

Magazine
article on
African
Aero Safari
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On safari on the wing

Aero-trekking across South Africa and Mozambique
with stops at game lodges and the Indian Ocean



BY MICHELLE CARTER

Remember the breathtaking scene from “Out of Africa” with Robert Redford and Meryl Streep soaring over the African veldt in a Gypsy Moth? That’s pretty much how six couples from the Pacific Bonanza Society felt as they took off on a 23-day aero trek across South Africa and Mozambique last May. Only no Gypsy Moths: Each couple had a rented Cessna or Piper Cherokee, arranged by their more-than-able guide Dave Van der spuy of African Aero Safaris in Johannesburg who usually brought up the end of each air leg in his Husky,

The ambitious itinerary for the adventure would carry the air caravan from Johannesburg, northwest to Madikwe Game Reserve near the Gabarone River, the border with Botswana, to Kimberley, the site of the de Beers diamond digs and the famous Big Hole, to spectacular Cape Town and a fly-around at the Cape of Good Hope, to the Addo Elephant Reserve, to the Zulu battleground at Isandlwana, to the pristine white sand beaches of Mozambique and back to Kruger National Park.

But a stubborn storm system settled in for an extended stay over the southwest, and the air trekkers had to forgo Cape Town in favor of one night grounded by 50-mph winds at a fuel stop in the Karoo, South Africa’s semi-desert which rarely appears on tourist itineraries. In the absence of tie-downs, the pilots strapped their planes to five-gallon paint cans filled with cement and hunkered down in a nearby B&B



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which put on a mutton-and-sausage barbecue for their unexpected guests — on Mother's Day, to boot.

Still improvising, the pilots (and their flight crews of one right-seater each) took advantage of slightly diminished winds to take a short hop to an unimproved dirt strip at a winery in Prince Albert where they settled in for the next night with some remarkable South African syrah, good food and a warm fire.

The weather-driven diversions gave the group new respect for Van der spuy, always in shorts with a cell phone glued to his ear. With each no-go, he would disappear with his phone, call fellow pilots at landing strips all over the country, and come back with on-the-spot Wx reports — and Plan B. Experienced pilots could have negotiated their own treks across the country, but Dave was the one with the speed-dialer for all possibilities when Plan A went to pieces.

Finally, the sojourners were able to pick up their original itinerary of five-star lodgings, adrenaline-pumping game drives, mouth-watering food and eye-pop-

ping scenery for the rest of the trip. But it was the flying that made this safari (Swahili for "journey") a cut above any earthbound adventure.

It called on each pilot's ability to fly by the seat of his pants, landing on remote strips of dirt, grass and/or gravel and taking off with clumps of grass in the tail cones. Finding those strips from altitude could be an adventure all its own. Good thing they packed their Garmin's from home because none of these strips had big white numbers at each end or ATC of any kind. A wind sock represented advanced technology.

Fuel stops had to be carefully planned since few of the small airports had it available. It wasn't unusual to see Dave climbing up on the wings of one Cessna to siphon gas for another with smaller fuel capacity. Every plane carried all it could all the time, and once Dave's brother, Peter, joined the group, he hauled jerry cans of avgas in his blue-collar AirVan.

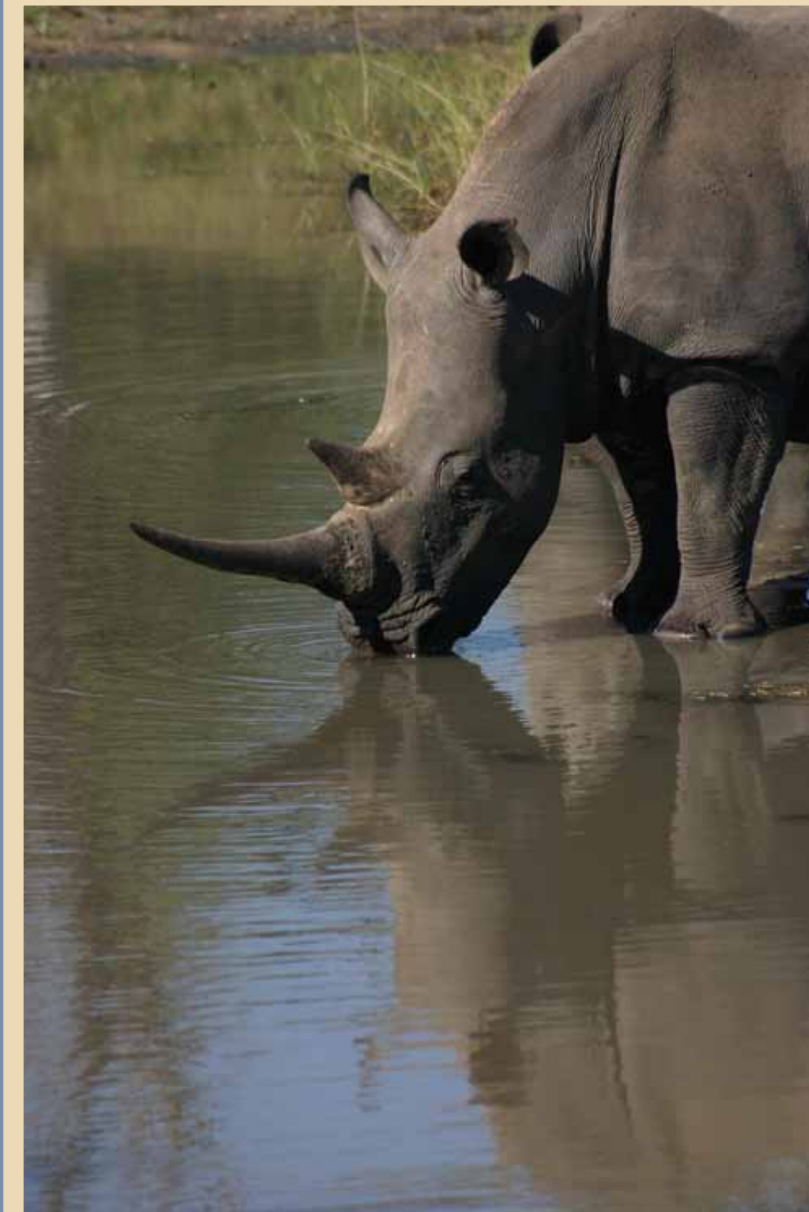
Each pilot had to earn his South African license during the first three days in Johannesburg. They did ground study and then each one had to qualify with an instructor. But even then, they were only approved

to fly VFR during the day which made things touch-and-go when the weather closed in.

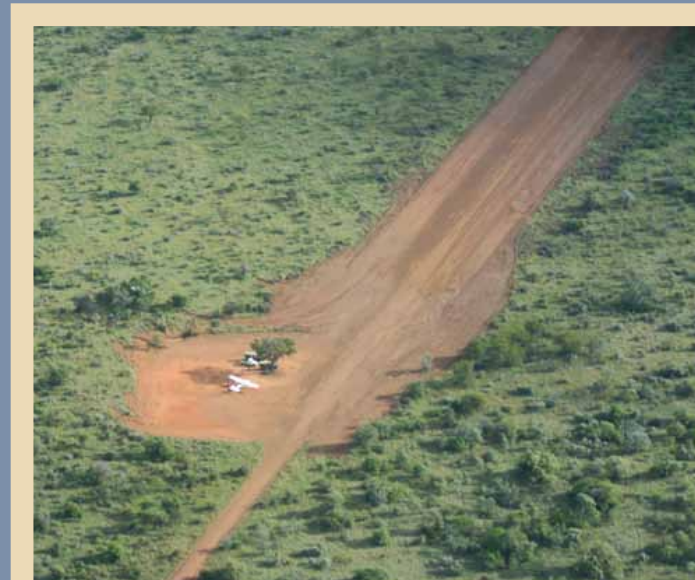
Once they were licensed, the pilots picked up their planes at small airports around Johannesburg. Locating planes available to rent continues to be Van de spuy's greatest challenge since only 2,600 private, piston aircraft are registered in all of South Africa, half the number you'd find in Los Angeles County alone. One of the planes he had reserved for this aero-trek was lost when the owner sold it just days before the PBS group arrived.

Once they were in the air, the pilots were quick to notice that neither the sectional maps nor the GPS software were nearly as detailed as they were used to at home. They all rediscovered the fine art of looking out the window.

The view never disappointed. Although it's against the law to fly lower than 1,500 feet over parks and game reserves, the rest of South Africa's 470,000 square miles (about the size of California and Texas together) offers the opportunity for planes to skim along low enough to identify animals (a dazzle of zebra or a journey of



Photographs by Michael Venturino and Michelle Carter



The language of aviation is English, but...

By Michael Venturino
"Line up and wait."

Sounds like the Department of Motor Vehicles. Instead it's the International Civil Aviation Organization language for "taxi into position and hold." Another is to request "joining and landing instructions" from the control tower.

English is the official language of aviation; however, toss in accents, idioms and local procedures, and it's not as simple as it sounds.

As they prepped for their flights, the American pilots had to acquaint themselves with different ATC terms for familiar maneuvers and routine requests for information about the flight that U.S. ATC only expects in an emergency. Added to the standard requests for aircraft type, distance out and altitude were endurance and number of persons on board.

In Mozambique, each transmission from ATC began with the four-digit Zulu time, a throwback to the days of position reporting that would insure that the giver and receiver were in sync.

Other wrinkles included the setting of 29.92 inches (QNE) at 2,000 feet agl ascending and setting the local altimeter (QNH) at 3,000 feet on the descent, place names in Afrikaans which were tongue-twisters for American English speakers, and an almost total lack of radar control.

During the 23-day odyssey, the pilots revisited their soft field landing skills and basic VFR pattern work. South Africa doesn't use the 45-degree entry to the downwind. An upwind is flown to a crosswind leg, then the downwind is entered from the crosswind. When entering this pattern, the call is a somewhat enigmatic "India Alpha Hotel is on the dead side."

The reward for all this was a flight over a spectacular country at low altitudes in virtually empty airspace, a type of flying that hasn't been widespread in the U.S. for many years. It was worth the "line up and wait."

giraffes) on the grassland below. Traditional round mud huts with conical or acorn-cap thatched roofs, clustered in villages and surrounded by crop circles, created unique visual geometry when seen from the air.

Landing at Madikwe on a well-maintained red dirt air strip looked simple enough until a fly-over was needed to scare off a breeding herd of impala that had wandered over. And then on final approach, the pilots had to contend with significant piles of elephant dung plopped in the middle of the strip. Grazing cattle and goats and soccer-playing kids in need of a flat surface for their game provided challenges on other landings.

The flying added a new dimension for an African safari, but the PBS group really came to see and photograph Africa's extraordinary animals in their natural habitat. The upscale game lodges (Tau in Madikwe, Gorah at Addo and Notten's in Kruger) exceeded expectations. Game drives in converted Land Rovers or Toyota trucks were scheduled at dawn and dusk every day, and well-informed rangers (who must pass standardized, university-level training courses) led their bundled-up, camera-packing visitors on myriad unmarked trails through the brush in search of the Big Five (lions, elephants, rhinos, leopards and cape buffalo) and scores of other impressive animals.

The first evening at Tau the six couples (in two vehicles on separate journeys) all sat in perfect awe while bachelor brother lions reclined in tall grass after enjoying a kill. The trucks drove within eight feet of each one and sat with engines off for 30 or 40 minutes.

The rangers admonished the group to stay seated. "In the truck the lions consider you part of the big green 'thing' that they are used to having around," the ranger explained. "But if you separate yourself from the truck by standing up or leaning out, then you are prey."

The thought that a ranger might have to use the high-powered rifle that rests in its holder on the dash on one of these magnificent creatures kept everyone in his or her seat, mesmerized but definitely seated. Only once did a

ranger actually reach for the rifle. After she heard a radio report of a white rhino nearby, she sped off the road onto a mere track and steered around a tree to find a one-tusked bull elephant smack in the middle of the path. He was startled and not amused. With his ears wide and flapping, he started toward the truck as the ranger backed up as fast as possible on the narrow trail. As he gained speed, she reached for the rifle. Just then, he veered off into the thicket, and the ranger and her groupies relaxed enough to breathe — and breathe again.

Not one of the rangers admitted to having shot an animal, but they all get rifle training once a month.

Perhaps the most serene animal moment came at a remote water hole just at sunset when about 15 giraffes moved silently through small trees and grass to the edge of the water to drink. The special slanting light of that hour caught perfect reflections of these fragile-looking animals who are at their most vulnerable when they bend awkwardly to drink. The only sound was the clicking of the SLRs and the sweet murmurs of photographers who recognized an amazing Kodak moment.

Not all the game encounters were planned. At Gorah Elephant Camp, one couple had just returned to their "tent," an elaborate canvas house on a platform, when they heard crashing and thumping outside. Through the screen, they saw a cape buffalo in the

scrub between their tent and the next. After watching him munch for a few minutes, they left the window only to feel the tent platform shaking and hear some annoyed snorting. Outside they found the buffalo with his huge horns (they look a bit like an ill-fitting toupee) caught under the railing. Once he worked himself free, he stormed off the way he had come.

On the very last game drive of the trip, at Notten's Bush Camp in the Sabi Sand Reserve in Kruger National Park, the first leopard of the trip showed herself at dusk in the grass at the foot of a tree. With everyone watching (including the spotter who sat exposed

out on the left front fender), she turned and leapt up the tree where she had stowed an impala carcass two days before. An uninvited hyena showed up under the tree and waited patiently until the impala remains tumbled down. He snatched it and took off with leftovers for dinner.

The leopard wasn't interested in pursuit. She jumped down and ambled off to play with her two cubs she had secreted away near a dry creek bed. Despite the waning light and no chance for photos, everyone watched the leopard kittens roll around and leap onto mom, just like domestic house cats, until it was pitch dark,

It wasn't game that drew the air caravan to Mozambique but rather the chance to fly low along the 300 miles of spectacular white sand beaches edging an aquamarine sea and then play for two days. But first came four-hour ordeal of passing through customs (and paying the equivalent of \$180 per plane and assorted other fees) at a remote border airfield. The hassle defined the "hurry up and wait" motif.

But Pomene Lodge, on a peninsula between the Indian Ocean and a wide estuary, offered down-time pleasures of swimming, diving and the best shopping of the trip at two native

Accommodations

Gorah Elephant Camp
Addo Elephant National Park
27.042.235.1123
HunterHotels.com/gorahelephantcamp/

Isandlwana Lodge
Zululand Battlegrounds
27.34.271.8301
Isandlwana.co.za

Notten's Bush Camp
Sabi Sand Game Reserve
Kruger National Park
27.13.735.5105
Nottens.com

Pomene Lodge
Mozambique
27.011.023.9901
BarraResorts.com

Tau Game Lodge
Madikwe Game Reserve
27.018.365.9027
TauGameLodge.co.za

curio shops where artists and carvers worked at their craft and bargained for Mozambican metacais, South African rand or American dollars.

On an ocean-side bluff above the peninsula sat the ruins of a spectacularly situated hotel with ancient lava flow and seaside blowholes on one side and a broad half-moon beach on the other. It was built as a retreat by the first president after independence sent the Portuguese masters packing. The airstrip the air trekkers landed on was carved out to serve the hotel, but two long civil wars left nothing but destruction and a few squatters. The strip was so seldom used that Dave had to call ahead to have the grass mowed.

On the flight back to Johannesburg, these air trekkers were surely overweight if you counted the unique flying experiences, remarkable sights and thousands of photos they were carrying with them. Even without the Gypsy Moth, they had flown over, into and now out of Africa in style.

Dave Van der spuy can be reached at AeroSafari.com or info@aerosafari.com. He will be at the AOPA convention in Long Beach in November.

