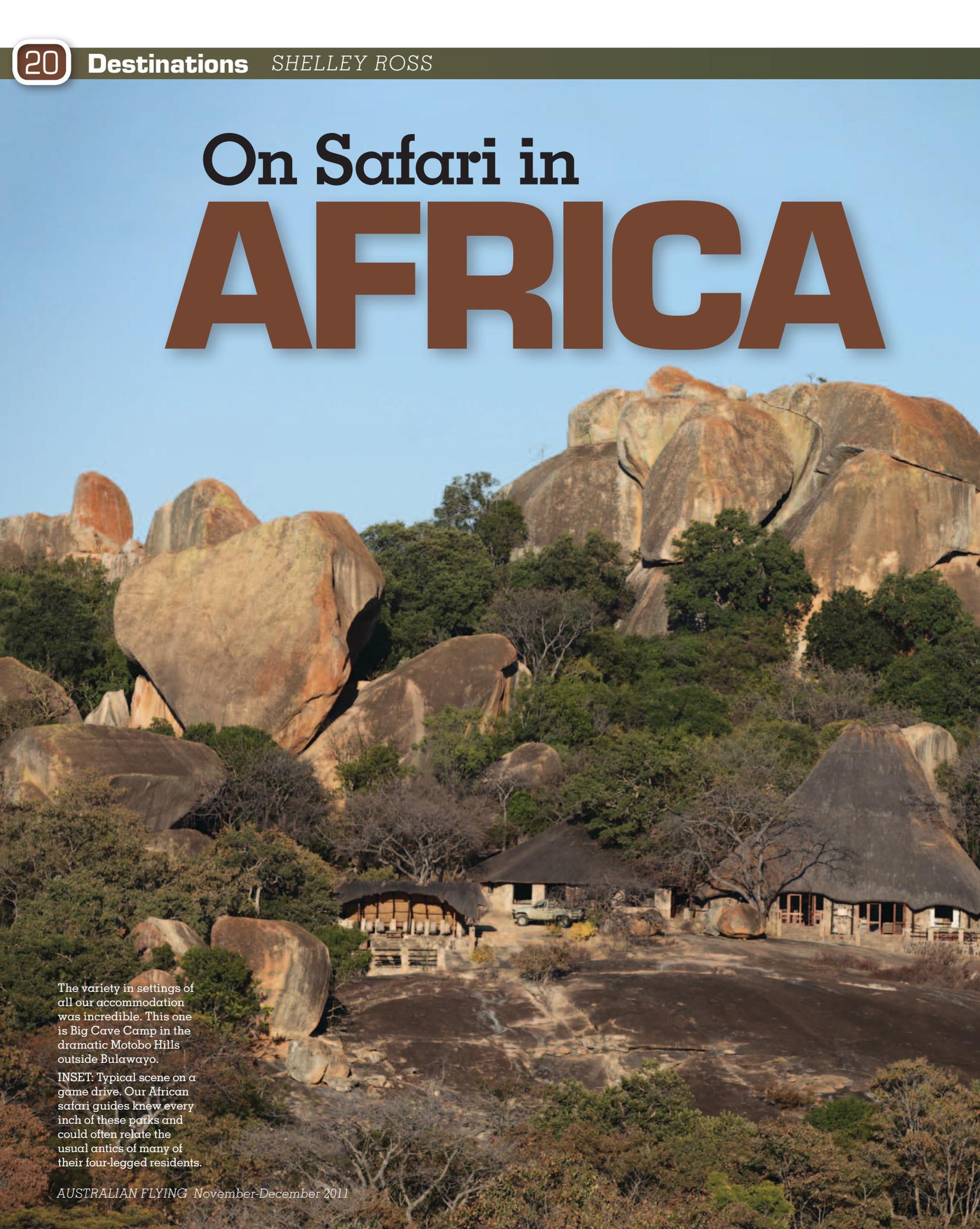


On Safari in AFRICA



The variety in settings of all our accommodation was incredible. This one is Big Cave Camp in the dramatic Motobo Hills outside Bulawayo.

INSET: Typical scene on a game drive. Our African safari guides knew every inch of these parks and could often relate the usual antics of many of their four-legged residents.

A throwaway line from Rossy over dinner was all it took. "Why don't we fly Africa?" The seed was sown. Join **Shelley Ross** and friends on an air safari that raises the rungs of that adventure ladder sky high.



(SHELLEY ROSS)

There was a moment in Africa. We dip the wing of our C182 into a steep bank and look straight down through the towering spray and into the thundering heart of the Victoria Falls. We watch as millions of tons of deep green Zambezi groan their way past the rapids and roar over the mile-wide edge of this ancient gorge into the tumbling cauldron below. A rainbow, just for us, seems to sew its end to our wingtip as we take in this ancient drama, as so many generations before us have done.

This is a moment. This is why I learnt to fly. Rossy and I have the pattern to ourselves, to fly as many orbits as we like. The magnitude of this privilege cannot be measured, and my euphoric tears flow unchecked. Africa, as these two weeks would show us, had many more moments to offer.

The challenge

I now believe any flying adventure is possible. Once you set your mind to it, all it takes is exhaustive planning, endless research, expert local guidance, all your money and some mad pilot friends to sign up with you.

(PETER VANDERSPUY)

After 18 months living on Skype with my great friend and trip co-organiser, Kiwi pilot Peter Merwood, we finally nailed an unforgettable itinerary that took us through remote Africa like we never dreamed possible. We covered the north-west of South Africa, Botswana, up through Zimbabwe to Lake Kariba, along the lower Zambezi, Mana Pools, and back via the Chobe National Park and Makgadigadi pans which edge the Kalahari Desert. That's 12 nights on safari, 18 hours flying, 14 crew, eight aircraft and countless memories.

For our group of six Australians and two Kiwis, our 2011 African air safari was to be the trip of a lifetime. Under no illusion that flying in Africa was going to be a straightforward exercise, we set about finding ourselves a reliable safari company to co-ordinate the logistics. We finally honed our research down to three South African companies: African Aero Safaris, Bush Pilot Adventures and Sky Africa.

Eventually deciding on African Aero Safaris (AAS) proved to be an inspired choice. Familiarity with flying routes, exceptional organisation and a true understanding of "the African way" was testament to AAS' experience of 25 years operating in



(PETER VANDERSPUY)

ABOVE: Six South Africans, six Australians and two Kiwis. That all worked, and having the locals along in their own aircraft was great fun.

the air safari business over here. All our group found the owner, Dave Vanderspuy, to be a particularly approachable guy, passionate about sharing his love of flying and his country to overseas visitors.

At the outset, we gave Dave our wish list, time frame, budget and flying experience and let him work out how to weave a workable itinerary around it. We also spoke to pilots in the US and Canada who'd done an AAS safari, who reassured us we were in great hands. Over the year, Dave drip-fed us reams of information about what to expect, cost estimates and how best to prepare for the trip.

The result was an outstanding safari – easy flying, quality lodges, wonderful exposure to game, unforgettable scenery, and the making of solid friendships. Never once did any of us feel we were in any danger, and we were certainly never left to make any

tricky flying decisions without their local advice ... except when dealing with ATC. I'll come back to this.

The team

Apart from our group from Down Under, we had along with us Dave Vanderspuy and his brother Peter in their Airvan. The "Breadvan" carted all sorts of gear including excess luggage, tools for every possible scenario, spare parts, you name it. Plus two of the most experienced pilots in southern Africa.

Now, here's the thing. We also had the unexpected pleasure and enormous fun of having four other local South African pilot friends of theirs along on tour with us. They were all fairly mad and all flying solo in a Citabria, a little Kirfox and two Huskys. The rest of us hired our aircraft through AAS at Johannesburg. Rossy and I flew a

"Never once did any of us feel we were in any danger."

C182Q; our Sydney friends Garth and Lynne swanned it in a fancy-pants Cirrus and Kiwi Pete, his wife Sharon and friends Dennis and Judith from rural NSW, cruised along in a C182P.

I'm including model numbers here so you don't get too excited about the fleet that's on offer for hire over here. They do lions really well in Africa; new light aircraft not so much. They are starting to have access to a reasonable number of modern, fuel-efficient composite types, but late model Cessnas and Pipers are way thinner on the ground. At any one time, South Africa probably has only four new build C172s and a few more PA180s for rental.

At the start, Dave advised us: "We favour airplanes with good fuel range over those with 'good looks' but that battle with distance. A cream puff 1975 C172 with King comms and a 38 gal tank would not be a good choice over a flight school 1968 PA180 with 48 gal tanks and an old Narco. Alternatively, a new build C172 with 52 gals would be ideal but costs more to rent and are almost impossible to find."

Whilst the two C182s that Pete and I hired may have seen better days cosmetically, they flew like the fabulous old workhorses that they are and never missed a beat.

SA licence

Before we could do anything, we needed to take care of the South African licence validation process. This required a minimum of three days out of our trip, allowing for weather. We three pilots had to sit an SA Air Law exam, pass a check-flight with an instructor that included a basic cross-country nav exercise and aircraft handling disciplines, plus sit a tutorial on hot and high conditions, for which Africa is famous.

We chose to do our licence validations in Cape Town, rather than Johannesburg, so that the five non-flyers in our group could spend the time sight-seeing in and around this fabulous city, rather than stay in Joburg and get murdered. This option also gave us time at sea level to ease the jetlag out before the safari started in earnest. Dave suggested we make our home for these few days in the beautiful wine



(SHELLEY ROSS)

To my surprise, most of the airstrips we landed at were long and sealed. A refreshing change here at Chikwenya in the Mana Pools region of the lower Zambezi.

ABOVE: A family of spotted hyena was a treat to come across on an evening game drive at Mashatu.



(PETER VANDERSPUY)

(PETER VANDERSPUY)



LEFT: Where the hell are the step-up footrests on this damn thing? Just one of a variety of innovative ways the boys found to hoist me up to my fuel cap.

ABOVE: Chobe National Park. I'm coming Mum, I'm coming.

BELOW (MAP): Starting and finishing in Homebase (Lanseria), our safari took us through three countries.

(PETER VANDERSPUY)

country area of Stellenbosch, just north of Cape Town.

The validation process didn't exactly run like clockwork and it was here that we fell headlong into the circus that is African aviation. "Take it all in your stride," Dave advised us. "This is Africa and whilst things may not always go to plan, be patient and embrace the culture and diversity this country has to offer. This is the colour of Africa, just flow with it."

So, with the colour of Africa firmly on board, we find that the aeroplane we were to use for the validation wasn't where it should have been at Stellenbosch, and

when we finally found it down in a very locked hangar at Cape Town International Airport, it took two hours to locate the key, which then only opened half the hangar. Who owns a key like that?

With Kiwi Pete and I nursing pulled hamstrings after trying to push and pull the bloody thing out through the door, a pre-flight inspection of this C172E, built by Moses, revealed a list of 'you're-kidding items' we'll never forget: no fuel dipstick, no radio until Pete tweaked a few wires, an upside-down fuel selector which made for a fun guessing game, and an instructor whose headset didn't work anyway.

He was an experienced veteran pilot, but we just felt he never quite engaged with our safety concerns. "Well," he chirped as he climbed in beside me and threw his headset over to the back seat, "I can't hear anything or talk to you, so I guess you're on your own." Bloody hell, we were departing from a busy international airport for God's sake; I wouldn't have minded a clue.

I glance over my shoulder at Pete in the back seat who is writing out his will, and mouthing the words: "The colour of Africa, Shelley, embrace it. It's the colour of Africa."

Thanks to a female air traffic controller who I've nominated for sainthood, we took off without a worry and all ended up passing our validations with only very mild long-term effects. Poor old Garth, in the Cirrus, had to do his flight almost in the dark that evening, but passed with flying colours.

Despite this little pantomime and a couple of days of torrential rain, our stay at the River Manor in Stellenbosch was absolutely wonderful. It's a gorgeous, leafy university town surrounded by rolling green hills, and home to some memorable colonial architecture, home grown artworks and a handful of great restaurants. From here, it is a quick flight back up to Joburg where our safari is finally ready to launch!

Let it begin...

"OMG, OMG! We're finally GOING!" was all we could say. Dead set, compared with ducking

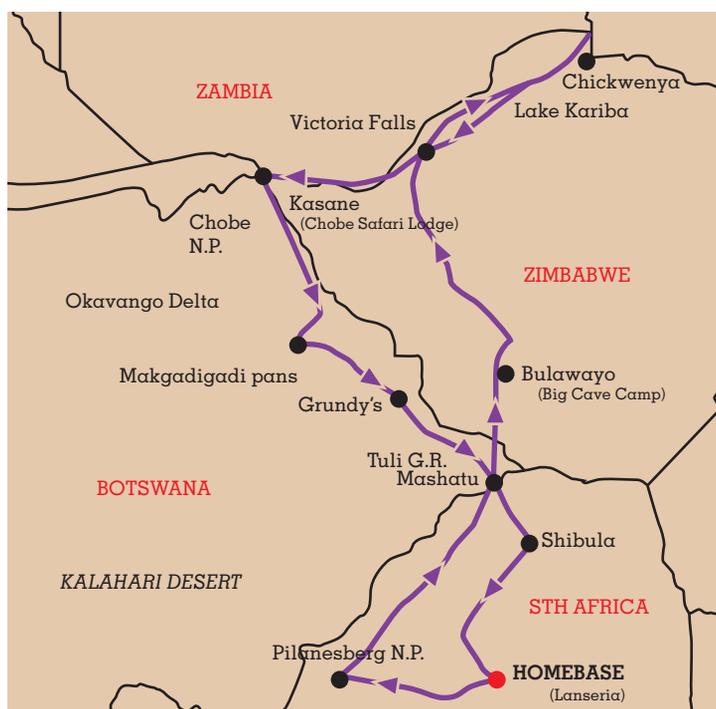
out to Camden with an overnight bag and pointing the nose towards Broken Hill, this has been an absolute marathon. But, nothing ventured, I guess and where's the reward in an easy achievement?

Our exclusively designed Zambezi Safari, which started and finished at Lanseria, near Joburg, included seven different lodges. It was a slightly modified version of AAS' published Rhino Safari. Apart from the first and last lodge, where we just overnighted, we stayed two nights in all of them, which gave us a very welcome lay day to discover the best of each of our locations. Despite trawling over the websites of most of the safari lodges before leaving home, we were blown away with the diversity and unique feel of each of our destinations.

The flying

The flying side of the trip was actually not challenging. Can you believe I'm saying that? *Everything* about flying is usually a challenge for me. It helped that Dave had provided incredibly detailed flight plans for each pilot, with every possible frequency, runway detail, phone number and photo we could want. What a luxury.

And the weather – the Gods were smiling on us big time. We didn't see a cloud for the entire time, not one cloud, and tailwinds, if anything. The only downside on a few days was the haze. If there's one thing





(SHELLEY ROSS)

LEFT: Kitfox pilot, Kobus (left), with our Commander in Chief, Dave Vanderspuy, founder of African Aero Safaris. We were his first-ever Australian safari clients, and he wants more of us!

the Africans love it's a good old burn-off, and over here the smoky haze just seems to hang in the air forever. Apparently it's even worse in August/September when they really let rip with the barbeques in the grasslands before summer, so June was a good time to go. The days were warm, around mid-20°C, and the nights and mornings chilly.

The flying legs were easy to navigate and relatively short, compared with what we're used to flying around our outback. During the validation process in Cape Town, we'd been thoroughly briefed on the precautions necessary with potentially hot and certainly high conditions, but I still can't believe how long all the airstrips are (South Africa's Polokwane is 2320m) and, despite their remoteness, how many are sealed. The few dirt strips we landed on came complete with grazing wildebeest,

antelope or warthog and littered with elephant dung. Yes - so Africa!

As we do here in Australia on safari, the crews of all eight aircraft were constantly in touch via a dedicated company frequency. It was in this way that we were taught about the real Africa below. The six local pilots would all chip in with some little fact or other as we cruised along, but it was Peter V in the Breadvan who filled in the gaps with his wonderful stories. With experience gleaned over several decades of flying, working and living in this part of the world, Peter always had an answer for the endless reams of questions we asked. Sometimes he forgot to stop talking, God love him, but for that we forgave him, and came away far more enlightened from the narrative.

Accommodation

Now, far be it for me to gush, but I really need to cut to the chase here and give you the award winners. Way up there has to be the Mashatu Lodge in Botswana. Our arrival at the nearby Limpopo Valley airfield had been uneventful, with nobody manning the tower today. That in itself secured its top ranking in my books. Have I mentioned my exchanges with the African air traffic controller? I'm brushing up on my Swahili Nguni before I go back.

The drive to the lodge threw up zebra, giraffe and warthog on both sides of our open vehicle. As we found on arrival at almost every safari lodge on our trip, we were met by impeccably dressed and beaming staff, who offered us something tropical in a chilled flute and a warm welcome. Porters would appear from nowhere, sporting their fabulous big African smiles, and whisk our luggage away to our accommodation which, here at Mashatu, was jaw-droppingly divine. The theme from *Out of Africa* seeps into mind as we take in our thatched-roofed setting that belongs on a Hollywood film set.

Later that afternoon we stop for Sundowners on our game drive, with fresh images of up-close elephants and families of spotted hyenas keeping us smiling. A mischievous mob of baboons

is keeping a gentlemanly distance from our vehicles as frigidly cold beers are produced and G&Ts are expertly served by our Mashatu guides. Atop our little hill in the open African veld, we share the sunset with new friends and wild things. That's it for me - I'm transported. I am now Merryll Streep and pass me my white gauze scarf. It has been just two nights away and Africa has begun weaving its magic on us all.

To be continued...

I'm emotionally exhausted reliving all of this. I need to finish this very special Destinations feature in the next issue of *Australian Flying*. There's so much more to share with you - landings on salt pans, walking with white rhinos, boating mayhem mid-Zambezi and, oh God, the ATC nightmare lives on. It started out as an improbable dream, this trip of a lifetime. It has turned out to be so much more than that. So, join me here next issue!

Further info

African Aero Safaris
www.aerosafari.com
 E: info@aerosafari.com
www.mashatu.com
www.rivermanor.co.za
 E: shelley@flyingtheoutback.com.au

www.aerosport.co.nz

Australia
 New Zealand
 Asia



ULPOWER
 AERO ENGINES



Ask Andre at Aerospport for more information E andre@aerosport.co.nz

The Leading Edge in Aviation - SportCruiser

Aerospport Aviation, Anton P +64 7 8295940 M +64 21 2895999
 E anton@aerosport.co.nz