

Desert Sun Launches Helicopter Academy

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Desert Sun Development, one of the fastest growing commercial and residential real estate development and construction companies in Central Oregon, has launched a helicopter flight school based at Redmond Air adjacent to Roberts Field.

Desert Sun Helicopter Academy, headed by chief flight instructor Joel Jensen, is offering two-hour blocks of instruction in a two-person Robinson R22 Beta II, the world's most popular entry-level helicopter. The helicopter produces a top speed of 115-miles-per-hour. The academy offers certified instruction for those interested in earning a private pilot's license, instructor certification or becoming a commercial helicopter pilot.



Jensen, who has logged nearly 1,000 hours of flight time, said the industry is wide open for high school graduates or those looking for a career change.

"Many of the Vietnam era pilots are retiring," he said. "The field has become wide open. Where we once had a peak of 6,000 helicopter pilots, we're now looking at 1,200 to 1,500 pilots. Commercial pilots with 1,500 hours are earning six figure salaries and working eight months or less. It's a very lucrative field."

Shannon Egeland and Tyler Fitzsimons, the adventuresome owners of Desert Sun Development, took a keen interest in the industry while enrolled in a flight school and recently purchased a commercial helicopter to help oversee a major subdivision project on the Oregon coast.

They each earned a private pilot's license and saw an opportunity to offer flight instruction based in Redmond to interested parties in the region. They also offer financing and differed payment plans.

"We look at the Desert Sun Helicopter Academy as another component to our business," Egeland said. "It's a great career opportunity where someone can enter the job market within a year after training as opposed to spending four years in college."

Sean Charlton, a 1997 graduate of Redmond High School, has been working at Costco for the past eight years, earning full benefits and above-average wages. But he said he enrolled in the helicopter school because "you got to be happy working and flying a helicopter is something that I've always wanted to do."

He hopes to someday fly tours in Hawaii after earning his commercial pilot's license.

Jensen said students typically earn their private pilot's license in eight to ten weeks and then 90 percent of the students continue working toward a commercial or instructor pilot's license.

"We typically have students who have the controls in their hands in the first 15 minutes that they're up in the air," Jensen said. "It's a very hands-on course. I'd estimate that after 10 hours of instruction, a student has the knowledge to fly a helicopter and that's one of the big attractions of the academy."

Information: Joel Jensen, 550-9573 or visit the academy website at www.desertsunhelicopter.com.