

# Secret Places

## The 'Great Rivers, Pans and Garden Route' Flying Safari

By Dave Van der Spuy

**LAST TIME AROUND,** I wrote about our Wildebeest Wings "Karoo & Wild Coast" aerial voyage of discovery. We found a host of new places to fly to and documented the trip in the June issue of SA Flyer.

Continuing the search for new venues to expand our local flying options I had noted the confluence of the Vaal and Orange Rivers promised more than just that...and so the 'Great Rivers' Flying Safari was conceived.

My 'Wildebeest Wings' philosophy remains that the flying must be good for the 'passengers'. have short flying legs, interesting and inexpensive ground stops, little ATC and handle airplanes cruising anything from 70 knots upwards. It must be lots of fun with plenty of diversity. Lastly, you must not be in a hurry to get there – after all, flying takes time!

Judging from the enthusiastic comments from the participants, our September 23- 29 Wildebeest Wings Flying Safari appears to have transcended expectations in every respect.

### Day one – we sally forth

September 23 heralded 11 airplanes setting off from their respective home bases for our rendezvous point near Douglas (west of Kimberley). The line-up on the farmer's airstrip was impressive; experimental vied with certified, rag-and-tube with regular tin, taildraggers with sissy-wheelers, two seaters with composites and utility – it was all there. The aeries came in from all points and as far afield as Harare, Stellenbosch and White River.

The longhaulers arrived later than expected due to mishaps en-route; one aerie argued with a tree on a runway, another had an alternator that had got out of bed on the wrong side that morning. Anton van Wyk, the farmer on whose strip we landed, kindly ferried the lot of us to the 'DaRiva' riverboat. Moored off the grassy banks of the Vaal River she certainly looked inviting with a host of the early arrivals egging us on down to the water's edge for boarding and



The Houseboat on the Vaal River - it sleeps ten people in great comfort.



Dave Van der Spuy repairs his twelfth puncture at Happy Valley.



Etienne Oosthuizen and friends discussing the rally route at Carnarvon.

refreshments. Cozy and comfortable with cabins at water level and entertainment on the upper deck, she easily housed our group of 24, the crew and our caterers. Soon we were on our way, sedately cruising in perfect weather and listening to the knowledgeable tones of Danie, the resident winemaker at the Douglas winery. Danie had brought a super range of locally made wines for tasting. After getting the gears on tasting, hitherto strangers were lifelong friends. A great meal materialised and the music pumped; what a kickoff! The boat finally moored and we all went off to bed in our allocated cabins or in the adjacent riverhouse under the willow trees. The riverboat is an excellent weekend breakaway and Anton will always allow

aviators to land on his farm – by prior arrangement.

### The pans and the Groot Karoo

After breakfast, the group headed off for the airfield. En-route we collected some mogas for the Kitfox and then briefed for the morning's flight. Secret co-ordinates were given out – so named as even after this they seemed to remain secret to some of the pilots! The plan was to fly over the Great Rivers' confluence, down the twisty Orange River, passing Prieska on the right. Then the real challenge began; identify and land on a pan (dry, thankfully) in the middle of nowhere. With the slower aeries off first we



*Air-to-air session off Tsitsikama coast.*



*A happy Maggie and Charles Wooler in their Katana at Happy Valley.*



*Gerrit ten-Siethoff and Bob Griffiths in their Robin HR120 at Victoria West before their cylinder problem.*

bumbled along the river, marvelling at its greenbelt contrasting so strongly with the arid dryness only a few hundred meters away. Sometime later Prieska arrived and then the vast expanse of the Northern Cape Karoo. A parched land stretched before us. At 500 agl we passed over derelict farmhouses stripped of their roofs, buried

dreams of long-forgotten inhabitants.

Listening out I am amused to hear the lead airplane at the coordinates (apparently), but unable to find a runway! The Lyc 360 drones the minutes away and I listen in anticipation as more airplanes mill around in confusion and advise they are flying over and around some large dry pans. Sure

enough someone suddenly spots a camouflaged Cessna 185 on the surface of an equally camouflaged mud pan. Dried and cracked to perfection, this is the perfect match and very difficult to see. True to form, our ground crew (Johan from Vic West and John from Carnarvon), have marked out a 'runway numbers' with a can of white spraypaint. They assure us by handheld that the surface is hard and we approach through the mirage. Soon we are all standing about bemused at landing upon so strange a surface and in such a remote place. Some pilots have never landed on anything except paved surfaces; even for the 'bush' pilots, this is a new experience. A billy has been made on an open fire and we enjoy rugs, coffee and tea off the back of a bakkie.

The 'runway' is so wide, three of us take off abreast, and now we head on low level for Carnarvon, first beating up on the Vanwyksvlei Saturday morning agricultural 'show' to the joy of the spectators - certainly this was not in the programme!

Arriving at Carnarvon, we are met by the local flying club fraternity, very active and totally unexpected in this part of the world. They lay on a fantastic lunch in a hangar; we meet lots of townfolk and farmers who have come out to see the 'airshow' and all the colour of our planes against the drab scrub backdrop.

Later Johan briefs the pilots and crew for the air rally. We are to head along the road for Loxton where the rally commences, then follow a course according to the rilly information sheet, identify photographs, estimate runway lengths from the air and finally compete in the spot landing in

Victoria West. Johan hands out the photos, rally instructions and map.

We set off in a stiff breeze. My five year old daughter decides to go to sleep just as I need the extra set of eyes, which are in any event a lot better than papa's. Airplanes and large birds compete for airspace as we pass stark rock formations, wave at wondering farmers and generally make a nuisance of ourselves in a sea of nothingness. At Vic West we unsuccessfully land on the line and stop at a large, rusty hangar in the veldt. The doors are open and we peer inside – it is occupied by Johan's pristine Stearman, a Super Cruiser, various microlights and tractors. Another hangar sports the fuel supply in drums and is home to the local Cessna 185 and itinerant rats. After wedging our airplanes into the hangars, we head off for our accommodation arranged by Johan in B+B's; some stay with John Rabie, a local gentleman farmer. The Golf Club is our dinner venue and we congratulate ourselves on getting the better of the cold front which has now passed east of Caledon, leaving behind clear air for the next five days.

### ***Weather-locked***

I awoke with a start before dawn; my senses told me all was not well. Having spent my youth enduring Cape winters, my

rasty memory cells recognise continuous rain on the tin roof. In the cold grey of dawn I peer out at a 100 foot ceiling with clag to the deck in places. Pumping wind. Is this a bad dream? As organiser, only I know how much we have to do today; refuelling of five airplanes, then flyaway to a secret venue for breakfast, rally prizegiving there, then heading on to see the wild flowers near Niewoudville, on to another secret lunch venue in the Tangua River valley; finally landing near Matjiesfontein and overnighing on a private game reserve in cottages specially reserved for us.

With foreboding I start to make the calls – cancelling arrangements as far ahead as I dare. MET says it might clear toward lunchtime. We wait it out. With help from a flying colleague, I fix five punctures on my tail wheel from dubbeltjies picked up while taxiing yesterday. The Vic Westers are telling me to cancel and stay – it won't let up they say. I hold out, fielding calls from our flyers every few minutes wanting an update on the weather. Eventually I capitulate, calling ahead to advise that we will not be arriving for the overnight. Strangely enough everyone seems relieved that we are not flying (they probably thought I would try to push them through under the clag!) and we spend the afternoon watching rugby and



*Secret beach landing near Plettenberg Bay. Left to right is Harry Tucker in his famous pink pants, Etienne Oosthuizen and Saskia and Dave van der Spuy with Dave's Christen Husky,*



*Happy Valley bed and breakfast near Greyton in the Cape.*

cricket. That evening we frequent the local Spur-look-alike and hold our prizegiving there. Dave and Herman in the B33 are first, Etienne and Harry in the Kitfox second and Bev and Japie in the Jabiru third. The rest of us wonder how we did so badly and drink another beer!

### ***Maintenance with a bang!***

Sunday we are all rearing to go. Propellers spin as engines kick to life and the comfortable purr of aero engines surprises the dawn. In the pre-flight briefing, some will land at Beaufort West for fuel, others at Nadini near De Doorns for tea and still others at Tankwa for a pitstop. Finally all at Worcester for fuel before heading for Happy Valley, east of Greyton. None of the routes are direct – all low level, down valleys and over mountain ‘neks’. Just as we are pushing out, one of the airplanes needs some en-route maintenance. The pilot piles his good woman into Peter’s Airvan and an engineer diverts from church to drive 50 km to assist us with some TIG welding – this could only ever happen in the Karoo! We



*RY-6 pilot, Trevor Davis with Bob Griffiths and Gerrit ten-Sietoff celebrate at Weesbaal,*

head off down the valleys, flying formation and having fun. After a short pitstop to meet our would-be hosts at Matjiesfontein, we descend into the De Doorns valley arriving finally at Worcester where the two Huskys are looked at with longing by the glider tug-pilot. “How long are you staying” he asks hopefully? We head off down the Teewaterskloof valley, finding more secret places, beautiful farm homesteads, tended vineyards and orchards in full blossom. Flying so low that the fragrance tickles our senses we again marvel at the beautiful



*Etienne Oosthuizen and Harry Tucker's Kitfox on landing at Van Wyk's Vlei, Northern Cape.*

country we live in and at being able to fly in such unrestricted environments.

Sneaking into Happy Valley we finally pop over the rise to beat up the assembled group laying about on the grass. Happy Valley is a privately owned B+B, some 10km east of Greyton and with a superb grass runway right there. The ideal place to stop over for a night, go horse riding or visit the town of Greyton. Hosts Neville and Marianne Wright are delightful and helpful in every way.

Soon we're on our way to Hermanus.

Rumour has it the whales are out in force and we want an aerial view. We hit the coast at Bot River and turn left into a strong headwind. Never mind, there is lots to see along the coastline. Sure enough the whales are showing off. We observe these magnificent creatures as no landlubber ever can. There seem to be more around every headland. We pass by the southernmost tip of Africa and continue, sometimes only a few feet above the deserted beaches. Whales are even in the surf! Overberg Military Base is asleep this Sunday afternoon, and we fly past remote seaside cottages built in stone, wondering which lucky souls have the keys! Our destination today is Vleesbaai, where an aviator friend who lives there has arranged self-catering accommodation in beach houses. Tannah has provided food and drink for an army and we sample his smoked snoek and huge T-bones, overlooking the crashing breakers.

Unfortunately upon landing, Bob has found a couple of nuts and studs "missing" on a cylinder base. No more flying for the Robin - and they were lucky to make it, we conclude.

### ***Photoship and formations***

It's Monday and while people have to work, we depart in super weather for our Garden Route flight. The plan now is to do some good aerial and formation photography, both on video and stills. We practise with the Airvan as cameraship. After a wonderful flight we land at Plett for refuelling. On takeoff, we position for six planes in formation along the Tsitsikamma cliffs. I coax the aeries into position, the air is smooth and we get some great shots. Ahead, Etienne calls for a beach landing. I go into behind him and we shriek for joy on the remote and secluded beach, run into the sea in a place where few people have ever set foot!

Continuing onwards, we land at a game farm near Grahamstown. Amakala Game Reserve transfers us to Leeuwenbosch Lodge for a welcome and very tasty lunch. En-route we spy plains game, warthog, wildebeest and Zebra. Leeuwenbosch offers an ideal stopover for aviators, will collect you from the airfield and host you. They also have a self-catering bush lodge overlooking a huge plain teeming with game.

### ***Airstrip challenge!***

#### **Comments by some of our group**

<i>Bev in Jabiru @ Addo</i>	<i>I didn't have time to be nervous – the adrenalin rush came after we shut down!</i>
<i>Chris in C172 @ Hitzenheim</i>	<i>Where the hell are we now – those co-ordinates are wrong!</i>
<i>Peter in Airvan @ any wide runway</i>	<i>Why are there so many trees on this runway</i>
<i>Charles in Katana @ Victoria West</i>	<i>SOS – I'm out of fuel – again</i>
<i>Stefan in Husky everywhere</i>	<i>Wragtig, dis mooi. Ons is pôle vir lewe</i>
<i>Herman in B33 @ most places</i>	<i>The diversity of this trip is incredible – how do you do it?</i>
<i>Trevor in RV6 @ Fort Beaufort</i>	<i>I think we need more height to get over these mountains....?</i>
<i>Emile in B23 on Sunday morning</i>	<i>Don't lose my address for the next one!</i>
<i>Gerrit in Robin on the whole trip</i>	<i>Fantastic!</i>
<i>Dave in B33 @ Vanwyksvllei</i>	<i>That pan landing was a first for me! I thoroughly enjoyed it all.</i>



*Parked at Sandstone Farm near Ficksburg in the Free State. Rally goes all went for a train ride.*

The aeries sleep tonight at Addo Elephant-Back Safaris airstrip. Mark Andrews, the owner, had given us coordinates. Flying point up a narrow valley I can scarcely believe that the runway is only a mile away and yet I still cannot see it. I flash over a strip of green, whipping my head around to get the gist of it. He has said land uphill, NOT downhill and now I see why. The strip is not for the fainthearted with an approach down the opposite side of the valley, over hills and powerlines. Then you descend steeply in a buse-to-final over equally steeply sinking ground, level out momentarily and start to fly UP to meet the rising ground of the off-camber runway in a quartering tailwind. This is an experience and a challenge to any aviator. One good thing is no-one can see you botch up because you touch down on the other side of a hill!

We all land safely and even Charles does not get lost this time. Now we're off to the Zuurberg Mountain Inn. Established in 1861, it is on the old coach trail over the Zuurberg. We wonder at the roadmakers of yesteryear and how they managed to twist and turn their route over these hills. The Inn has been revamped and is comfortable with thatched suites, good public areas with raging log fires, a cosy bar and great food. Activities include hikes and horse trails into the nearby Addo National park.

### ***Of Elephants and aeroplanes***

Next morning everyone is keen for the elephant interaction and we head for the boma. Soon the handlers have brought along their great charges and they are eating from our hands! You've got to be careful not to be stepped upon! We walk up the runway with the gentle giants, photographing them next to our dainty flying machines. "Please don't sit down here," breathes Bev silently as Mukwa curiously eye-balls her Jabiru.

Scotia Game Reserve is our lunch stop. The immaculate grass runway is 100 m from thatched lodgings nestling in the bush. Although lodging is not their main activity, they will offer aviators special rates. The dense bush is alive with birds and plenty of game, including free ranging lions. After lunch we depart again, some of us for Hitgeheim Farm, others directly for Queenstown. Hitgeheim is on a ridge overlooking the Sundays River valley, thick with citrus trees and manicured lands. The farm boasts a cross runway and you can walk to lodgings overlooking the valley.



*Addo Elephant-Back Safari's own airstrip near Addo National park near Zuurberg in the Eastern Cape. The strip requires some skill to get into despite being a lengthy single-direction runway.*



Aircraft sales, Air charters, Pilot training, Aircraft management & contracts

They will cater for you or you can self-cater. Buffalo breeding and farming are the local activities here.

On arrival at Queenstown, we are hosted to a great evening by the local flying club, who are all keen to hear of our travels. We overnight courtesy of locals in their homes – what a great bunch of truly hospitable folk.

### ***Steamtrain ride***

Today we bid our sad farewells to the others and head off for Aliwal North, Wepener and Ficksburg for lunch. We land on Sandstone Farm, a huge commercial wheat and grain farm bordering Lesotho. William Mole owns the largest private narrow gauge railway in the world, complete with working steam-engine train that collects our astounded group from the runway! We tjoek-tjoek, clickety-clack and toot-toot along the tracks and are treated to a wonderful lunch in restored, period-

architecture buildings. Then we are led off to what looks like huge airplane hangars – putting the largest Lanseria hangars to shame! Staring aghast at the sights before us we contemplate rows and rows of fully restored, operating steam tractors. Another vast building houses restored trucks and army vehicles, complete with cannon. Another is used for doing the restoring work. Yet another as a full workshop servicing the steam trains, with teams of workmen and engineers in attendance. We pass gangs of workmen repairing railway tracks and are told how these amazing steam machines are used to actually harvest the corn on the farm, till the fields and the like. In a timewarp, we are awed by one man's mission, purpose and tenacity in restoring and preserving our heritage.

This farm is supposedly scheduled for re-distribution. Clearly this is one that should be set aside as a model, a shining example of vision for posterity. To 'give' this away, to change it in any way, would be a travesty. Sandstone Farm also boasts some rooms in which aviators can sleep over and a manicured, lawned camping area with modern ablution facilities for the camping types. All by special prior arrangement only.

Finally we head off for home pastures, feeling as though we had just spent three weeks instead of only six days on this voyage of discovery. Our enduring thought – can this get any better?

For information on costs etc., please go to fly-away destinations on our site at [www.saflyermag.co.za](http://www.saflyermag.co.za) or [www.aerosafari.com/wildebeest](http://www.aerosafari.com/wildebeest)