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OUR INCREDIBLE AFRICAN AIR SAFARI 9/1/06 – 9/20/06

By: Kathi Blythe

With contributions from:

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There's a romance in Africa...to experience up close encounters with magnificent, untamed animals, to absorb all sounds in the African bush, to gaze up into the endless starry skies at night, the landscape, as diverse and picturesque as the wildlife...it's almost incomprehensible. I speak of "first time" experiences often...and this one still feels like a dream...neither words, nor photos do justice to what we actually lived! I now understand the words of Karen Blixen (played by Meryl Streep in the movie Out of Africa), "When I am out from Africa, I long for Africa!"

I have one sentence that says it all for me. "If I never take another trip and/or never fly to another place, I feel completely content...absolutely fulfilled with the memories I have of beautiful Africa!"

I'd like to begin this article with a huge expression of gratitude to our fearless leader Dave; and his awesome tour company, [African Aero Safaris](http://www.aerosafaris.com). Dave's guidance and knowledge were immeasurable! Thank you for your expertise and in making each of our pilots "Seasoned African Bush Pilots"! Together, you and your wonderful wife Kitty have quite a thing going and we hope you keep it up! I personally can not wait to return! Interested parties (and who wouldn't be) can get more information at www.aerosafaris.com.



African Aero Safaris made a *dream* for 16 pilots and passengers from the Pacific Bonanza Society, become a reality on September 2, 2006. We landed in commercial aircraft in Johannesburg South Africa to begin a once in a lifetime adventure!

Conversations of this "*almost unrealistic air safari*" began in early March 2005 in Punta Chivato, Mexico. Our PBS group was enjoying another relaxing afternoon during our "Whale Petting Fly-in" when I overheard Bob Hecock say, "Hey, Steve, what do you think about doing an air safari in Africa?"

I saw Steve's eyes light up and I felt succumbed by a two completely opposite emotions. First, a rushing thrill of adventure, to actually have an opportunity to fly over and embrace the wondrous beauty of a country Steve and I have only witnessed through television by watching the National Geographic Channel. Second, was a fear of my own...I felt apprehensive about being in and flying through an unfamiliar, far away country; currently suffering from political coups, wars and hostile outbreaks, as reported by our television media. All fears went to rest as we departed Johannesburg and flew out into the African Bush!

Day 1: We arrived at the Johannesburg International Airport and found our way to the money exchange booths to convert our US currency to South African Rand and Botswana Pula. This was

important because the two countries did not accept each other's money and since we were headed for the "outback of Southern Africa", the airport was our best bet to accomplish this task.

We transferred to our Hotel where we all met with our guide, Dave Vanderspey, founder and owner of [African Aero Safaris](#). PBS member Bob Hecock, who volunteered to host this phenomenal air safari, chose African Aero Safaris because of Dave's extensive knowledge of flying through Africa's expansive and diverse terrain; deserts, mountain ranges, valleys and landing on bush airstrips in the wild. To quote our personal guide from his brochure, "This self-pilot safari enables you as PIC together with family and friends to experience the rich wildlife, many cultures, varied topography, fascinating history, ancient geology and colorful ambience of Southern Africa whilst flying freely but safely in largely uncontrolled airspaces." And I must say...*he provided just that and more!*

Upon arrival at our hotel, we met for a trip briefing with Dave. He provided flight plans, maps and a complete summary of where we would be flying and what to expect for the check-rides. It was here that we learned of Barbara and Tom Glazes' loss of luggage during their flight into Johannesburg...they would probably spent their Johannesburg days shopping for clothes and other essentials.

After the briefing, we headed out for an evening of education and entertainment at the Lesedi Cultural Village "Place of Light". Lesedi is home to four African families from different cultural tribes living together as they would have years ago. We were introduced to the people of The Zulu Nation, the Xhosa, the Pedi and the Basotho by walking through their respective villages while our guide enlightened us with an explanation of each of their cultures. We ended the evening with a wonderful display of each tribe's cultural dance and a dinner where we experienced many of the traditional African foods. By the way, the main chief of Lesedi is seen frequently in National Geographic commentaries and advertisements! Dawn Sather recollects this being one of my husband's favorite places 😊!

Day 2: Check ride Day! Everyone headed out to two different airports to be checked out in the planes they would be flying and to complete everything required to obtain their African pilot's license. Most of the planes were Cesena 172's (one with a diesel engine) and a couple of Pipers. Everyone felt happy with their planes.

Bill and George Zander arrived one day earlier than the rest of us and I wanted to share her story of their first check ride. It's pretty funny!

"Bill and I arrived in Africa a day early to be checked out in our pristine vintage airplane. This was to be our means of transportation for the next two weeks and an experience of a lifetime. It was a 1961 Piper Tripacer.

I was given the first check ride. Well, the Tri-pacer was not exactly vintage and not exactly pristine, more like a flying kite. Well who needs a DG anyway, it recessed so badly it was unusable. Doing a run up was exceptionally fun especially without toe brakes. Oh well, at least there was a hand brake, but wait, it wouldn't lock, so the run-ups had to be done screaming down the taxiways. This was alarming enough, but what concerned me the most was the fuel system. Always start up on the right tank, then immediately switch to the left tank, use three quarters, go back to the right tank. Fill the left from the reserve tank, you can always use the remainder of the right tank. But what ever you do never land on the right tank or was

it the other way around?

And what about pictures? It would be impossible to take them in this Kite-like structure. But again, who needs pictures on an African safari? In addition, we were sitting shoulder to shoulder; two weeks is a long time. On that note we made a request to switch planes. Our new plane was a Cessna 172 diesel. Run-ups were done with the push of a button. Very nice!”



After all check rides were complete and African Pilots Licenses were issued, we headed out to the Cullinan Diamond Mine, discovered in 1902 by Sir Thomas Cullinan; and now owned and operated by DeBeers, a diamond mine and Trade Corporation that monopolizes the world's diamond market. The mine employs 1130 people. Although the mine was closed for the day, we walked through the property above ground while our guide explained their methods of mining these incredible gems. It was here in 1905 they discovered the largest stone in history

called the Cullinan I, or the Great Star of Africa, weighing in at 3,106 carats in the rough and 530.2 carats after being cut and polished. This exceptional stone now graces the British Crown Jewels, mounted in the head of the Scepter with the Cross; on display in England's Tower of London. It was in 1939 that DeBeers began advertising the famous slogan "A diamond is forever".



That evening, our guide and host, Dave and his wife Kitty entertained us at a local restaurant where we enjoyed a great meal and good wine. The energy in the room was almost overwhelming as everyone shared their expectations and excitement of the adventure that lay ahead. Unfortunately, the Glazes' were still missing luggage!

Day 3: This day was a free day to relax and tour Johannesburg. Our excursion took us through Soweto, an African township and home to approximately 3 million blacks. The main language spoken here is Zulu. We passed through extremely poor government squatter camps that seemed to be miles long, plagued with poverty. We visited the middle-class section where Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela lived, stopping to tour Mandela's home where he lived prior to his imprisonment. And we ventured through the upper-class section where Winnie Madikizela-Mandela currently lives. It was very sobering when we drove past the biggest hospital in the southern hemisphere, the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, and learned that there are about 300 funerals per week performed due to the Aids epidemic. Eleven different languages are spoken in Johannesburg. The two "white" languages are English and Afrikaans, which is a combination of Dutch, Flemish and German. The other languages spoken are that of the different African tribes.

Our next stop was at the very sobering, Hector Pieterse Museum where we learned about the June 16, 1976 protest and uprising between the native African school children protesting over the government pressuring the use of the Afrikaans language in the school system and attempting to change their way of education in math and science. The museum is named after the dying Hector, who at the age of 12 was photographed being carried by a fellow student shortly before he died, after he was gunned down when the Apartheid government police opened fire on the student protesters. By the end of the day 556 children were dead. June 16 is now recognized as National Youth Day, a day that South Africans honor young people.



We enjoyed lunch at a local restaurant in Soweto where they served traditional food of the South African township which included several curry dishes, and then we headed out to the DeWildt Wildlife Sanctuary. (The joke being passed around when we entered this compound was that Dave, our guide, had arranged this tour so that we were guaranteed a glimpse of the “Big 5” up close...just in case our air and ground safari’s left us discontented!) Africa’s “Big Five” consist of the Elephant, Rhino, Lion, Leopard and Buffalo.



These five animals were considered by the early dwelling natives to be the most dangerous animals to hunt. They have few natural enemies and being very cunning, it made them difficult to track. And when cornered, they were lethal. The DeWildt Wildlife Sanctuary was established in 1971 with a goal to aid in the breeding of endangered species and to re-introduce them into their natural habitat. During our visit, we had the opportunity to enjoy and interact with 1 – 2 year old baby cub lions. I think the person that enjoyed their time the most with these darling little cubs was member Rita Hecock, who truly loves all cats...all cats! We also stopped by to see the “Vulture Restaurant”. Yes...I’d never heard of a vulture restaurant either! It happened to be an area set aside in the park where farmers brought their dead livestock and road kill was deposited for the vultures to feast on! And yes, everyone in the van voted to stop and check it out! I don’t think words can describe the rank and disgusting stench! Dinner anyone??

That evening, we stayed at a small B&B called the Pelectus Manor. After checking in, we all headed out for a great meal at a local Italian restaurant. We were greeted with open arms by the owner, a very kind and jovial man who promised good food, wine and service. And that was exactly what we received! After a wonderful meal, we headed back for a good nights rest...our day was coming! Back at the hotel, we learned that the Glazes’ still had no luggage show up but they kept a positive attitude...as Barbara put it, “Oh well, things happen”!

Day 4 & 5: The adrenaline was filling everyone’s veins...our day had arrived! After 1 1/2 years of planning by our member, Bob Hecock, the quest was about to begin! This was the first day of our first of flying the African Bush! Everyone boarded their planes, set their radios for group chatter “1-2-3-4-5” and began taxiing toward the runway. One by one, as each plane left the ground, the next would start their roll out and soon all 9 planes flew in beautiful formation through the blue skies over Africa.



Our first leg was about 1 hour 30 minutes, destination Pietersburg/Polokwane where we fueled and cleared immigration to check out of South Africa, which went smooth as silk. Our second leg was approximately one more hour. Our elevation over the ground was between 250 and 500 feet...each plane communicating to each other sightings of wildlife...herds of giraffe and zebra. We landed on a tar packed 1500 ft. runway in the Limpopo Valley in Botswana. Clearing customs was well organized and effortless, and this is where the Pula currency came into use...they don’t accept Rand currency here.

Our accommodations would be at the [Mashatu Game Reserve](#) which encompasses 18,000 acres nestled between the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers. The Mashatu Lodge team greeted us with cold cocktails & beer, gathered our luggage, and organized us



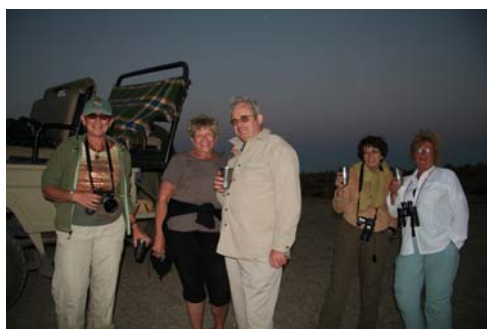
into open topped land rovers immediately for our first African bush ground safari...just before sunset! Our guide and tracker teams took us down dirt roads through the bush where we had close up sightings of giraffe, Impalas, antelope, warthogs, a family of lions, and even cute little bush babies! I asked about the rifles attached to the dash board of the trucks and was told that they had never had to use them. It was just in case...ahhh, that was calming!

We returned to the Mashatu Lodge where we were escorted to our fabulously decorated African colonial suites and enjoyed a wonderful dinner, dining in a "Boma"; an area where the dining tables surrounded a huge fire pit, out under the stars. The following morning we awoke to our 6:00 wake-up call, a quite knock on the door followed by, "Good morning"! We enjoyed a light continental breakfast and by 7:00 began our early morning game drive. The sounds were quieter in the morning than the sounds heard during the sunset game drive. After a very successful 3-hour game drive, we returned to the lodge for a huge breakfast.



We relaxed around the lodge until 3:00. Tea and snacks were served and we were off again at 4:00 for our sunset game drive. The Limpopo Valley is also heavily populated with the wonderful baobab tree, or as they sometimes call it, the "upside down tree". This spectacular tree is shown often on the National Geographic Channel when they do shots of Africa. It has huge thick trunks with what looks like the roots of the tree coming out of the top, spreading flat like an umbrella! During this game drive, we received a radio call from the guide of another land rover

who stated they had spotted a leopard. He gave our guide the coordinates. We pulled a u-turn and started down another road. Quietly and slowly, we pulled up behind our other group watching the leopard. I couldn't make out where they looking and my eyes continued to scan the ground. All of a sudden there was a loud hissing growl and the huge animal jumped from the tree onto the ground with a loud thud, right next to the group's truck. Everyone within the vehicle leaned simultaneously to the right...in fact; I



thought Bill Zander was going to jump into our tour guides lap! We came to find that the leopard had part of his impala kill in the tree and was attempting to quietly eat in peace...away from the vultures and other predators. After all this excitement, we headed to a spot to have a "sundowner". The "sundowner" was always scheduled at a beautiful location, overlooking the fantastic scenery where we would enjoy cocktails and snacks while watching the beautiful and colorful African sunset melt into the landscape. It was absolutely breathtaking!

We started off again and to our surprise, came upon the lion family. We were surprised to see them lazily lying around. Our guide explained that they had already fed and could go a few days' in-between kills. The mom was on her back with daughter about 5 feet away and son about 15 feet away. The daughter and son just laid there staring at us. The daughter gave a yawn, stood up and walked over to mom; gave her a loud purr by her ear and lay down, spooning into mom. About 5 minutes later, the son yawned, stood up and walked over to mom; put his paw gently on her cheek and gave her a loud purr in her ear. He then spooned himself into his sister and they all closed their eyes. It was quite a spectacular display of nature. Driving back to the lodge that evening was mesmerizing. The night became alive with sounds of



the birds, baboons and frogs. I just laid my head back and took in all the beauty of the sounds, the stars (Southern Cross and the Milky Way included)! It was so tranquil! Surreal!



We enjoyed another great dinner that evening under a sky full of stars in the Boma and bedded down for an early evening. We would partake in another early game drive in the morning before departing for our next destination.

Day 6 & 7: We ended our game drive at the airfield. In route, our guide found signs of an African Python just before arriving at the airfield. He found him by following his tracks in the dirt which lead to a tree and sure enough...there he was...a big python. Several people got out of the vehicles to take photos. It was here that I had my first fearful moment as I watched the snake strike out at Steve's camera lens. I did a quick, hard tug on Steve's jacket followed by, "That was close enough! In fact, that was TOO CLOSE!" Everyone thought it was pretty funny, except for me! I saw that bright pink mouth with two huge fangs!



We finally gave up on expecting the Glaze's luggage to arrive and crossed our fingers it would be in Johannesburg at the end of the safari. We departed Limpopo after taking lots of photos with our guides and trackers and hit the African skyways again in loose formation. Our next destination was a 1 hour leg to refuel and then an additional 3 hours northwest to the Okavango Delta in Botswana, another one of Africa's prime wilderness areas. In route, we flew super low down the (currently dry) Shashe River that borders Botswana and Zimbabwe. I can't even begin to explain this fantastic flight! We flew low, low and took every curve of the river! I have to say, when I glanced over at Steve, he was wearing a grin that went from ear to ear...he was in heaven! And he kept repeating, "This is so cool!"

Soon, we were flying over what looked like salt flats, the landscape has changed from the dry, barren, burned sand and scrub in southeast Botswana, to what looked like salt flats and then, into lush green marshlands. This Delta was formed by a fast flowing river created from rains in Angola. The river branches and spreads over thousands of square miles feeding the desert as it evaporates. It's known as the river with no mouth.



As we flew over the wetlands, the pilots throttled back to around 80-90 knots for safety and better viewing; keeping our eyes peeled for large vultures, storks and eagles soaring around at our altitude. I kept wondering where we'd land if we had to as I peered out over the marshland...well...it would be in the water and most likely in the jaws of a croc or hippo! The flight was long, bumpy and hot, but we finally spotted the 3200 foot dirt airfield, with delta marshland visible at the front and back of the field. It made me pucker a bit but everyone landed safely.

We were greeted by our [Kanana Lodge](#) team. They loaded our luggage and transported us to our new accommodations. Everyone had their own individual canvas tent set upon a stilt foundation along the shoreline of the Okavango Delta. I really enjoyed the tent living! Like our scuba diving trips...this was more like camping...who needs a blow dryer or make-up anyway☺! Each tent was decorated in African colonial



furnishings and equipped with an “air horn” just in case we awoke to an animal in our tent! The trails throughout the property were covered with dried elephant dung...yes, elephant dung! We’re roughing it now!



We departed for our first game drive after enjoying a delightful lunch. The game that we would see in this area was a little different than in southeast Botswana. This area is home to hundreds of species of birds, crocodile and hippopotamus. We spotted some elephants and giraffe, and again witnessed another beautiful sunset during our “sundowner”. Evening sounds took over just after sunset...birds, monkeys, frogs and a few elephant roars in the distance. We all gathered around a campfire by the dock of the lodge, enjoyed a few cocktails and shared stories of our day. Before our meal was served in the main tent, our chef

came out to our table to introduce himself and explain the menu. Our guides and lodge hosts joined us for a wonderful meal. The food was exceptional! When it came time to retire to our tents, our guides escorted us down the trails to our tents. I asked the guide, “Do you carry a weapon?” “No”, he said. I asked, “What are you going to do if we’re confronted?” He explained that he was there for our protection and to keep us from panic. He said he knew how to react to the animals to make them go away. Okay, that makes sense.



That evening, Steve and I lay awake on our bed, taking in all the sounds of the African Delta at night! I wish I could have embedded the animal chatter into this article About 4:00 AM, we were awakened by two hippos doing their thing right in front of our tent. As soon as they heard us whisper, we heard them thumping toward the water and then two big splashes! We fell back to sleep and awoke early to take a canoe ride out into the delta.



We had different activities available for the morning and afternoons. There were ground safaris and boat safaris. Steve and I chose the canoes, along with several others from our group. Each couple boarded a canoe with their own personal guide, who stood at the end of the boat and used a long pole to make our way through a path, probably made by a grazing hippo the night before, through the high reeds. The feeling of complete tranquility came over us as we drifted through the Okavango Delta. We listened to all the sounds

and embraced the quite, peaceful life in this region. The bird life was absolutely amazing! We had the opportunity to see some of the most spectacular variety of birds...you don’t get to see this variety at major zoos! We saw Kingfishers, Bee-Eaters, Lilac-breasted Rollers, Hornbills, Cranes, Swamp heads, Guinea fowl, African Fish-Eagles, Storks, African Darters, Frigate birds; I could go on and on! This was a bird-watcher’s paradise!



After a nice relaxing rest, we boarded another boat for some more bird watching and a wonderful “sundowner”! When we arrived back at the lodge, we were informed that a few people would be showing up late for our cocktail hour as they had sunk their vehicle into a mud bog during their afternoon ground safari. Bob Hecock and George McCaffrey helped by trying to push as the guide



accelerated and they were covered in muck from head to toe! After showering off a few pounds of mud, they joined us for cocktails and another wonderful dinner.

The following morning, as I showered, Steve called for me to come immediately...we had an elephant right in front of our tent staring in! Sure enough, I left the shower in a towel...shampoo still in my hair and he gave out a little grunt and walked away. I returned to the shower and in the distance I could hear Jim Ott and Larry Carrillo talking excitedly about the elephant sighting...then silence and then a loud elephant bellow. I thought to myself, "That elephant sounds upset." Later, when we gathered in the dining tent for

breakfast, I noticed Larry limping. I asked what had happened and he shyly said, "I saw this elephant this morning outside our tent and I went out to get some good photos. He charged me and I ran and pulled my hamstring". I asked him, "How far did you have to run before he stopped charging?" Larry responded with, "I don't know. I didn't stop until I got back into the tent!" Sorry, Larry, but just the thought of your experience makes me laugh out loud...just like when Bill Zander almost crawled up Dave when the Leopard jumped down from the tree at Mashatu! What experiences we've had!

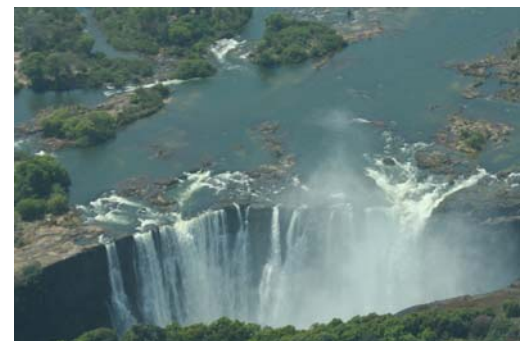


We packed up and headed out to the airstrip, only to find a small herd of giraffe grazing on the front of the runway! Many grabbed cameras for photos. Georgia walked over to me and said, "Wow, giraffe on the runway...that beats an Emu!" (She was reflecting back to our Australian Air Safari in 2002 when an Emu held up landings and everyone had to circle!) The land rovers unloaded and then headed out to herd the giraffes off the runway so that we could depart safely.



Day 8 & 9: We departed the delta region continuing our northeast trek for about 1 hr. 45 min. to Kasane, Botswana to clear immigration. This flight took us up the Linyanti and Chobe rivers, flying low in hopes to spot more animals from the sky. After our immigration stop, we were back in the sky! This leg would take approximately 30 min. and would deliver us, in my opinion, our most incredible flight! We soared at very low levels down the great Zambezi River! It was as exciting as when we flew down the dried

Shashe River when we departed Limpopo, only this river is huge with water flowing at incredible speeds. Again, we spotted hippo, elephant and some pretty big crocs sunning themselves on the banks. Also, during this flight we were cleared by the Livingstone controller to fly over the Victoria Falls! It was absolutely spectacular to see tons and tons of water rushing over the massive cliffs and presented a fantastic photo opportunity! After circling the incredible Victoria Falls, we headed to Livingstone airport to clear customs again. We were now in the Zambia.



Victoria Falls and town of Livingstone was discovered in 1855 by Scottish missionary and explorer, Dr. David Livingstone. He named the magnificent waterfall "Victoria Falls in honor of his reigning monarch, Queen Victoria.



Our accommodations at the [Royal Livingston Resort](#) were lavish and luxurious. We were escorted out onto their beautiful lawn and garden area by a host of the hotel. They explained everything we needed to know about the hotel and covered all activities available during our stay. One piece of information that I laughed at, but didn't take seriously was the warning about the monkeys in the area. We were advised to not just keep our sliding patio doors closed, but locked...more on these cute little nuisances later!

All rooms were large and very attractive, decorated in very upscale African Colonial with a taste of British décor. The patio looked out over the expansive lawn where we enjoyed watching the monkey's running around and climbing through the trees. Having two little ones on our porch gave me a perfect opportunity to test our hotel hosts warnings about the innocent little creatures. I walked to the sliding glass door and watched them become very alert. They glanced quickly at my eyes and then immediately to the center base of the door...back to my eyes...back to the center base of the door. I unlocked the door which made them flinch and become even more alert. Now their eyes were darting faster, back and forth, watching my eyes and the center base of the door. Ever so slowly, I started to open the door...just a crack. They jumped toward the door like a bullet. Of course, I slammed it shut and then witnessed them press their fingers on the glass and try to pull the door open. I locked the door and they both sat with their faces pressed against the glass looking around the room as if they were casing the place...thinking to themselves...if I managed entrance what would I grab immediately and run? They were a hoot to watch and play with!



A few of us gathered at the resort's restaurant for lunch. The service was impeccable and the food was extremely good. And then it was relaxation time! Our activity that evening was to board a river boat and cruise down the Zambezi River for cocktails and appetizers. During the cruise, we saw hippos and gators. The sunset was absolutely phenomenal...I don't think there has been an evening this whole trip where we didn't have spectacular sunsets! After the boat docked, we headed to a local restaurant on the river's edge.



The next day, everyone had different activities planned. Some went on the Elephant rides (Tom & Dawn, Georgia, Beth and Joe); others enjoyed riding around in the bush on Quads (Jim & Barbara), while others relaxed around and hiked to Victoria Falls. Steve and I chose the latter with Bob & Rita, Larry & Anita, and Tom & Barbara. The hike was easy and fascinating...it was quite a sight watching tons and tons of water rushing through the gorge, shooting mist and spray into the air as it plummets over the cliffs.

After lunch at the hotel, some of us grabbed a taxi van and headed into town for some shopping at some popular craft shops, others continued relaxing and some enjoyed a soothing massage. I was with the shopping group became a little nervous when we started back to the hotel. I had planned a sunset micro-light ride over the falls and in route back to the hotel, all traffic came to a halt. We had approximately 25 – 35 elephants decide to cross the road. Elephants have full right of way...have you ever seen what an angry elephant can do to a vehicle? Slowly...very slowly they crossed and I sat there hoping my pick-up at the hotel would wait for me.

They did wait...where else can you use the excuse, "I'm late because we had a herd of elephants crossing the road"?

From our dinner conversation the night before, I knew that Jim Ott was going to book a flight in a micro-light, which sounded very appealing to me. I scheduled Steve and me to take a flight over Victoria Falls at sunset with [Batoka Sky](#), fifteen minutes over the falls and 15 minutes flying low over the terrain searching for animals in the bush. When Steve found out that he couldn't pilot the light piece of aircraft, he opted out, saying he didn't trust a pilot he didn't know in something so small. I was too excited about this first time experience. If I was going to have a first time in a micro-light, what better place than over Victoria Falls and low over the African Bush at Sunset! My pilot and I took to the air. The take off was quick and we gained altitude very fast. After circling the falls twice, we started up the Zambezi River where we witnessed about 20 elephants crossing the river, one directly behind the other. I was told they never walk side by side when crossing a river, always one directly behind the other. Once over the bush, we spotted two White Rhinos that were being protected by the National Park in hopes that they would mate. We also saw herds of zebra, elephants and giraffe. I must admit, when I heard my pilot radio that he was 1/2 mile out for landing, I was a little nervous. I'm used to being in a plane with weight and power and here I was landing in something that I could probably pick up with two hands! The landing was very well done however; I was a little weak kneed when I disembarked!



Once over the bush, we spotted two White Rhinos that were being protected by the National Park in hopes that they would mate. We also saw herds of zebra, elephants and giraffe. I must admit, when I heard my pilot radio that he was 1/2 mile out for landing, I was a little nervous. I'm used to being in a plane with weight and power and here I was landing in something that I could probably pick up with two hands! The landing was very well done however; I was a little weak kneed when I disembarked!

We enjoyed dinner that evening at the Zambezi Sun, a sister hotel within the property along the river. Everyone enjoyed sharing their activities of the day and the food was great! Tomorrow we fly back to Kasane to clear immigration again into Botswana. That means we're heading back toward Johannesburg 😊.

After a fabulous buffet and elegant breakfast at the resort, the group surprised Barbara Glaze with a birthday celebration. The Livingstone staff presented her with a personalized plaque and cake, as well as having a group sing Happy Birthday in their common language; and Rita and Bob presented her with a gift from the group. Today we also observed the anniversary of 9/11; and each of us paid homage, remembering that horrifying day.

We departed for the Livingstone Airport, stopping in route at the Simonga Basic School (1st through 9th grade), to share contributions we had all brought from the U.S. The ratio was surprising...376 students (1/2 are orphans) and only 11 teachers. Upon entering the property, we saw a statue of a girl, which we learned represents their strife for preferential treatment towards females; to help break the chain of youthful marriage and lack of education. We also noticed several hand-painted signs with reference to aids to help educate their young. The children were delighted when we arrived. In an orderly manner, they departed from their classrooms and gathered together to accept our contributions. There were tee-shirts, crayons, paper, magazines, books, personal hygiene supplies and more! The school director, Chester Mufalali, generously gave us a wonderful tour of the school and its library. Again in an orderly manner, the children returned to their classrooms but were allowed to stand at the windows, where we took photographs and video, and then shared with the children. There's nothing more delightful than watching the eyes of a child seeing their photo appear like magic on a digital screen! Some of the kids gathered together outside the classrooms and sang about 10 beautiful bible hymns for us before we departed.

Day 10: After clearing immigration to check out of Zambia, we departed Livingstone, took one more circle over the Victoria Falls and headed for the Simonga Basic School to drop down and do a low fly-by over the school we had just visited. Many of the children were in the dirt soccer field with arms extended up. Each plane tipped their wings from side to side to say good-bye. Hopefully, our visit was an inspiration to a few of them...maybe in the future; we'll have a pilot or two amongst them! From here we headed back down the Zambezi River for Kasane to check back into Botswana.

Our stay tonight will be at the [Chobe Safari Lodge](#) in Botswana. This lodge offered many different options for accommodations. Some chose thatch-roofed chalets, some chose regular rooms with a view, some chose suites and some chose tents. There was a little of everything! Everyone met in the patio area overlooking the Chobe River for cocktails, enjoyed another spectacular sunset and a huge elephant herd sighting along the river.

Short funny story...Dawn and I left the cocktail group to spend some time in the lodge's curio shop and while passing through a garden area, were surprised to witness a woman that worked at the resort having an altercation with a couple of monkeys! The monkeys were involved in a pretty heated fighting match...she took her shoe off and started yelling and slapping her shoe against the palm of her hand. One of the monkeys actually started to stand up to her, but she didn't give up and it finally turned and took off up a tree.

That evening, we dined under the stars, enjoying a wonderful buffet dinner where they served a variety of dishes, including Impala! We bedded down early as tomorrow was going to be a full day of flying!

Day 11: We departed the Chobe Safari and had wheels up around 9:20. This was going to be a lengthy day of flying consisting of 2 long legs! We crossed miles and miles of dry open bush, through the Magadigadi Pans with vistas spanning on forever. Scattered here and there, we spotting small groups of shanty housing out in the middle of no where! Most of this leg, everyone followed the Endless Highway, a straight long and lonely road that stretched out as far as the eye could see. (IFR – I FOLLOW ROADS! ☺). It was along this highway, that Steve almost did a touch and go (just like we had on the Alaskan Highway in July). Ahead in the distance, we saw a truck coming in our direction. Steve's plan was to touch down after passing over the vehicle. We began a decent toward the highway, flying at about 40 feet off the ground. The driver of the truck panicked, probably thinking this plane was having mechanical problems and was attempting to land on the highway. He pulled off to the side of the road way ahead of us which made the touch and go too dangerous so Steve brought the gear up and took higher altitude. Had the truck continued its pace, we would have passed over the top of the vehicle, completed a "touch and go" and been on our way! End result...we had a great thrill, and the truck driver now has an awesome road story to tell!

After 2 hours and 30 minutes of flying, we landed in Francistown to fuel and then started our 2nd leg of the journey to Polokwane, where we would clear immigration and check back into South Africa. We departed Francistown heading southeast, crossing over the Limpopo River again where Beth and Joe spotted a huge flock of flamingos at the water's edge. As soon as they reported the location, everyone circled to catch a glimpse and take photos. It's not very often you have an opportunity to see a wild flock of flamingos!

Soon, we found ourselves in a sparsely populated wilderness area, revered throughout Africa as The Lost World and believed to be a highly spiritual place. High "Grand Canyon" like formations jutted randomly into the sky from the flat desolate landscape around them. Tribal witch doctors are known to climb these gigantic formations to talk to their gods.

We twisted through the gorges and over valleys, still heading southeast. The terrain began to turn into lush, green countryside with mountains and rolling hills with forests of pine and eucalyptus...we had entered South Africa's tropical fruit basket! This ended up being one of the most scenic routes of our entire journey. We continued over spectacular green mountains to our next destination, beautiful Tzaneen, a subtropical paradise, 50 miles east of Polokwane, nestled in the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains.

When we arrived at the Tzaneen airport, we were greeted by the hotel staff with an array of cocktails, which we enjoyed while our bags were being loaded into the van. We had a short transfer to the hotel through the lush forest and up winding roads.



The accommodations at the Coach House were phenomenal! Just as they're website says, "The Coach House offers world-class hospitality in luxurious comfort and scenic tranquility in the friendly ambience of a gracious country estate. Brimming with history, the Coach House is on the site of the original staging post and hotel used by travelers in the feverish gold rush days of the late 19th century. Situated on 560 lush hectares of the Letaba district in Limpopo Province, the hotel nestles atop a spur looking over the verdant Letsitele Valley and the dramatic splendor of the Drakensberg Mountains." They also have an incredible spa and a

Nougat factory on the premises!

Owners, Jane and Guy Matthews entertained us on our first evening with a private party in their beautiful wine cellar. They served wonderful appetizers and the wines were incredible! Our meal was served in the elegant dining room above the cellar and was absolutely delicious!



Day 12 & 13: We awoke in the morning to fresh coffee, tea and orange juice; served on a tray through a little trap door in the wall beside the front door. As we enjoyed our morning beverages from the balcony, we enjoyed a spectacular view of the morning mist hanging low over the rolling hills...perfect climate for growing citrus! What a treat! Although our visit was only a one night stay, 6 of us made arrangements to visit again on the day before our departure to the U.S.

We left for the airport for our next destination, Kruger National Park, South Africa. When we arrived at the airport, we were surprised to find a group of very young children standing outside the tarmac to watch each plane depart. They were so cute, giggling and pointing and showing lots of enthusiasm.



This leg was about one hour and our view from above changed from the green lush hillsides to dry, flat terrain. We were back in "animal game territory"! Soon we spotted the Luvuvhu & Limpopo Rivers, and our 3280 foot, packed dirt airstrip came into view. Each plane landed one after another and taxied off to the side where we shut engines down and unloaded luggage again! Our camp staffs were there to greet us in their Land Rovers with ice chests full of cocktails and cold beverages. Our arrival at Pafuri Camp was very impressive. The staff was lined up at the entrance, waving hello and handed us cool, aromatic face towels

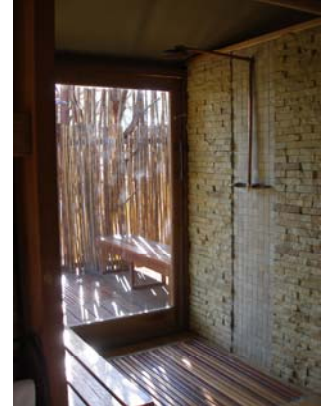
to cool our faces. Sandwiches were then served while we listened to our introductory briefing, advising us of game time departures and meal service.

[Pafuri Camp](#) is a very extraordinary camp! There accommodations consist of 20 tented rooms all overlooking the Luvuvhu River. Yes, they were canvas tents on the outside, and were accessed by raised walkways and decks. The interiors however were lavish! Is this really considered “camping”? I don’t think so! Our beds were adorned with beautifully draped netting (unused by us as mosquito season was



over), and soft goose down comforters and pillows. Our bathroom had double sinks, set in granite and there were two showers! One on the inside with two walls of stone and a huge glass door opening up to the shower on the outside! The outside shower had two walls made with woven tree stems and one completely open side, looking out over the

Luvuvhu River...and no ceiling...we could and did shower with nature! The ambiance and tranquility is almost more than one can put into words! From our private balcony and from the dining area, we enjoyed watching Impala, Bushbuck, Nyala, Gazelle, Elephant and Baboons grazing peacefully along the shore line.



Our game drives that took place early morning about 6:00AM (with fire pit a flame in the dining area); and afternoons at 4:30PM (which included our daily “sundowner” cocktail time), our guide educated us about the history of the Pafuri Region, ancestral home of the Makuleke people. It’s location is in the northern section of Kruger National Park, positioned between the Limpopo and the Luvuvhu Rivers. This area is known for its high density of general game, the Nyala, Impala, Kudu, Baboon, Waterbuck, and Warthog. The vegetation was incredible, from the Yellow Fever Trees and Stink Weed, to the fascinating and huge Baobab trees with trunks 6 ft. round! The topography was stunning...mountains, deep gorges and open savannah grasslands.

The famous Crook's Corner is also located in this region as well. Crook’s Corner is where the Limpopo and Luvuvhu rivers and three countries, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique, meet; and where illegal smuggling took place between the countries years ago. As we stood upon the bank of the river to view Crook’s Corner, we had a close encounters with as many as 12 hippopotamus’ enjoying a leisure time in the river! During the drive, we came upon elephant and many different species of birds. One bird in particular was called the Grey Go Away Bird; which had a frilly head and actually gave out a call that sounded like the words “go away”. Our guide told us that these birds actually work together with the Impala’s, Gazelle, Bushbuck, Nyala, and other ground animals, alerting them of predators approaching with their call “go away”.

On our last days drive, we experienced an absolutely incredible experience! On the early morning drive, away in the distance in the savannah grasslands, we spotted a group of lions nestled under some trees. Binoculars had to be used to see them. That evening, we drove slowly toward the area where we had sighted the lions that morning. Perfect timing! They had started moving across the grassland...they were on a hunt! Our guide added a spot light from time to time so that we could watch their movement and watch the cubs play with each other. Soon we lost vision of these incredible beasts, but continued driving slowly...very slowly... down the road that separated the grasslands from the more dense wooded area. Our guide kept his light moving and watched everything that moved! To our surprise, we witnessed three females and five cubs as they crossed the road, on a hunt for tonight’s main course! What an experience! You don’t see that everyday!

The staff of Pafuri camp was exceptionally friendly, educated and very courteous. And the food...absolutely phenomenal!! And one extra note here, Tom Sather, took two staff members who had never flown before, up in the plane for an aerial view of Pafuri! They truly enjoyed the experience!

Day 14: Sadly, we had to accept the fact that our adventure was almost over. Today was the day when our group would say our good-bys to each other. We departed Pafuri, all going in different directions. Bob & Rita Hecock and Larry & Anita Carrillo flew back to Johannesburg, spend the night and head back to the U.S. Bill Zander & George McCaffrey headed to another tent camp...a very exquisite camp where Angelina and Brad Pitt have been known to hide! Beth Marx & Joe King headed back to Johannesburg as well, however, they caught a flight to Rwanda where they would enjoy a few extra days in Africa, trekking with the gorillas...(I wanted to jump into their suitcase)! Tom & Barbara Glaze also stayed some additional time in Africa and when they arrived in Johannesburg, they flew back out to beautiful Cape Town...(I would have liked to jump into their suitcase too)! Jim & Barbara Ott, Tom & Dawn Sather, and Steve and I headed back to Tzaneen to enjoy one more night at the beautiful Coach House.

Day 15: After a relaxing evening, we departed the Coach House and headed back out to the Tzaneen Airport. This was the last leg of our journey and in 1 hour and 50 minutes, we'd be landing at Wonderboom Airport in Johannesburg.

We emptied out the planes, turned in the keys at the flight school and were transported to the Rosebank Hotel. Our guide and African Aero Safari owner Dave and his wife, Kitty had sent out an invitation to everyone remaining in Johannesburg, inviting us to their home for cocktails and appetizers. Their home was very beautiful, warm and inviting. After enjoying some time at their home, we all ventured out for our last meal together. The evening was thoroughly enjoyed by all!

Day 16: Today was spent doing some leisurely, last minute shopping at a local African Flea Market and relaxing. Our departure time from Johannesburg Airport was 9:15...this would be the beginning of a very, very long flight (total hours, door to door was 35 hours)! Almost everyone sat in "Traveler Plus" seats which gave us a little more leg room than in the "Cattle Car" seats; however, one couple enjoyed "Business Class" the whole way. Here is what Dawn Sather shared with me about their long flight home.

"Tom and I enjoyed a lovely dinner beginning with bubbly French champagne and fresh cut berries, served tableside from a white-cloth covered wheeling cart. The colors were magnificent among the various fresh fruits. This opening course was followed by a 4-course dinner on Wedgwood china and was paired perfectly with a very nice imported 80's red wine - and plenty of it, I might add. The meal culminated with desserts - hot fudge sundaes or bananas foster, and a cheese course consisting of entirely imported cheeses. My goodness, even a Velveeta cheese would have been something imported on this flight! Port was poured and the combination of the cheeses and the port created a sensation in the mouth neither of us will forget for a long time. I'll have to ask Kathi if she or Steve had anything like this. Well, as if there could possibly be more but, there was. There were showings of a couple new-released movies on stereo surround sound and, then we turned over for a leisurely slumber. I woke and pulled up the moving map at some point and saw we were somewhere over the Sahara Desert."

Am I jealous you ask? Of course...okay, maybe just a little bit ☺ Actually, I'd like to extend a special thank you to Dawn Sather for her comprehensive & detailed journaling. Without her sharing, this article would only tell a quarter of the story!

We're home now and back into our grind. Writing this article has done nothing but bring back magnificent memories of an unforgettable air safari! What more could pilots ask for... *1700 nautical miles; 21 hours behind the yolk, in absolutely perfect weather conditions, flying over some of the most fascinating landscape and enjoying animal sightings at 250 ft!*

Here is a memory shared by PBS members Beth Marx and Joe King reflecting on their experience in Africa.

"A flying experience of a lifetime! From South African pilot validation to streaming take-offs and stacked landings, to treetop flying in Botswana and Zambia over herds of elephant, cape buffalo, giraffe, zebra and hippo, down river beds two aircraft abreast, over flamingoes by the hundreds, around mesas at Lost World, to Victoria Falls, interspersed with up-close ground game drives at luxury lodges and tent camps. All this with a great group of guys and gals. A special thanks to our esteemed leader Bob Hecoeks, who beyond the call, even pushed our stuck 4-wheeler from an African bog."

I'd like to extend a very special thank you to Bob Hecock, who thought up, researched and planned this phenomenal excursion! Fly-ins are very time consuming, but air safaris take the cake when it comes to the amount of time and effort they consume. Hats off to you Bob for suggesting an air safari to Africa; and actually making this dream, a reality to all of us!