

*South Africa's secret places*

# Drakensburg, Wild Coast and Karoo Flying Safari

**AS A KEEN PILOT AND GUIDE** on our commercial 'Group Escorted Self-Pilot Flying Safaris' for our international aviators, I figured there had to be room for something more affordable and home-grown for us local-joker 'wildebeest' pilots.

South Africa offers so many places both wonderful to fly to and with great ground experiences. There are dozens of hideaways with their own airstrips, or strips nearby. Many of us talk and hear about them, but never quite get there. We are blessed with good weather as a rule and many options to change our routes to remain VMC. The flying topography is without peer and activities on the ground are varied. I took some time off to work out a scouting tour.

In-depth research opened up the many possibilities and I set up the brief. Parameters included: the trip concept and execution of the routing and legs had to be attractive to the 'passengers' (we all know how our partners avoid flying 'cos they don't feel comfortable in small aeries); overnight accommodation to be basic, clean and inexpensive; meeting interesting people and activities whenever we landed (also important to our not-so-happy-flying partners); landing within walking distance of our accommodation, or at worst a short drive; good security for the aircraft overnight; backup routes for bad weather; minimal ATC reporting; maximum chat between crews; legs short enough for a 70kt

cruise, three hours endurance machine; no upper limit on speed, so anyone can join in; not be in any hurry to get to the next place fast; and above all, a sense of adventure, fun and camaraderie in a group.

Well, our just-completed April 22 - 27 trip seemed to achieve all it set out to do. A bevy of different types including rag-and-tube, composite and 'tin', set off from home airfields on the afternoon of Thursday, April 22. First stop was the sleepy hamlet of Wakkerstroom in the foothills of the Drakensburg mountains near Volksrust. Arriving at the informal airstrip on the top of a hill, we secured the aeroplanes and headed for the village. Our hosts, Weavers Nest Lodge is a jewel operated by Irishman Mark Deveney - our charming host who was infinitely more knowledgeable on the local area than all the other locals combined! Wakkerstroom's environs are scenically spectacular and this is popular as SA's largest wetlands (read prolific birding) outside of St. Lucia, and a new 'find' for Jo'burgers wanting a weekend getaway in tranquillity. The valley is also father to incredible history, not only about the pioneering days of establishing railways and routes from Durban to the Witwatersrand, but prior conflict between Boer and Pommie (Majuba etc) and the Zulus and their numerous enemies of yesteryear. Between casually delivered compelling local legend and Irish jokes, Mark alone makes this

stopover memorable - and tops it with the delicious cuisine he personally oversees.

We awoke next morning to mist and broken cloud covering the tops of the hills. A few weather calls to friends in the Dundee and Pietermaritzburg area (note we didn't use the weather services!) assured us it was burning off and our first aircraft departed (a 70kt cruise Taylorcraft). After a short look around the wonderfully restored buildings in the village the rest of us fired up and headed for Ladysmith, a refuelling point. The local Flying Club appeared en masse to meet and refuel us - an insight into just how keen our local aviator support system is. Onward to Margate at low level over the rolling green hills descending from the Drakensburg massif to our right. At Margate our group swelled to six aeroplanes and after sampling the prescribed wild Indian curry at the Margate airport restaurant we set off down the Wild Coast. The chat frequency is alive as the 'foreign' pilots query the 'local' pilots on the amazing hide-aways and lodges, rivers, waterfalls, airstrips along the way. One of our group even missed Port St. Johns, so taken was he with watching the 'surfing' cattle on the beaches below! And what a memorable journey, ending on the immaculately groomed airfield at Wavecrest Lodge. Conrad, the owner, has always kept his own plane there, so knows the needs of aviators to a tee. We park off the grass runway and, watched suspiciously by the



*Airvan was quickly called the 'breadvan' and put to good use carrying luggage*



*Nick and Phillipa Wilson's brilliant Wavecrest West hostelry on the airfield itself!*

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By Dave van der Spuy



*Gariep now becoming popular with pilots*

local cows, amble off to the nearby lodge – a cluster of rondawels and cottages right on the water's edge. Crashing breakers combined with a beautiful estuary thick with birdlife is our treat as we take in tea, beer and other beverages on the deck. The lodge is a wonderful place to relax and deserves more than the one night we had scheduled.

Comments by some of our flyers...

Gerry in Husky: "I've re-discovered my country and made friends in places where I never had friends before"

Jeff in Supercub: "I'm tired of telling Claus to bear left. Claus, please read your map!"

Maggie in Katana: "Every flight and every place we have stayed at seems, unbelievably, better than the last"

Jack in Taylorcraft: "Why do I have to wear this silly flying suit with badges and things? I'm not even a pilot!"

Peter in GA-8: "Overhead somewhere, going nowhere. Anyone out there?"

Harry in Grumman: "Count us in for the next trip – we wouldn't miss it for the world!!"

With the arrival of a brand-new GA-8 Airvan we are at seven aeries; all are agog at seeing something 'out-of-the-box' and so different. Nicknamed the "breadvan" it became our regular depository for all our luggage as it is so much easier to pack than trying to shoehorn our katunda into our little aircraft – Peter was only too happy as he was trying to get the machine to MTOW (he converted only the previous day!).

After a great dinner and overnight to the sound of the sea, the early risers headed off dawn-patrolling. Breakfast and we're off to our next fuel stop, Port Alfred. A friendly FAEL ATC shoos us through his coastal airspace and we marvel at looking down on those mammoth people-carriers from our little 'gnats'. In our pre-take-off briefing I had cautioned our group to expedite departure, as we would doubtless meet a line-up of airplanes waiting for fuel at 43 Airschool. Sure enough the apron is busier than ever. Superb weather and a Saturday combine to call-out all the pupil pilots and we have a hard time refuelling seven aeries and departing by 11h00!!

Airborne again we head off for Shamwari Game Reserve. But now something is different. Against all odds we had wonderful tailwinds for the last two days. The Wind-God is back from holiday and realised his mistake! He devilishly dialled in headwinds, not of ten, but thirty knots – and – right on the nose! The little Taylorcraft





*Dave's Christen Husky at Richmond*



was stretched to its limits, measuring 44 kts groundspeed at times! Landing at Shamwari, we are treated to a game drive and super luncheon at their Eagles Crag Lodge – right at the top end of service, accommodation and game lodges in Southern Africa. The accommodation we tour through are high-end (Tiger Woods recently stayed there) and without peer, extremely private and nestle in the thick bush. Each has its own plunge pool, outlook bath, aircon and every other mod con conceivable. Well, bully for that, but WE are not staying over tonight (but promise to tell our well-heeled friends)!!

We take a look at Longlee Manor, another Shamwari lodging option. As an old farmhouse and outbuildings it has been beautifully restored and converted to the upmarket lodge it now is. As we sit under a huge peppertree drinking refreshments, a large herd of elephant cruise by. Later we are spoilt by good sightings of cervical cat and giraffe. So all is not lost and even the lesser fortunate can peek into the highlife!!

We depart again (after topping up the Taylorcraft) for the Great Karoo. Our routing takes us over Graaff Reniet and the stark Sneeuberg Mountains. The headwind is stronger than ever and unrelenting – along with the sun, now directly in our faces. Our group soldiers on and we spend the time chatting about how long it's taking to get to that next point – finding our group in the air and generally wishing we were already there. Late afternoon and after crossing the main Johannesburg-Cape Town highway just south-west of Richmond, we at last spot the triangular landing field at Victoria West. Landing directly into the sun we taxi up to the waiting reception committee – Dr. Johan Lochner, John J. Rabie and others at the hangar. As we wearily step out, a cold beer

is pressed into our hands and the hospitality of this tiny dorp and its intense aviation community encompasses us. The good doctor owns a variety of airplanes including a Boeing Stearman, and yes, there it is in the hangar. Other locals have their taildraggers and microlights parked around and we are treated to true Karoo hospitality. After heading off to our varying accommodation in self-catering, B+B and private houses, we return to a feast at the local golf club, meet lots of Victoria-Westeners and generally have a grand time.

This is wild, wide-open country. The farms are huge along with the general friendliness of the local folk. We are regaled with stories of the local area, questioned on our lives in the big smoke (do we really live there?) and have immediate affinity with total strangers. It dawns on us that this is what our flying trip is about! It makes it all

worthwhile – rapport and identity with strangers from a far-off place.

After a much needed rest, the Karoo dawn breaks through crystal clear air. We meet at 07h00, refuel from drums organised by our hosts and head off to a secret venue for onbyt. Melton Wold is our first stop on the flying rally we have now embarked upon. They offer a runway, great breakfast, olde-worlde lodgings and more: Established in 1859 as a coaching station by an enterprising British 'trekker', you will find dinosaur and plant fossils, do hikes through the hills, horseriding, sheepmustering and more.

Bolstered by a hearty Karoo boerekos breakfast, we brief for the rest of our rally route. We have to follow a course, creatively re-name prominent mountain peaks along the way (remarkably reminiscent of parts of the female anatomy!), identify photos we have been given and end with a spot landing. What fun and everyone did their thing, got creative, got lost, missed the markers and landed in the wrong places! Now another airplane, a Cessna 185, joins us from Stellenbosch and after an impromptu prizegiving with prizes of dried biltong etc sponsored by the locals we set course for Beaufort West. A super, low level late afternoon flight found us alighting at the Flight Deck. This establishment consists of the original terminal building (from the days of DC3 schedule flights) having been converted into a B+B by enterprising Zimbabweans Nick and Phillipa Wilson. Clean as a whistle, the rooms are neat, tidy and comfortable. The erstwhile control tower is now the pub and lookout point; many a tale was told there that evening. Nick cooked up a storm with absolutely no domestic staff assistance, and we drank, eat and sang into the night.

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The dawn patrol was up early next morning to photograph the orange hills in the breaking sunlight. Then after refuelling (proper underground bowser), we bade Nick farewell and headed off in the general direction of Gariep. Now well into our flying pattern we fly in loose formation along the remote and isolated Karoo valleys. Hidden gems unfold as we fly past oases of farms nestling on rivers and hilltops and heralded by the brilliant autumn colours of the tall poplars. Another revelation as we realise that this is a new and compelling experience; close to home, close to our trekking heritage. We throttle back in respect of the peace and tranquillity below as the scenes unfold around our slow-moving machine. On an impulse, we turn left and land at Richmond strip. Out of nowhere a couple of friendly locals emerge from the Karoo scrub. Shortly after, a police van races across the dusty runways, concerned that we have a problem with the goats and small ruts in the runway surface. "Too late!" we cried, and bond with them before heading off again into the sunrise. Passing Colesburg, we spy magnificent horse-stud farms (was that one Gary Player's??).

Landing at the big paved Gariep (formerly Hendrik Verwoerd) runway, we are met by friendly refuelling folk. There is even a hangar for some of our rag-and-tubes to overnight in! The local doctor's Mooney is the only other occupant and we are soon exploring Gariep's dam wall and environs. A possible booze-cruise does not materialise due to the short notice (so what's wrong with an hour's notice, us 'big-smoker's ask?).

We check into the Gariep hotel, surprising us with its neat upkeep, friendly, efficient staff, wonderful-view-over-the-dam

rooms and tasty food. Good wine too. Another Karoo gem, as yet undiscovered. The local doctor here attends to one of our team that's got a violent, but short-lived-after-the-drugs tummy bug.

The last morning's breakfast is festive and chatty. We are preparing for a formation photo-session over the water. Jeff and I brief the others on the do's and don'ts of this exercise. In short order we are airborne into the pristine Free State air. The breadvan is our photoship now, and we battle to align aeroplanes with cruise speeds between 70 and 120kts. Afterward we all peel off for our respective home airfields.

The original four aircraft from the reef area now head up the Caledon River low level, lazing in the sunlight and vistas that continuously unfold. Soon we are at Wepener, and turning left for a flight up the Lesotho border. The river twists and turns impossibly and we pass Ficksburg, Clarens and finally land at Bethlehem for a last fuel-up. Friendly folk here too and a great steak sandwich; another place to put on the list.

Approaching Vereeniging we are met by a virtual wall of smog. So bad that it stings eyes and throats and threatens the start of a headache. Do we live in this stuff? Better do some more Wildebeest Wings Safaris far away in the clear air of this wonderful country.

Everyone was ecstatic about the whole 'event'. All are ready for the next one – freedom of flying like we imagine it was in the first half of the 20th Century!

Watch this space for more info, bookmark [www.aerosafari.com/wildebeest](http://www.aerosafari.com/wildebeest), email Dave on [explore@global.co.za](mailto:explore@global.co.za) or fax him on 011 462 4547 if you want to be on the list for the next flyaway – scheduled for late September 2004.