

Skybanners SA – The art of aerial advertising

By Pete van der Spek

Durbanites and visitors along the beachfront were greeted with a very large banner flying along the area over the Christmas and the New Year season. The banner, with an area of 850 square metres, was highly visible for all to see. The client was Glenaire Gourmet Grill in Durban's CBD. Skybanners flew a total of 34 hours over 15 days, slow and low, from Durban harbour to Umhlanga Rocks focusing on all the crowded beaches, covering 2,519 km along the beaches and CBD.



Closeup of the Glenaire Meat Gourmet banner

Andre Botes (and his copilot / safety pilot Andre Botes Jr.) of Skybanners SA took some time off from their busy flying to explain how banner flying works and the safety issues they have built into the system. They have been operating this system for the past 18 months. Before that, they went through an extensive design and development phase and the system has been tested and approved by the SACAA. The material that is used is made of a special lightweight, but durable fabric. The message or image is digitally printed in full HD colour and any image is possible. The product is guaranteed for 150 hours of flight time and if handled properly, will last for over 200 hours.

The system used, can operate up to a 5,500-square meter banner quite safely. The banner is weighed down by a ballast of sand that weighs around 170kgs. In the event of an engine out, the pilot immediately opens the electric operated cargo hook and the safety pilot simultaneously pulls a manual handle that also opens the cargo hook that releases the rope from the bottom of the helicopter, which in turn opens the sandbag and the sand is safely released. This in turn deploys a small parachute that opens and lets the banner descend at a slow speed to land safely.

I asked how difficult it is to fly with a banner that size. Andre told me that a Bell Jet Ranger is very suitable for his operation. He started off using a Robinson R44, but that proved to be on the limit. The forward speed is 40 knots indicated. I asked how much drag these banners have – Andre's answer – PLENTY! The slow speed and low altitude effectively give the audience on the ground ample time to read the banner.

Andre told me that the best times for flying (especially in Cape Town and Johannesburg) are early or late afternoon during peak hour traffic when people had plenty of time to look up and see what was on the



Father and son selfies - Andre Botes Snr (left) Andre Botes Jnr (right)

banner and look up they will, because this is a natural reaction to the sound of the helicopter. Asked how cost effective the method is, Andre told me that an advertisement on regional radio in peak times is R24, 000 per 30 second (excluding production costs) and the equivalent cost of the banner is R15,000 per flight hour which equates to R125 for 30 seconds. This makes it very cost effective.

I watched both the take-off and landing of the banner and safety is obviously a big issue. It is a very delicate operation. The added pressure is that this all happens on an active runway and with the good weather we have had in Durban, Virginia airport was very busy. The whole operation was very well run by all accounts and feedback from the client was very positive.

Skybanners SA operates in all the main centres, Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria and has even flown in the Limpopo area. It has set routes, but those can be tailored to suit the client. Skybanners SA flew an advertising banner campaign for Private Property over the 2015-2016 festive season and here are some of the facts from those flights:

- **Cities covered:** Cape Town and the Winelands, Mossel Bay to George, Plettenburg Bay to Sedgefield, Amanzimtoti to Ballito (including Durban) and the Johannesburg Northern Suburbs.
- Total Hours flown – 50 hours
- Distance covered – 3726 kilometres
- Total fuel burn – 5,030 litres
- Banner weight was 250 KGs

Andre's company manufactures and prints the banners locally at facilities in Cape Town and Johannesburg. So, next time you see a massively oversized Skybanner being towed around by a helicopter, give Andre and his team a wave! ✈