

AFRICAN ADVENTURES

After our successful Australian adventure it wasn't long before John Cresswell & myself were thinking about a follow-up trip. Our initial idea was London to Cape Town but with WWII, personal constraints and various other factors we ultimately decided against it. After much soul searching we decided on a circuitous route within Africa. We planned to start from Capetown initially travelling up the west coast through Namibia, then travelling East through Botswana, Zambia and Tanzania before tracking South through Mozambique & back to Capetown, but the best laid plans.....

We arrived in Capetown on the 20th October expecting our aircraft to already be 'in country'. Somehow a 19 day sailing took over month. Still, there are worse places in the world to be kicking your heels... Lesson No.1 - Africa time. "The sooner you get used to it the easier things will be" a fellow triker told us. The other advice was:- " one thing at a time, always smile & don't swear in front of an official". On a number of occasions we struggled with this!

On 25th October our wives arrived and still no trikes. Finally on 28th they were ready for collection. Elation at them being undamaged was swiftly replaced with frustration, as it took us 3hrs to secure them on to a pick-up & trailer. They were secure in the loosest sense of the word, as the wings were placed on top of each other and a trike wider than the truck meant that one wheel was supported on a plank of wood! Nonetheless all was well and we had the aircraft rigged by the end of the day. The late arrival of the trikes meant we were under pressure to get the trip underway as we had to deliver our wives to Victoria Falls in less than 3 weeks. In some ways the loss of fettling time cost us in terms of niggly problems over the 1st week or two.

Our first flight up the West Coast of S.A proved to be a bit of a highlight with numerous sightings of whales. Our first day ended at a coastal town named Hondeklipbaai where we landed on a dirt road and before we knew it were surrounded by hundreds of children. It was all too scary with a live propeller but then we said we wanted adventure! When we came to a stop by the fuel pump in town it was soon evident it hadn't been used in years. It turned out to be a great overnight stay and a few months previously Mike Blythe had stayed in the same guesthouse.

The next morning, with some trepidation, we continued North towards the Namibian border. We were anxious because if we landed in the diamond mining area we were traversing we probably wouldn't get our clothes back let alone our aircraft and we hadn't found a strictly legitimate way of crossing into Namibia without tracking 600 km's inland. However, we had a cunning plan. Just short of the border, by dodging the signposts, we managed to land on the road and then taxied as close as we dared to the border post. We then walked to get our passports stamped before continuing across No Mans Land to Namibia. After some coaxing ,the officials stamped our passports & also let us walk back to S.A. Our diligent guards then stopped all traffic whilst we took off. Welcome to Namibia!

Tracking North through Namibia we flew over remote mountains, sand dunes and anything else inhospitable you care to mention. In contrast, we received fabulous hospitality wherever we stopped. We had certainly arrived in Africa with lots of bush flying and impromptu road landings. Often the only way to get fuel was to taxi into the local petrol station. Our scariest Namibian moment was taking off from a dirt track in a village 5000' up where engine failure would have had us in the graveyard we had climbed out over.

All too soon the Namibian experience was over & with flight plans filed & arrangements in place we were ready to cross in to Botswana. The previous sentence makes it all sound so simple but believe me it wasn't!: a four mile taxi to town came in to it somewhere. Making hand signals and driving round roundabouts in a trike were certainly novel experiences. Our arrival in Botswana took the airport by surprise as the flight plan never made it and their radio was broken. This turned out to be fortuitous as we were advised that we would have been denied permission to

land if the airport had known about us. We were confused as all seemed to be smiles & our passports were stamped without delay. All became clear the next morning when we were not allowed to take off. It turned out we didn't have the necessary permissions. A frantic morning of phone calls to Overflight (our permission agency in the UK) and the matter was resolved. The following day we were airborne again.

We struggled with strong headwinds across Botswana, I managed to get a tank of contaminated fuel & we had numerous other minor incidents: not quite the experience that had been hoped for. On the plus side our last stop in Botswana at Kasane was very relaxed & we spotted lots of game.

Next stop Zambia but not so fast guys!! We were just in the process of getting exit stamps in our passports when our clearance agent in the UK called and told us to stay exactly where we were. 'Zambia are not happy!!' An hour later & all was well, we were on our way. The flight along the Zambezi River to Livingstone was one the most scenic we'd had for ages & you could see the spray from Victoria Falls some five miles away. Sadly, this was the point at which our wives were to leave us, so we took a couple of days off to relax & sightsee before they left. They were replaced with fuel cans to increase our range across Zambia and Mozambique.

Flight plans & military clearance were required for every flight through Zambia but we had no real problems, even when landing at a few remote strips where the obligatory several hundred children materialised out of nowhere in seconds. The flight was very tiring but immensely rewarding. Something very Un-European that we had to get used to was employing guards to look after our aircraft. These guys allegedly kept a 24 hour watch on our aircraft and this usually cost us about a £1/day: protection money arguably, but nonetheless it gave us a little peace of mind. At Chipata, our exit point from Zambia, we met one of the most well read individuals I have come across in a long time. He was immensely entertaining & helped us while away some of the time we had due to bad weather.

Country No.5, Malawi, where we had time to relax a bit & where better than on the shore of Lake Malawi having cleared into the country through Lilongwe international. We couldn't believe it: our first stop after this and there was a trike parked up. After a couple of days relaxing we met a local GA pilot whom I took for a flight. It transpired that he managed a local bush camp. An invite couldn't be turned down, so the next day we went to visit, flying over hippo's & elephant. Amazing stuff! All too soon it was time to move on, and with extra fuel capacity (120L), we headed for Mozambique. Across from Malawi to the Mozambique Coast was incredibly remote & inhospitable. The thought of engine problems was very sobering.

Having had the 1st tailwind in ages we made Quelimane, our first stop in Mozambique, in good time. Due to poor weather we stayed there for three days. The novelty of the place had certainly worn off by the time we left! Our unscheduled stop in Quelimane had removed some of the slack in our program so we attempted to progress South at a fairly swift pace. While taxiing out for departure from Quelimane we went through a swarm of bees. We accelerated as fast as we could and luckily all was well. The anticipated Northerly winds failed to materialise which didn't help our cause very much.

Heading south, the coastline was absolutely stunning: mile upon mile of golden sandy beaches. Mozambique proved to be very undeveloped but was certainly a highlight of our trip. Our exit point from Mozambique was Maputo which proved a little hectic and tested my patience and negotiation skills to the limit. By the fourth visit to the same office to get my passport stamped I was getting a little annoyed. A small payment finally solved the problem. Having nearly been blown over when Nelson Mandela taxied past in his private jet we were finally on our way to Matsapha, Swaziland. After a horribly rough but speedy trip through the mountains and we were in Swaziland. We made our trikes safe and prepared for a few days of land based touring. Immigration proved to be the most efficient we had encountered and we were soon on our way.

After a couple of days in this very pleasant country we headed back to the airport for our final border crossing back in to South Africa.

Having spent the usual hour preparing for flight I called the tower to request engine start which was promptly denied. Oops! Richard's Bay, the airfield in South Africa we had intended to fly to had recently had its international status removed. Several fruitless hours and many phone calls later we left the tower with little option but to plan on flying to Durban, some 300miles south, on the following day. This plan would be fine as long as we didn't have a headwind.

The forecast on the following morning was good and with a more positive response from the tower this time we were on our way at 7.15am. Having set course, the prognosis was good. We were getting a groundspeed of in excess of 80mph. Happy days! Approximately 100miles North of Durban this happy situation changed dramatically. The scattered clouds we had been flying above suddenly started becoming horribly solid and we were forced to descend and, you guessed it, there was a howling headwind at low level meaning we could no longer reach Durban. We were left with no choice but to divert to Richard's Bay. Following the previous day's conversation you can imagine the reception we received. Before we knew it we were being interrogated by customs, immigration and the border police. We spent the majority of the day being interrogated and completing statements before being issued with £1000 fines. Ouch, what a way to encourage flight safety. Needless to say, at this stage the fines are unpaid and we have lodged an appeal. The weather on the following day was appalling and we remained grounded and despondent at our favourite stop so far!

The bad weather was short lived and we headed South towards Durban, electing to land at Cato Ridge, as we were now officially in South Africa. Cato Ridge was a stunning spot located in the 'Valley of a Thousand Hills'. However ,when we landed ,the instructor insisted we follow him somewhere that would suit us even better! A short flight and we were on the ground at Emoyeni. Hangarage was swiftly arranged and we had to walk nearly a hundred yards to the guest quarters. The proprietor swiftly convinced us that this was the place for a day off with a possible side trip to the Drakensburg mountains. Weather the following day proved to be too inappropriate for mountain flying. However we made up for this by flying over local game reserves spotting rhino's and blue wildebeest.

As was often the case it was time to move on too soon and we tracked out towards the coast again over some of the most inhospitable and beautiful terrain. A strong Northeasterly was blowing when we reached the coast and even trimmed slowly. We were travelling at close to 100mph over the Wild Coast. The scenery was absolutely awesome, with waterfalls tumbling over cliffs into the sea. Within an hour and a half the wind had died significantly, probably a good job as we were thinking of landing for a short break at Port St. John's. This is one of the most strangely positioned airfields I have ever seen. Research failed to clarify why you would put an airstrip(tarmac of course)on top of a 1500ft high outcrop. When we landed it was only 8am and very calm. Later in the day it must get very hectic. Over the next few days we continued to track down the coast before tracking inland to Oudtshoorn to meet up with two South African guys who are off on an eighteen month round the world adventure in trikes (www.safreedomflight.co.za)

We are indebted to all the club members for their fantastic hospitality. We left them on the centenary of flight and had a fabulous flight back out of the mountains to the coast at Knysna. After a further stopover recommendation on our final few days to Cape Town we found ourselves landing at a vineyard with a gravel strip. The owner was incredibly friendly and it was, with regret, that we prepared for our final leg to Cape Town. Luckily, with the lighter loads we were now carrying, I found room for a couple of bottles of wine in the trike. Flying, being the unpredictable beast it is sometimes, an hour and a half later we had to land in a field some 50 miles from Cape Town due to badly deteriorating weather. Two hours later and the weather hadn't improved and we made a dash for a nearby airfield, further from Cape Town would you believe! It was to be another two days before the weather improved sufficiently for us to fly

around the Cape of Good Hope and on to our final destination.

In summary we had an amazing trip with enough experiences to dine out on for months! We flew about 5000miles in just over a 100hrs. The journey took us about 7.5 weeks and again the Mainair Blades behaved impeccably. We did not use any of the spares that Mainair Sports supplied us: not even an exhaust spring!

As with the Australia trip Jim will be available to give club talks. A video of our adventure will shortly be available.

Trip statistics

101 hours

1187L of fuel used

48.87mph groundspeed. Airspeed average 60mph (estimate)

5000 miles covered