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Paris Air Show offers flying toys for super-rich

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LE BOURGET, France: Fancy a helicopter-plane hybrid you can launch from your lawn? Yearning to fly in the world's biggest passenger jet — all by yourself? How about shooting into orbit at a cost of up to US\$100,000 a minute?

This year's Paris Air Show hasn't just been about fuel-efficient Boeing Dreamliners and fearless MiG fighter jets. For the super-rich, the show in Le Bourget over the past week has also been a showcase for high-end, high-tech flying machines.

Airbus was casting about at the show for new customers for its long-delayed A380 superjumbo, which could theoretically hold more than 800 seats. Few new airlines took the bait — but potential private buyers are lining up.

"We are in negotiations with several private individuals," Airbus commercial sales chief John Leahy said. No one has signed a deal yet, he said, but the company is hoping for one by the end of the year.

One of the lesser noted deals announced at Le Bourget involved a company called Aero Toy Store, based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida: It's buying 12 helicopters from AgustaWestland for more than US\$80 million (€60 million), to be refitted for "discerning clientele" in Florida, Canada and the Caribbean.

Air Harrods, meanwhile, bought an S-76 helicopter at Le Bourget from Sikorsky — the fourth such craft for the U.K.-based company that operates executive and VIP flights. Sikorsky is more widely known for its Black Hawk helicopters, popular with armies worldwide.

Most aircraft on display at the air show, while impressive, were of predictable shape and form — but not Bell-Agusta's BA-609 tiltrotor. Part helicopter, part plane, the craft takes off vertically before its rotors lower to allow it to cruise horizontally.

A bigger and more powerful tiltrotor, Bell Boeing's V-22 Osprey, captured attention at the Farnborough International Airshow last year after years in development, but the U.S. Marine Corps remains its only customer, largely because of its high price.

Bell-Agusta may not be looking just at militaries for the BA-609 — its promoters note the convenience of a craft that doesn't need a runway to take off.

"It's intriguing," said James Ferrell, a consultant for the executive jet industry at Le Bourget. "There are many questions to be worked out, but this is something we are studying."

For those itching to explore beyond the Earth's atmosphere, European aerospace company EADS unveiled a model of a jet designed to take tourists into space. The space jet would rocket paying passengers to weightlessness — but only for three minutes.

Tickets are expected to cost US\$199,000-\$265,000 (€148,000-€197,000) — no small sum but also nothing like the US\$20 million (€15 million) paid by the world's first space tourist, Dennis Tito, to jet up to the International Space Station in 2001. EADS Astrium joins entrepreneurs including British billionaire Richard Branson who are hoping to develop a space tourism industry.