

# AERO SAFARI

Loose formation flying over Zambezi River

By Vici DeHaan

**When** Warren and I signed up to fly an airplane on a tour in Africa, we never dreamed that we would be embarking on the trip of a lifetime.

On August 25th, we arrived in Cape Town after traveling for 33 hours. We spent four delightful days there, where we rented a car, and had to stay on the alert at all times since they drive on the left side of the road. The roundabouts provided much amusement for us since we were not always sure which fork to take and had to constantly remember to stay to the left to avoid any surprise encounters with the locals.

Two options available in Cape Town that we weren't able to work could have included an

excursion to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated, and taking a cable car up Table Mountain where you get a panoramic view of the city and its harbor. Unfortunately, when we were there, there was a "tablecloth" of clouds capping the mountain, so sightseeing was out of the question.

However, we took a mind altering tour of District 6. In 1950, all the city housing was declared off limits to the blacks who were then moved into "townships" and between 1950-55, over 60,000 people were forced into the most squalid living conditions I've ever

seen. To further control the blacks, all males were issued identification cards which classified them as either black, colored or Malay. The shacks they were able to construct were unbelievable, and today AIDS is rampant.

Currently, approximately 70% of the blacks are unemployed



The South African Cessna 182 we rented

and the local bar in the township was open for business from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., where the men are able to drink cheap, but fairly potent beer. Very few women drank since once they reached marriageable age, they didn't drink because the men wouldn't marry them if they drank.

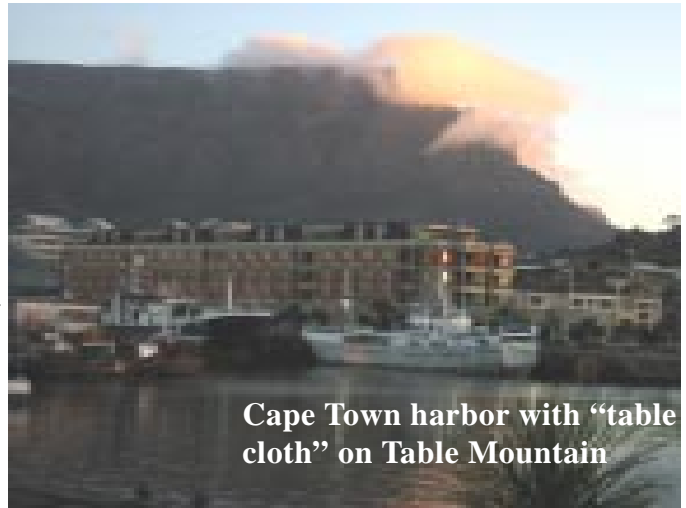
We stopped by the local nursery school which accommodated children from two months through age five. It had two rooms for over 60 children, with the babies separated from the toddlers, and all were overseen by only four attendants. When we visited, we were immediately surrounded by many little people clamoring to be held.

We left Cape Town to go to the coast where we drove through historic Simon's Town to the Cape of Good Hope, where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet. En route, we stopped to watch jackass penguins at Boulder's Beach. While at the Cape of Good Hope Nature Preserve, we climbed up to the lighthouse, keeping a wary eye out for some very aggressive baboons who were very adept at separating the visitors from their snacks. We also drove to Hermanus where we could watch many right

whales spouting, some fairly close to shore.

We stayed at Gordon's Bay in a delightful B&B which had a fantastic overlook of the bay and was extremely reasonable. Our second night there, we ate at the most expensive restaurant in town, and our bill was only \$30.00 for the two of us.

Then it was back to Johannesburg, or "Joburg" as it is known by the locals. There we met three other couples, all from California, and our escort, Dave Vanderspey, owner of African Aero Safaris. Here we learned some of the local aviation jargon. For example, each pilot put in the local altimeter setting or the QNH. However, when you reached 2000 feet agl, you set in the QNE where you dial in 1013 millibars (equivalent to 29.92"). When



Cape Town harbor with "table cloth" on Table Mountain

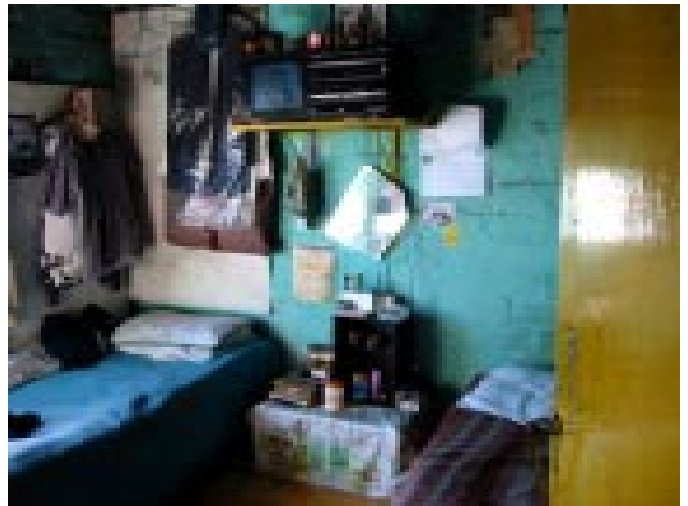


Orphans in orphanage

entering the pattern for landing, you radioed you were "joining and landing." Instead of "position and hold," it was "line up and wait." Instead of reporting the amount of fuel on board, you reported your "endurance." You also were



Township housing



Typical room for family of four in township

**Typical game drive vehicle**



**Face off with elephant on game drive**



instructed to contact “Information” rather than Approach Control.

Warren and the three other guys who would be listed as PICs then went to Lanceria Airport where two of the pilots were checked out in Cessna 172s and Warren and another pilot checked out in 182s. The planes were in pretty good shape, with ours built in 1975.



**Pride of lions**

While the men were doing their check rides, the four of us ladies toured a cultural center at Lesedi where five villages in Africa were represented. Since we had an additional day at Johannesburg, we also toured Soweto, another township set aside for the blacks, but in much better condition than the one out of Cape Town. We stopped by Nelson and Winnie Mandela’s house that had a concrete wall in the kitchen to protect them from snipers (the police) stationed on a nearby hill who frequently tried to shoot them in their house.

While driving around, we learned about “sleeping soldiers” which are speed bumps, and “robots” which are traffic lights. We also saw a sign in a local restaurant that read: “Heaven is where the police are British, cooks are French, and mechanics are German. Hell is where the chef is British, the mechanic is French, lovers are Swiss, police are German, and everyone is organized by the Italians.”

Finally on Sept. 2nd we loaded our four rented South African Cessnas and were ready to explore. Our guide, Dave, had spent a great deal of time preparing notebooks for our flying trip complete with photos of the airports plus all the numbers you would need for each. We learned as we went along that being adept with a GPS is all but mandatory since there are

not a lot of man-made landmarks available.

Our GPS also made it possible to land in poor visibility at one of the airports in Botswana. Since they were in the third year of a drought, and many of the fields near the airfield were being burned to get rid of the dry grasses, the smoke obscured the airport. As a result, our visibility dropped to below a half-mile when we descended about 5 miles out. At this point, approaching the airport visually was not an option since we never even saw the runway until we were just a few hundred feet from the ground.

Apparently they do have instrument procedures at some airports but these are usually restricted to an NDB approach. Since we were officially flying VFR, even though it was quite obscure at low level, we were glad we were flying over very flat terrain with no obstructions.

Each time we were ready to take off, we lined up at the holding point in formation and Dave handled the radio calls, including reporting the number of people on board and our endurance (range for flying), and we were off. We took off closely together so that we could usually see at least one other aircraft ahead of ours at all times. Once airborne, we switched to a channel where we could talk freely, so keeping track of one another was made much easier. When using this channel, we also kept each

other entertained with jokes and comments about our surroundings.

On our first hop, we landed at our first airport serving the Mashatu Game Reserve in Botswana north of the Limpopo River. This game preserve seemed to have most of the animals you would expect to see in the bush: lioness with three cubs, leopard sleeping in a tree, impalas, wildebeest, elephant, elan, steenbok, wild pigs and jackals. Here we were also treated to a short hike in the bush accompanied by a guide carrying a rifle, which was carried only for an emergency. Fortunately, we never had to rely on our guides' rifles at any time throughout our whole trip, even though they were always available.

The next afternoon, two of us pilots went on a mountain bike ride through the bush with several other guests, again accompanied by a guide carrying a rifle. Someone later referred to us as "meals on wheels." The ride was challenging as we rode through soft sand, across rocks and finally met our nemesis at "Disappointment Hill." This "hill" went straight up, and apparently only a couple of exceptionally strong riders have ever actually been able to ride up to the top. I had all I could do to push my bike up the thing!



**Watering hole by  
Makweti Lodge in  
South Africa**

## **Warren feeding Madinda at Livingstone, Zambia**



One tradition on game drives was the sundowner. Each evening around dusk the group would stop in the bush and enjoy drinks and snacks while waiting for the sun to go down so we could continue our game drive after dark. A spotter would then sit on a front seat on the left fender with a strong spotlight, searching for creatures in the dark. However, if we were close to lions, he very quietly would join us in the back of the vehicle.

On Sept. 4, we flew to the Chatibe airstrip after refueling in Francistown. This was a long flying day of almost five hours total in two legs. We had a spectacular flight coming into the Delta, and even did a "round-the-delta tour" of the Delta at low level to see herds of large game such as elephant, hippo, giraffe and buffalo while managing to avoid hitting any large

storks and vultures.

Upon landing we went for a game drive where we observed around 200 cape buffalo grazing in a field accompanied by their usual bird companions—the yellow and red-billed ox peckers. The termite mounds throughout this area were huge, some measuring over ten feet high.

We stayed at the Sandibe Lodge in the Okavango Delta. While coming in on final, the plane behind ours had to do a sudden go-around when a giraffe decided to cross at that precise moment. Usually the host from the camp would arrive at the airstrip prior to our arrival and attempt to keep the wildlife away from the landing strip, but this giraffe managed to get by him.

Since the animals always had access to the game camps (no fences allowed), at night we were never allowed to go back and forth from the lodge unless accompanied by a guide. One particular evening we were in an open area by the lodge enjoying a candlelight dinner when we kept hearing the crashing sounds of a





Lodge at Livingstone



Interior of lodge

very large elephant who was butting his head against the palm trees to shake down the nuts. Then without warning, this elephant decided to join us for dinner. Our host had us quietly move to one side while he single-handedly took on this giant beast by jumping up and down, clapping his hands and encouraging him to move on. At any moment the elephant could easily have stomped him into the ground, but fortunately, after a brief stand-off, decided to move along. Of all the times not to have a camera, this was it, resulting in everyone bringing their cameras with them to all the rest of the meals.

That night we were treated to hot water bottles to take to bed with us under the mosquito netting, which was a welcome touch since nights were quite chilly, dipping down into the 40s.

The next morning as we were eating breakfast, we discovered a hyena had “stolen” our guide’s flight bag and after a search of the area,



“Hot seat”  
at Jack’s  
Camp

following bits and pieces that had been chomped from the bag, we were able to regain the bag. However, Dave’s flight log had been chewed but was still serviceable.

On Sept. 6, we arrived at Livingstone in Zambia after overflying Victoria Falls. En route, we did some close formation flying over the Zambezi River. As we were walking from our planes to the terminal, we saw a large entourage of cars arriving with the president of Zambia. Obviously, security there isn’t what it is in the States, because three of our group asked if they could meet him. Amazingly, they were escorted into a reception line along with a long line of citizens where they shook his hand as he prepared to board his jet.

We did a short tour of the paths surrounding Victoria Falls, known as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World and known locally as “the smoke that thunders.” This, the world’s greatest expanse of falling water, spans more than a mile and drops an average of 328 feet.

The next morning the majority of the group signed up to go on a raft trip. The rapids here in the

gorge below the falls were rated at class five and quite wild. After descending 300 feet straight down into the gorge, the group was receiving their final instructions when they watched the people in the first raft go through the rapids and everyone immediately flew out of the raft into the water. Fortunately, everyone in our group’s boat came through the morning safely.

While the rest of our group was doing this adrenaline-pumping raft trip, Warren and I enjoyed a leisurely boat ride on the river beside our quarters where we saw ten hippos sunning themselves and had the opportunity to listen quietly to the many sounds of Africa.

That afternoon, four of us went for an elephant ride through the bush after which we sat on the elephants’ legs and popped treats into their trunks, and even threw some into their enormous mouths. That evening, the ten hippos who had been swimming in the river outside our camp decided to come ashore to graze.

A humorous incident happened when Dave, our guide, breathlessly arrived at the central lounge area, having just been mock-charged by one of the hippos. This, along with the presence of so many elephants, was one of the reasons that as a frustrated marathon runner, I was unable to go for a single run while on safari. I realized, once again that I am most definitely not the top of the food



“Meals on wheels”

chain. However, one of the camp hosts did offer to let me go for a run while he followed with a rifle in a jeep. Reluctantly I decided to turn down the kind offer.

Sept. 8, we flew to Jack's Camp where we went for a dusty 4-wheel ride on quad bikes through the Magadigadi Pan, a large vast prehistoric desert. Here, we ladies were treated to a very "elegant" throne room enclosed by a tall wooden fence. The top was open to the hot sun resulting in a "hot seat," but the facility beat trying to find a small shrub to hide behind.

Sept. 9, we flew over the impressive Drakensburg mountains to our most luxurious accommodations at the 5-star Coach House at Tzaneen, South Africa, set in some of the most colorful gardens we had seen. The next morning we did a scenic drive through the Magoebaskloof area and stopped for lunch at the Peeko Tea Plantation before continuing out to the airport.

From there we flew to our last game camp at Makweti Lodge located in the Welgevonden Private Game Reserve in South Africa. Shortly after all five planes had landed, some lionesses killed a wildebeest a short distance away from where we were



**Victoria Falls**



**Our group's line of airplanes**

having an afternoon snack prior to going on the game drive.

At this point, Dave felt confident enough about our navigating on our own, so he flew back to Johannesburg the day before we did. The four of us then enjoyed our last "team" flight together, and it was with some sadness, we returned to Lanceria Airport and civilization. As Warren and I landed, we followed a Lear on final.

In all, we had a most memorable trip and did indeed see the big five along with many other animals in the bush. If you want to explore this area for yourself, feel free to contact Dave at African Aero Safaris. You can contact him at PO Box 784327, Sandton 2146, South Africa, or call him at +2711-4624521

or fax at 465-4547. Even better you can email him at [explore@global.co.za](mailto:explore@global.co.za). Remember, they are halfway around the world and daylight in the USA is night time there. African Aero Safaris also has a website at [www.aerosafari.com](http://www.aerosafari.com).

For further recommendations, contact Warren and me at 303.499.4582. We'd do the whole trip all over again without reservation, especially if several of our Flying Physician friends joined us!

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*Vici and Warren DeHaan have enjoyed taking part in Flying Physicians Association activities since 1995 when Warren was made an honorary member. They are both pilots seeking new flying adventures anywhere in the world.*

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**(303) 499-4582** about their experiences flying this trip

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