

On Safari in AFRICA

Part II

It's been months in the planning and our eight little crews are now in the thick of an African dream. With endless savannah below and who knows what ahead, **Shelley Ross** and friends continue their adventures.



When I left you in Botswana last issue I was gushing about something uber-African; probably in tears, was I? Not unusual. When it comes to flying, I seem to spend my entire life either rapt or terrified, so routine tears seem appropriate. In the case of Africa, it is total theatre. You never know what's going to happen next; like being in the middle of a Harrison Ford movie, without the spiders.

Anyway, two days into our 12-day safari and we're starting to get the hang of things. If there's one thing you can safely say about Africa, it's that it doesn't work quite like a well-oiled machine. Seeing little point in anything more than a loose acquaintance with efficiency, the locals are pretty laissez-faire about most things: maybe there'll be someone manning the tower today, maybe not. If so, they might be using this frequency, but then again, perhaps it'll be that one. We've filed a flight plan, but has it been digested by someone who matters? You just never know.

Knowing the system

As I mentioned in Part 1, the flying legs were a comfortable distance and the crews of all eight aircraft chatted away enroute. Tour boss Dave Vanderspuy, of African Aero Safaris, and his brother Peter in their Airvan were always available for any questions or concerns we had as we flew along, so no one was ever left alone to solve a problem. And we three visiting pilots, Kiwi Pete and I in C182s and Garth in a Cirrus SR20, had lots of questions.

Each day before we flew, we would gather at the wing of the nearest plane, someone would

produce a map, and Dave would give us a briefing on the next leg. The best news at any briefing was hearing that we were to fly somewhere that didn't involve a border crossing. This meant no customs and immigration forms to fill out for ourselves and our aeroplane upon landing, and no lining up for officials, who may or may not be at lunch, to stamp our passport. Who knew we'd have to import and export our aircraft so many times in a fortnight? Actually, these formalities were entertaining in themselves.

After 25 years leading these safaris, Dave Vanderspuy knows

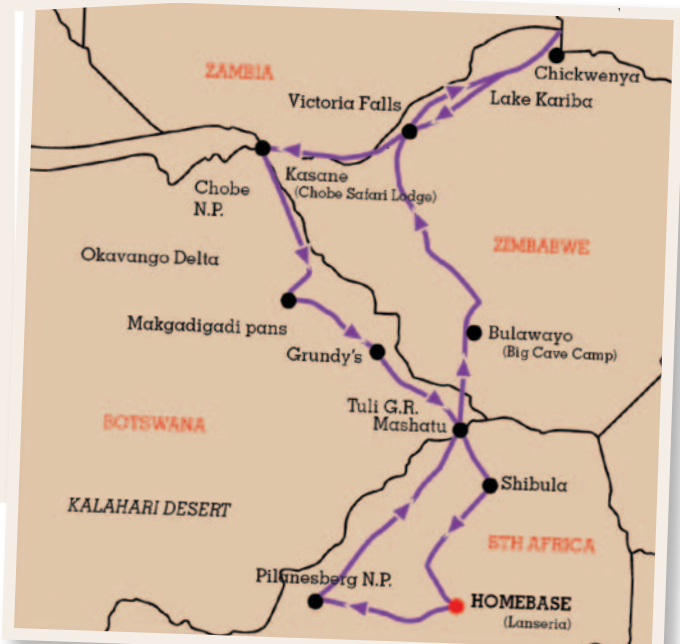


MAIN IMAGE: Victoria Falls, a scenic flight to remember. (Shelley Ross)

BELOW TOP: Here you go Jumbo – just like chocolate, only disgusting. (Peter Ross)

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

BELOW BOTTOM: Evening sundowners – the best invention since the colonies. (Shelley Ross)



his homeland well enough to be prepared for delays. As predicted, we soon discover the value of having him along. He does all the hard yards behind the scenes in an effort to make these encounters as painless as possible for us, and he teaches us creative ways to handle the paperwork. There is an art to streamlining most official duties in the Dark Continent; Dave is a master artist. Amongst other things, we swiftly learn that we pilots are not carrying passengers; we are carrying crew (for whom there is no charge). There is, subsequently, much mirth amongst the ranks as Kiwi Pete tries to convince the

Zimbabwean authorities that he does indeed require a crew of four to operate his C182.

Welcome, welcome

Immigration buildings and their officers would take on varying degrees of credibility. Nkomo Airport at Bulawayo was a torrent of officialdom. But another day, as we were the only arrivals at the remote Limpopo Valley airfield in Botswana, the tower wasn't manned (hallelujah) and the customs and immigration team hadn't turned up. So a big truck materialises and we are driven a little way down to the bank of the river to ... um ... Headquarters.





FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

1. Shelley and Jim Davis manage to catch up near Jo'burg on the eve of the safari launch.
2. They do African thatch very well over here. Chikwenya on the banks of the Zambezi. (Shelley Ross)
3. Zambezi magic – the freedom and privilege of private flying in a foreign country is worth every ounce of effort. (Shelley Ross)
4. Welcome to Africa, where the wild things are. (Peter Vanderspuys)

That would be a tumbling-down shed with a wooden school desk inside, an ancient Rolling Stones poster, a condom dispenser and a uniformed lady holding a serious looking stamp.

Outside on the dusty road it's a cheery scene where local African kids have gathered to see these white visitors from the sky and test out their scant English, a discipline in which these little mites could well teach ATC some valuable lessons. We are all enthralled with the action at this border crossing, where road travellers needing to present passports are required to exit their vehicles and cross the river in a rusty old swinging cage suspended on a cable over the water that's tied to a tree on the other side. It's all good, and as business is slow today, the affable operator is thrilled when one of our mob accepts his sunny invitation to have a go in his cage.

So, with planes put to bed and formalities completed in these remotest of airfields, another new adventure is always in store for us. The day is warm, but wherever we have landed, waiting politely at the end of the airfield is our immaculately uniformed safari guide beckoning us towards the lodge vehicle, laden with eskies of icy beer, snacks, water and soft drinks for his parched and weary travellers. I'll be speaking to the refueller at Birdsville about this.

Under the stars

Apart from designing a diverse and achievable flying route over terrain as sparse as the Kalahari Desert or as lush and green as Chobe National Park, Dave and the team at African Aero Safaris had taken great care in choosing a range of properties in these vastly different settings throughout South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. From hillside rock-etched huts to luxury river cabins to memorable nights under that trademark African canvas, our safari lodge accommodation never failed to delight us. Mashatu and Grundy's Lodge in Botswana, and Shibula in Welgevonden, SA, were all places we'd return to in a heartbeat. There was, however, an Oscar winner. We are now at the most remote game park on our itinerary, Chikwenya Safari Lodge at the very top of Zimbabwe. This one did not come cheap, but with an arrival that involved a low level flight up the Zambezi, no air traffic control, a beautifully unmanicured dirt airstrip complete with nearby lions, a champagne welcome, and a stunning lodge overhanging the river, this place had us at 'hello'.

We had the lodge to ourselves here, as a group of 14 will do, so the hosts offered us different activities, happy for us to split up into mini groups. A day on the water here is spent in the

company of an endless circus of wild things: crocs by the dozen, hippos, elephant, antelope, extravagant birds and the illusive Cape Buffalo. For me, today is another one of those 'moments'. It is difficult to believe we have flown our little aeroplanes all the way to the mighty Zambezi River, surely sitting proud on the top rung of that adventure ladder.

Another place we stayed at called Big Cave Camp in the Matobo Hills of Zimbabwe could have been used as a *Flintstones* film set. The whole place is set amongst a massive expanse of weather-beaten granite, with sculptured boulders teetering improbably on top of one another. It was here that we were taken into the bush by Ian Harmer, award-winning Zimbabwean guide, who walked us up to Cecil Rhodes' grave, into a hilltop cave well stocked with

all. Oh wait, have I mentioned the food? First up, Warthog Pie was not a safari highlight. Home barbequed Kudu fillet was. I could not come at the Zebra sausages for breakfast, fresh as they were, but I refused nothing else over the 12 days, as it was invariably cooked by an African magician, served to me by a beautiful ebony skinned waiter, whisked away by a crisp-aproned angel, into a kitchen that I was not required to enter. I had indeed arrived in Heaven.

Mixing it with the wild things

I guess this is why one comes here. One day, our little red and white C182 was first to arrive at our destination, Welgevonden West, a dirt strip atop a hill in SA. A precautionary search revealed a

« **It's difficult to believe we have flown our little aeroplanes all the way to the mighty Zambezi River.** »

bushmen's rock art and then led us on foot to linger within a breath-taking few metres of two grazing white rhinos. It's sobering how you put your life in the hands of a bloke you didn't know at breakfast time.

Anyway, enough about ground time; this is a flying magazine, after

beefy herd of wildebeest, about 15 of them, sitting on the far end of the strip waiting for us, and they weren't moving for anyone. I put a lot of years practice into a decent short field landing, thus giving Rossy and me a healthy distance between touchdown and 15 sets of



African ATC

Here is a topic that requires a little lie down before I begin. Looking back on my personal exchanges with African ATC, I would have to say they did not go well. The curtain-raiser to this pantomime begins the day before our self-fly safari even starts. We three pilots from here and NZ are excited, nervous and anxious to set off, but first we must complete our insurance check ride with a local instructor. Lanseria, being a busy airport just out of Johannesburg, is home to large commuter aircraft, executive jets, heli's; you name it, they're all here. We note parallel runways, typically African – well sealed and the length of Australia. As I pre-flight, there's plenty of activity. Everyone's out flying today, aren't they? Super – let's mix it up with a few dozen other crews all trying to get off the ground the same time as me. Getting a gig on the Ground frequency here requires lightning reflexes on that PTT button and more front than Mugabe. The bodies in the control tower are white South Africans and speak English. Upon enquiry, my instructor, Russ, confirms that the chaotic torrent I'm hearing over the radio is indeed English, so what a relief when I find this out. Finally, I plunge into a gap in transmissions. What comes back at me is nothing short of a

nightmare. Subsequently, Russ is the only reason we ever lift off this day. Without his fatherly but firm advice against it, I would have let loose on ATC, about their diction for one thing, their total over-supply of random information, and don't even start me on the delivery. Unbelievable, it was. What do they think they're doing – calling the Melbourne Cup? Granted, they were not to know a band of unfamiliar Australian ears were at large, but I'm still mystified why they feel the need to deliver their instructions at double express speed, and expect you to a) translate it into plausible options; b) read back the important bits; c) vaguely comply without hitting something; and d) not throw up from the stress. I kept thinking, any minute now, he's going to say a word I recognise. I'm at least taxiing at this point, but even this is doing my head in. I'm all eyes outside as my little C182 tries to find its way out to Alpha via Lima, safely past Learjets languishing at their FBOs, Citations parked mid-taxiway because they can, and oops, mind the cars! Hello Africa. In Australia, we're weird – our airports are for aeroplanes. Go figure. By the time we're at the runway holding point, I've had a couple more tragic exchanges with ATC. I blame Russ passionately for the inability of his countrymen to

make themselves understood. My take-off clearance is imminent; I know this will not end well. And so the sideshow continues, with the controller then offering me 12 after take-off instructions, a 10-bullet point traffic report and the weather conditions from here to Istanbul. God, did I ask for his life story? I've got to read all this back, tricky to do whilst you're hyperventilating from angst, so I leave bits out, and he's not happy. *He's not happy?* To hell with this, I felt like saying: "EXCUSE ME, BUCKO, but you're dealing with *me* here. All I want to do is take off, okay? Look, I'm Australian, I'm menopausal, and I'm operating heavy machinery – don't push your luck". That night, after being drip-fed all remaining African G&T supplies, I'm told that today's episode is a breeze compared to what's waiting for us throughout Botswana and Zimbabwe, where we're headed. Oh happy days. Whose bloody idea was this? Indeed, things start to unravel, as predicted, as we continue to fly north, into remote locations where the control tower is now home to some colourful characters we'll call 'out-of-controllers'. We have moved deep into black man territory that comes with deep black accents only their mothers could decipher. Admittedly, we are a fleet of eight aircraft, which is apparently more action than a lot of these airports

see in a month. But, regardless, it seems their sole mission is to deliver back to us, upon our first inbound call, the complete world news at space shuttle speed. Asking them to slow down, or perhaps even pop a few words of the Queen's English in there, didn't work. I think they reasoned that the crosser they got, the more successful would be our exchange. As the safari progresses, I relax and start to take this mad circus that is African aviation in my stride. I even land at that impossibly serious-looking Polokwane Airport without crying. Unfortunately, I land on R19 instead of R23, but the nice man in the tower doesn't even go into meltdown. I notice the rather large typo when I'm nearing the piano keys, so upon giving him the news on late final, I see he throws his hands up in the air. But I reckon he's smiling! Not so confident am I of the progress of the female controller at Victoria Falls Approach; I think she is still in therapy. I never did master the art of the verbal gymnastics with ATC, but I got into the swing of things. I came to expect the usual tumble-dryer of Swahili coming at me through my headset and would just make up stuff to read back to them, which to me sounded very helpful. We came to an understanding, me and Africa.

horns. But one thing about African airstrips – because of the high elevation, they're nice and long. By the time we got to the herd, we were taxiing at snail's pace, just following their casual sauntering up the middle of the strip and off the far end.

On our departure at that same place two days later, we had to get the local guide to wait half way down the strip, just off to the side, and flash his vehicle headlights when he'd been able to coax the family of warthog off the strip for our take-off. Excellent; all we then had to watch out for was the very likely presence of large vultures, storks and soaring eagles.

Predictably, Rossy got into the African groove from day one. He's a get-on-with-it type of guy and by now knows what he can and can't do to help me around an aeroplane. One day after landing I saw him disappearing into the bush, only to re-emerge soon after carting an armful of prickly bushes which he carefully placed all over and around our three tyres. Too much sun, I'm thinking. With theatrical eye rolling, he rightly explains the obvious danger of leaving exposed rubber out for the hyenas to chew on tonight. I stopped questioning after a while and just did as I was told.

Local antics

As was the case at every new lodge, we would all gather for happy hour around the bar to talk about our day in the air, the six South African boys always getting there well before us to ensure all was in order for our arrival. They were particularly helpful like that. Along the way, we had discovered in the six local pilots touring with us a combined flying experience of many thousands of hours between them, a deep love of flying in their homeland, and an infectiously relaxed outlook. Like the day we were flying across the Makgadigadi Pans on the edge of the Kalahari Desert and we heard SA Simon saying over the radio how madly tempting the massive saltpan down below looked for a landing. You think?

A rapid exchange in English/Afrikaans followed, with much excited debate about wind direction, surface conditions and last-time-we-were-here counsel. Sure enough, one

by one, the five local aeroplanes all head down and land on the saltpan, even the loaded-up Airvan, with not a problem in the world. We could see the thin layer of salty crust exploding under their tyres before each plane came to rest on an obviously solid piece of Africa. Dave calls over the radio for us to come down and try it. I'd rather set fire to myself. Apparently they do it all the time over here. They've even taken sleeping kit and bedded down for the night out here. That's outside my comfort zone on so many levels.

Conclusion

And so the team from Down Under survived. As we reflect on why this particular safari has made such an impact, yes, we talk of four-legged wild things. We laugh at the countless hilarious memories that our crew has shared. We shake our heads at the beauty of our destinations and the natural elegance of the African people. Spending time talking at length to the local staff throughout our trip made for special personal memories.

But where we are left gobsmacked is reflecting on the absolute freedom that private flying offers us, especially in a foreign country. The rules of the air are the same, north is north and south is south. So we transfer our familiar disciplines; we engage our normal cautions; we grit our teeth and take on the African ATC, and we are then free to fly together wherever we wish, to land with our friends wherever we want to in this impossibly romantic land.

Perhaps because so many hundreds of hours of preparation have been put into ensuring the success of this trip, we return home with a tangible sense of achievement. We drag our exhausted bodies off our Qantas flight and through customs for the final time and exchange emotional farewells. But we all feel it – Africa has seeped into our souls. Our SA licences are valid for five years...we'll be back. Who's up for it?

You'll fall in love with the colour of Africa. (Peter Vanderspuy)

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Africa calling...

Here's the other side of the story, from tour boss, Dave Vanderspuy, of African Aero Safaris (AAS):

"When we heard folks from the 'proper hemisphere' were coming to fly in the African air, we figured this would be interesting. And a whole group of them? ATC, look out! We get lots of northern clients, so what a pleasure to have along on a trip guys and gals that think like us; the sun is in the right part of the sky and we all still have that colonial pioneering spirit.

"When they asked us to extend our 'normal fare' flying safari into the lower Zambezi River area, it triggered a new plan. Figuring this group would be up for some real adventuring, I concocted a trip that would feature highlights I had not even been to. Here I give credit to the enduring hospitality of Zimbabweans; after a dearth

of tourists, they bent over backwards for us; it was a real treat. We will be heading back soon to seek out further jewels.

"I found the group great to fly with – knowledgeable, better than average pilots, a laugh a minute and no whingers. Everyone got on with what was needed at the time and mixing Kiwi sheep and Ozzie roos made for great fun and grand memories.

"Please come back with your mates! But first I'll send you a CD of ATC bits and pieces to get your ear in! Lifelong friendships struck up and talk is buzzing about the next flying trip – Africa, Alaska or Russia? Thanks for the memories."

FURTHER INFO

AAS operate safaris throughout the year.

POA, but rough cost guide:

AAS published Rhino Safari
US\$10,500pp (12-day safari, 18+ hours flying, approx 1800nm)
African Aero Safaris
www.aerosafari.com
E: info@aerosafari.com
E: shelley@flyingtheoutback.com.au

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The three aircraft we Aussies hired out of Johannesburg – Garth's Cirrus, my C182, KDT, and Pete M's C182, JOT. (Shelley Ross)

Capt. Roger Johnson
Commercial Pilot



Flight Into the Perpetual Sunset

One Pilot's Solution for Strong
Glare Outside and Dry Air Inside

This month we caught up with Roger Johnson, an experienced pilot and long-time Claroxan customer.

Roger Johnson has enjoyed a 36-year career as a captain with American Airlines. He has logged over 22,000 hours of flight time and is type rated in the B-767 and B-777 airframes. Roger is also an AOPA member. The 67-year-old California resident has been using Claroxan™ – the once daily tablet for vision improvement – for five years, and is thrilled with the results he has seen. In addition to Claroxan, he uses OptiSoft eye-drops.

Pacific Health recently spoke with Roger, and he shared his success using Claroxan.

Aviation Medical Issues

I started using Claroxan for peace of mind. I take my AME every six months to renew my first class medical and continue to receive 2080 on the vision portion, which exceeds my examiner. He asks me how I do it and I say, "In addition to a healthy lifestyle, I take Claroxan daily."

On the Job

I fly the LAX-HNL for surrounding islands – LAX route. During the entire flight out to Hawaii, I endure "perpetual sunset" which can be quite glaring on the eyes. The cabin is kept at 7% humidity during the flight, which is dryer than the Sahara Desert.

Fortunately, I have my OptiSoft eye drops to keep my eyes moist for the flight out and less irritated when looking into the perpetual sunset.

Claroxan also helps when I return to LAX. I usually arrive right before sunrise, so my night vision has to be keen. There is heavy traffic coming into and out of LAX. So, it is important to be able to pick up visual traffic to orient myself for traffic patterns early.

One morning, returning to LAX after the long flight from HNL, I was cleared to land on runway 7L. On final approach, I spotted an aircraft on the runway. It had been cleared for take off, but hadn't started moving yet. As an airline pilot, you always look for options. I could go around, which would cost the airline unnecessary gas money and cause an unnecessary delay. Or I could execute a side-slip maneuver and land on 7R.

I advised the tower of the situation and asked if we could side-slip and land on 7R. The controller cleared my suggestion and we landed safely and earlier than anticipated. This move saved 1,000 pounds of fuel and saved the passengers my uncle's dings. I have to say that taking Claroxan helped me pick up that aircraft on the runway much quicker giving me more time to weigh my options and make a sound decision.



Call 001.1.360.255.4340 or visit www.CLAROXAN.com to learn more.

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