

Eye in the sky

Flying deep into the Southern Alps with a father-daughter team from Wanaka. **BY TIM BREWSTER**

BRIDAL PARTIES SAY their photo shoot on a remote alpine peak was the highlight of the day. Globetrotting travellers are floored by the scenery. But Aspiring Helicopters' most grateful passenger must be the guy plucked off a narrow ledge overhanging a 600m drop in Mount Aspiring National Park.

The climber had lost his footing and gone for the slide of his life before clinging to the last available rock long enough for Charlie Ewing – pilot and local farmer – to manoeuvre his helicopter close enough for a rescuer to bundle him aboard.

Ewing has been flying helicopters among the rugged peaks of the Southern Alps since the mid-1990s, honing the demanding skills of mountain flying by herding deer and sheep on Cattle Flat Station, the family farm in the Matukituki Valley, and transporting climbers to the high alpine huts – not to mention carrying some of the huts themselves.

Four years ago, daughter Alex gained her commercial pilot's licence and joined him in the business. The decision "just happened", says Alex, who, after travelling overseas and flying for the local skydiving operation, needed

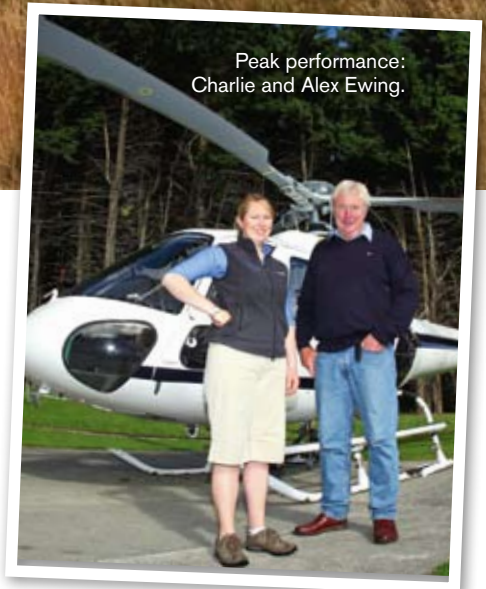
to choose between a career as a commercial pilot and helping her father develop their homegrown business. Since then, a trip with Aspiring Helicopters has become a must-do for visitors to the Wanaka area.

Weather permitting and customers on hand, on crisp mornings the father-and-daughter team can be found wheeling a helicopter or two out of their farm sheds and heading up into the mountains for one of their highly regarded alpine "flightseeing" tours.

Delivering climbers to the Bevan Col route to tackle the 3000m summit of Mount Aspiring, scenic flights around the peak itself and day trips over Milford Sound, wedding party photos on the snow and the serious, sometimes grim work of search and rescue can all be part of a working day for the company.

As well as flying with Charlie, Alex now runs the tourist operation – managing the marketing and putting packages together. Her biggest reward? Seeing people's responses to the spectacular scenery that is her back yard. "They are just blown away"

High-end charter work has also increased, clients gaining a unique insight into the



Peak performance: Charlie and Alex Ewing.

area with personalised trips, accompanied by guides such as climber Lydia Bradey.

Despite such high-flying adventures, family life still revolves around the station. After working on the farm since 1971, Charlie has stepped back over the past few years, leaving the running of the 4000ha deer, cattle and sheep operation to his two other highly capable daughters, Pip and Anna.

They now refer to Charlie as the "weekend pilot". But there is no doubt who still makes the big decisions. Says Alex, laughing: "Dad's the boss." ☺

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