas. He also provides the ropes, crampons and climbing harnesses. Kiyoshi Ikenouchi, an experienced mountaineer with several winter ascents of Fuji, charged \$1,000 to guide me and my friend Hirono.

At the start a steep trail winds up a scree of broken volcanic rock. Because of the altitude, we went at a slow, steady pace, resting every 50 minutes for water and snacks. Sheltering huts (or stations, as the Japanese call them) are conveniently placed at regular intervals.

After four hours of huffing and puffing, we moved onto the snow and roped up, in case one of us slipped. We put on our crampons and pushed on. The thinner air began to get to me, as did the whipping, chilly wind.

Once we reached the crater rim (Fuji is a dormant volcano that last erupted in 1708) we passed through a giant Japanese torii gate and arrived at the Fujishenggen Shrine. In summer the place is open to the public for refreshments. One can even mail postcards—and hundreds of people at a time do. But not today. We saw at most six people during our entire climb.

We paused to rest, gathering strength for the last part of the

ascent, a traverse of the crater rim into a snowy section with an inclination of 30 degrees. A slip here could be fatal. I tried hard to concentrate but felt light-headed from the thin air.

At the very top (called *Tsurugi-go-mine*) a radar dome, a weather station and a grey-black granite obelisk stand guard. Below, a vast sea of cloud obscured the lower reaches of the mountain and all of Tokyo. Suddenly I felt alone in a country populated by 850 people per square mile.

From my pack I removed a cross my father wore until his death last year and an amber pendant my mother wore until hers in 2001. For years I had been planning to give my parents, as their anniversary present, a trip back to Japan. But always I got sidetracked. Now I held their mementos and said a prayer.

Then it was time to descend. On the way down I wondered if having finally topped out on Fuji would dull my mountaineering yen, as my shrink had suggested.

Not long afterward, I got a call from a friend asking if next year I'd be interested in climbing Cho Oyu in Tibet, the world's sixth-highest peak (26,906 feet). I said, "Sign me up."

So much for \$300 an hour.

For more Adventurer escapades, see www.forbes.com/adventurer.

PUTTERING AROUND

Straight Up

Nice though a Gulfstream V may be, you can't land it on your tennis court | By Matt Villano

Like Ferraris and Lamborghinis, helicopters are temperamental mechanically, challenging to pilot and costly to maintain. Purchase prices range from \$400,000 for a petite four-seater to \$20 million for a 15-passenger monster. But they have their charms—not least the ability to whisk you directly to and from home. Federal Aviation Administration regulations allow them to put down pretty much anywhere, absent certain travel restrictions.

Take the twin-engine Agusta Westland AW139. The \$10 million, Italian-made machine debuted in 2003 and has quickly become the choice of potentates and fat cats. When President Bush needed a new Marine One (the copter complement to Air Force One), he chose a modified Agusta.

Other AW139 owners include Nicky

Oppenheimer, chairman of South African diamond colossus De Beers Group, and the Aga Khan, who in 2004 bought four for use by his charitable foundation.

Its appeal begins with comfort: The AW139's interior can be customized to offer any level of luxury and accommodate any number of passengers

from 2 (cosseted in white leather upholstery) to 15 (in a less luxe setting). Oppenheimer's chopper is said to have reclining seats, a minibar and a flat-screen television. Other options include air-conditioning and a state-of-the-art audio system. The baggage compartment is the biggest of any medium-size helicopter's.

Performance: The AW139 tops out at 165 knots and can fly as high as 20,000 feet, surpassing all others in its class. Range and endurance are comparable to

those of the S-76 from Sikorsky and the EC155 from Eurocopter, Agusta's two toughest competitors. (The former costs \$11 million, the latter \$8 million.) It's got a de-icing system, which most competitors don't. As for noise, its emission level is well below the latest international regulations.

Pilots at the Sonora Resort in British Columbia use an AW139 as an airborne limousine, shuttling guests from a helipad near Vancouver International Airport to the lodge. Wynne Powell, president of the resort, says the ride is quiet, comfortable and—most important—fast.

"We fly guests right to our front door," says Powell, also president of London Drugs, a Canadian pharmacy chain. Agusta has sold over 200 of this model in the past three years, and demand for them is outstripping production. Figure on a wait of 12 to 18 months.

For a slide show of other recommended helicopters, visit www.forbes.com/extra. **F**



Nicky Oppenheimer's AW139 (top right), interior amenities can include canopy leather seats (above).

