

Review 9396: Helicopter

By Jetro

Images by TechnicBricks and Brickset



Set: 9396 Helicopter
Set number: 9396
Parts: 105

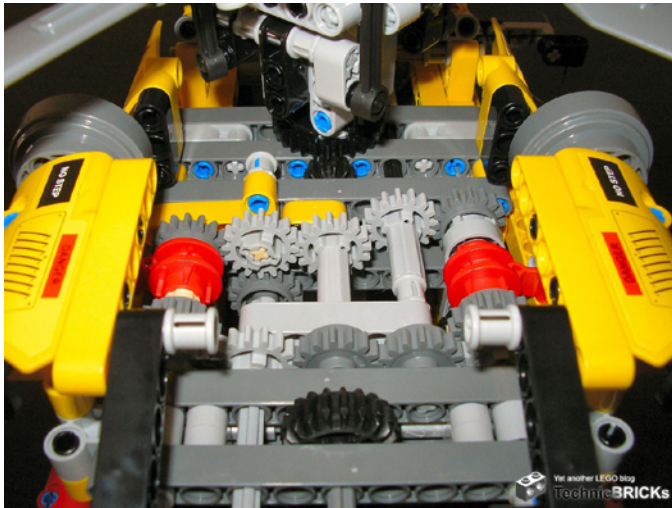
I still remember it like yesterday. After successfully building my first Technic set (the 850 Fork-Lift Truck) I got my second, more complex set, the 8844 Helicopter. It was the third largest set of 1981 and contained only 316 pieces, but it got me completely hooked on LEGO® Technic. Since then LEGO has released a number of helicopters in Technic sets, either as main models, secondary models or as part of a universal building set. The 8856 Whirlwind rescue, the 1991 flagship with 517pc was the largest and most complex of these in the technic brick era. It incorporated the, unfortunately, discontinued Flex system, which allowed for an easy and elegant mechanism to change rotor tilt and had a retractable winch boom, in addition to the rotating top and rear rotors and retractable landing gear the earlier 8844 also had.

In the last few years LEGO has again released a series of Technic helicopters, this time built with liftarms and beams, in a growing scale, from the 8046 in 2010 (the second smallest set with 152pc) followed by the 8068 in 2011 (408pc, reviewed in HBM011) to the 9396 reviewed in this article – 1056pc and the third largest set of the year.

Flagship?

We tend to assign the label “flagship” to the largest set in any given year, but looking back over the years the size of sets has changed dramatically. The largest Technic set in 1980 was the 8860 Car Chassis with 668 parts, a size that was not significantly surpassed until 1992, when the 8868 Air Tech Claw Rig was released, containing 954 pieces. 1994 brought the first 1000+ piece set, the 8880 Super Car with 1343 pieces and 2005 brought the 8421 Mobile Crane with 1884 Pieces, but the second largest set contained little over a third of that number. Since then there have always been at least two sets





with 1000+ pieces, with the 8110 Mercedes-Benz Unimog U400 breaking the 2000pc barrier with 2048 elements.

In 2012 three 1000+ sets have been launched: the 9398 4x4 Crawler (reviewed in the previous edition of HBM), containing 1327 pieces and no less than 3 new motors (2+1), the 9397 Logging truck with very few less pieces (1308) and a single motor and the 9396 Helicopter, containing a total of 1056 pieces, but with the added advantage that the set can be easily motorized using the add-on motor set or parts from other motorized Technic sets. If we look at price, it is obvious the Crawler is this year's flagship, but if we also take into account the number of Technic functions each model has, the 9396 Helicopter may not carry the title, but is most certainly the more technical set of the two. Add to that that it comes with instructions for a complete secondary model (as opposed to a different superstructure for the Crawler) and the size of the main model (58cm long), and you will see why "Flagship" is not such an obvious label for the Crawler.

Don't get me wrong. I'm very excited about the Crawler, mainly because of the new motors and the sturdy build, but the 9396 Helicopter is not a set that should be considered a second option. It is a first class, high level Technic construction with interesting features and an option to motorize. Because why should a set contain a motor to be considered especially interesting? It adds significantly to the cost (although this year the parts/price relation of the 9397 Logging Truck, which does include a PF "M" motor, is better than that of the 9396 Helicopter, but that must be put down to the large number of panels used on the latter), without necessarily adding much interest. True, everybody likes seeing how a set comes to life when you switch on the motor, but if, like me, the Helicopter isn't the first (or second) set you buy you probably already have a couple of motors lying around, waiting to be used. And again, a motor is a nice addition to this set, but by no means a necessity. All the functions can be operated comfortably by hand.





Mechanisms

The 9396 Helicopter is a large in size, big in number of pieces, but does it really add something new to the existing collection of technic helicopters? Well, let's have a closer look at the mechanisms it incorporates. Like most of its larger predecessors, the 9396 has working main and tail rotors, the blades of which have been specially designed for this model. The blades for the top rotor measure no less than 24.5cm and have a soft rubber tip that, in addition to help maintaining momentum soften any accidental impact the blades might cause. These large blades are packed separately between two sheets of carton, in the same bag as the instruction manuals and the sticker sheet.

Whereas the 8856 features a mechanism to change the (simulated) cyclic pitch (changing the angle of the entire rotor block forwards or backwards, to make the helicopter go forwards or backwards, and left or right, to make it go sideways), this helicopter comes with a system to change the pitch of the rotor blades, also known as collective pitch (resulting in an increase or decrease of lift power, which in combination with cyclic pitch control is also used to increase forward/backward speed). Rather than using chain links or gears, the retractable landing gear is operated by a lever system connected to one of the small Linear Actuators that does an excellent job and with the added advantage that, like most of the other functions, it can be easily motorised adding a few PF elements to the set. This also goes for the winch, which despite not being retractable, is fun to operate with a motor.

The loading ramp is operated by a mechanism that is partially symmetrical to that of the landing gear, using the other small

Linear Actuator and a linkage system. Finally there are the sliding doors on either side of the helicopter, a simple, but ingenious design that adds to the overall playability of the set. All functions – except for the sliding doors – are operated from a single knob (a black 20t double bevel gear) and routed through a complex gearbox with two selector, one on either side of the model. This makes the model a lot more technic than might appear at first sight and it is here that most of the elements necessary to motorise this set are already in place. However, even without motorisation the model is fun to play with and easy to operate.

The final verdict

Size, number of pieces, the complex gearbox, the new rotor elements for both the main and rear rotor, an attractive colour scheme – they all add up to make this set a must have for the real Technic fan. Add to that the fact that, although there have been a considerable number of Technic helicopters in the past this one is without a doubt the largest and most complex and moves away from the usual road vehicles. The set comes with a fair amount of stickers, and while they probably do make the set more attractive to the general public I am not a fan of stickers. Fortunately the set still looks very good without them. The only drawback: I'll need a helipad to store it!

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