

# Jason Hawkes

As one of the most respected aerial photographers in the business, Jason Hawkes has flown all over the world taking unique pictures of famous landmarks and stunning scenery for nearly 20 years

**A**s a general rule, practitioners of this most rewarding profession choose their path relatively early in their careers. They decide which speciality appeals and then go out to perfect their own branch of a very diverse art. But when the chosen path is 200m in the air, leaning out of a helicopter over the busiest capital in the world, achieving perfection becomes a little more challenging.

'I originally wanted to be a studio photographer because I liked shooting on 5x4,' explains Hawkes. 'So after I'd finished my Higher National Diploma in photography I started assisting at some studios in London's Covent Garden. Around that time, I went flying in a microlite, which is rather like a motorbike with a hang-glider wing on top. I decided I just had to have one.' In the early 1990s, microlites cost close to £20,000 – way beyond what most photographer's assistants could afford. Hawkes decided to buy one anyway, and gamble on finding enough work in aerial photography to pay for it. 'I didn't have any work for quite a few months in the beginning,' he says, 'and I didn't have any idea of how to get it. Also, the microlite was practically useless because it couldn't fly very far so all the pictures had to be taken close to the take-off and landing points.

'However, it was a good platform from which to take pictures so eventually I managed to put together a portfolio of abstract images of fields and buildings and I started showing it around.' Hawkes approached *Photography* magazine, which often championed new photographers. The editor liked what he saw and promptly gave Hawkes and his work an eight-page feature. 'I bought quite a few copies of that magazine and sent them around to other editors and publishers and off the back of that, I got a call from a publisher who wanted to see some shots of London. Luckily, I managed to get a free ride with Capitol Radio's eye-in-the-sky traffic helicopter and from the resulting pictures, I was commissioned to do my first book about a week later.'

*London from the Air* sold more than 160,000 copies and established Hawkes as a full-time aerial photographer. He sold the microlite and began shooting exclusively from helicopters. 'It was a steep learning curve,' he says. 'Although the photography was quite easy, I had to learn how to find work.' Hawkes now has some 35 books to his name but the changing market means he now makes most of his income from his impressive stock library and commissions from design agencies. He describes shooting from helicopters as 'no big deal' but when the process is broken down you realise there's more to aerial photography than just jumping in an aircraft and taking some nice pictures. 'Once I've worked out the costing, I email all the different helicopter companies to get the best prices and check

**Right: The Seven Dials junction in London.**





the availability of the helicopters. I know what the price should be and what you can and can't do, but you have to be very specific. The route has to be planned exactly, even down to the altitude of your flight. 'Amazingly you can pretty much fly anywhere over London, whenever you want. The only place you're not supposed to fly is directly over the top of Buckingham Palace, although I think I may have drifted over it a couple of times. The only time you are allowed to is on Fridays because the Queen is not in residence, but you still have to get permission from the royal protection police. 'It can sometimes take a couple of weeks to get all the permissions through, so it really is all about planning and knowing what you need from a flight. Once you're in the air you still have to hover outside the zone you want to shoot in until you have clearance. Air traffic control has to check with the police and ambulance services to make sure the airspace is clear. Sometimes you can sit there for 20 minutes, which is really frustrating, especially when the light's changing and you're paying £1150 per hour.' Hawkes sits up front with the pilot – generally with the door off – leaning out attached to a harness. He communicates where he wants to go via a two-way-radio. And if that doesn't sound exhilarating enough, the weather can always add to the excitement. 'Flying in windy conditions is pretty horrible, so I don't often do it,' he explains. 'There was one time in Scotland when we were coming in to refuel and the cloud had really descended so we couldn't see to land. We had to fly around a mountain and come down the side very gingerly so we could practically 'feel' our way to the ground. We've had a few near misses too over the

years, but they're very rare. You hardly ever hear of two aircraft hitting each other. Even a near miss is 15-20m away, and you have the added dimension of height so it's pretty impossible to run into anyone really.' Hawkes' recently completed an assignment for a book about Las Vegas at night. To get the real impact of the Vegas lights, he sometimes had to climb to over 300m. 'I don't actually like heights,' Hawkes confesses. 'I'm okay in the air but oddly I don't like being high up while connected to the ground. I went up the Empire State Building and absolutely loathed it, but thankfully flying around it didn't bother me in the least.'

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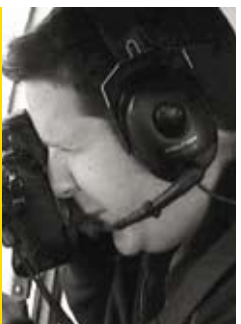
**WHERE IN THE WORLD**

When Hawkes first took to the skies, global positioning systems were still in their infancy. Full capability in Europe was still a decade away so keeping track of your whereabouts was a constant challenge. 'Very few helicopters had GPS in the 90s so it was a nightmare trying to write down your location while hanging out of a cockpit with a heavy camera around your neck, not to mention trying to decipher the handwriting later.' Thankfully, technology has moved on considerably and

Hawkes' life has been made a lot easier. The digital age has brought lighter, faster, higher resolution cameras with an almost limitless capacity for storage. But Hawkes' favourite piece of kit has to be the Nikon GP-1. 'It's just incredibly easy,' he explains. 'I plug the GP-1 into the camera and it puts the exact coordinates into the EXIF info of each file. The software then links those coordinates to a map to show you exactly where the image was taken. It can even give you the postcode, but of course that's not really much use to me.'



**JASON HAWKES**  
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**CLIENTS:** BBC, Random House, HarperCollins, Nike, HSBC, NatWest, Ford, American Airlines, Rolex, Toyota, Smirnoff, Mitsubishi and BP.

**SUBJECTS:** Aerial photography

**WHAT'S IN THE BAG?**

'I've got two D3 and a D3x at the minute. Lenses? I use a 70-200mm and a 14-24mm. I use those all the time now, I never use anything else.'

**WHY NIKON?**

'Everything about them really, they're really nicely put together and for shooting night images the D3 is unbelievable, there's literally nothing else I could shoot on. I've recently been trying a D3x and the resolution is incredible. When I sell some of my older stock images that were taken on MF camera, they usually asked for a bigger resolution file. At least with the D3x I'll never have that problem because the resolution is more than big enough for pretty much everything.'

**NEXT PIECE OF NIKON EQUIPMENT**

'The D3x.'

Previous page left:  
The O2 Arena  
(Millennium Dome)  
Greenwich, London.

Previous page right:  
View down onto  
the fountains at the  
Bellagio, Las Vegas.

Right:  
Deserted school  
playground in  
Las Vegas.

