

Africa's lack of radio and radar coverage can be frustrating and doesn't offer much peace of mind should something go wrong, but then that is a part of what makes the place special, it offers you a freedom which you don't have in congested CTR's which overlap each other overseas. Besides, we're in formation with two other aircraft which can provide logistical and radio support.

Vilankulo had been hit by Cyclone Favio, and even though that was three months before the devastation is still quite apparent. Buildings were destroyed and trees strewn all over the place, UNESCO tents were set up and we could see the community walking around with sheets of whatever material they could find to rebuild their houses. We had originally planned to spend two nights at Bazaruto Lodge, but it had also been wiped out by the cyclone, along with all other lodges in the area. Logistically Vilankulo was our only option for the night, and we found a somewhat rundown place on the beach of the mainland, but it would do for the night.



Day 2 & 3

With a long day ahead we were up early again. With long-range tanks in each of the aircraft we decided to fill up and fly directly to Blantyre in Malawi, just short of 400nm, without the planned refueling stop at Beira. So with border formalities finally sorted we packed our aircraft and called tower. We were to turn out to the left, climb to FL055 and route coastwise to Beira, before proceeding to Blantyre. The view of the islands from the air was magnificent, the turquoise waters not revealing any remnant of the cyclone at this altitude.



Routing coastwise the massive towering Cumulus, which had built up at the point where the warm sea breeze hit land, didn't dissipate as we'd expected closer to Beira. So much for calling them for a MET report; their simple answer "sunny" was obviously not very accurate, a simple reminder that out here it is up to you to predict what the weather will look like further en-route (and to plan your alternates properly).

Beira was the point at which we had to route in-land, so we requested a descent to FL035 and a further descent to 1500ft. Beira approach questioned our second descent, but when we told them that the big clouds above their heads had a base of about 1700ft they granted our second request. It wasn't long however before we had sunshine above our heads again, a silent radio and the massive expanse of bush and winding rivers below.

We crossed the great Zambezi River after which the sudden outcrop of mountains signaled the Malawian border. The scene below changed suddenly from flat rugged bush to a mountainous semi-rainforest, although our 1984 ONC chart of the area reflected many mountains that didn't exist and neglected those that did. It was only far into Malawi that we could finally contact Blantyre and advise them to expect us in 10 minutes.

With the customary border formalities out the way we were in the air again, routing further north towards Lake Malawi. We had to gain some altitude as the lake crossing was about 20nm across, and it's with a slight sinking feeling that one turns away from the shore, heading for the other side.

We were happily chatting away on the official frequency when an ATC voice suddenly piped in quite sternly "Confirm you're not on the Mozambique side of the lake". Silence... "JBP and company, confirm you're not on the Mozambique side". Peter's voice crackled "Negative, we're not on the Mozambique side". That was all we ever heard from an ATC outside their circuit. Of course our statement was the truth, if ever so slightly bent; even our flight plan would have shown that that was our chosen route. Having spoken to pilots that fly in the area this was the correct, if not the official, way of flying this route.



The landing on the 700m strip at Likoma Island proved to be surprisingly soft, although even Luigi's fly-byes hadn't interrupt the local football match on the strip. It was only when Peter was on short final that the crowds dispersed, and then crowded around our aircraft in excited welcoming. Craig, our host, was there to meet us and designated one of the locals to look after the aircraft, and after tying down the planes and unloading our gear it was dark by the time we reached the lodge.



Craig had suggested that we'd be blown away the next morning waking up and seeing our surroundings for the first time in day light, but nothing could have prepared us for that first sight as we opened our eyes. Stretched before us was Lake Malawi in all its splendor, right there in front of our bed, and the morning bath consisted of picking up the snorkels and walking into the submarine fish-rich world of the lake. Breakfast, and all meals for that matter, could be served in bed, on the beach or on top of a rock outcrop, and as Jeanine aptly described the place "This is paradise, it's like Thailand yet it's African". Yet even those words didn't do it justice, as none could, therefore I suggest you come experience the place for yourself!

Day 4 & 5

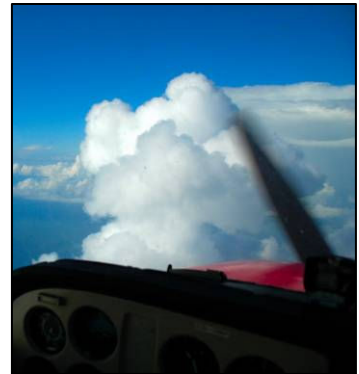
We were reluctant to leave. There's so much more to see and do and the atmosphere on the island is just so special, the people so humble yet proud, the cuisine outstanding, the lifestyle enviable. We were having some problems with the Zambian flight clearance for ZS-OCD (the Zambian air force had lost the application fax) which put a huge smile on many faces, but we had only just got back on schedule and didn't want to play catch-up again. With one last low level fly-by we waved to our hosts at the lodge down below and started the arduous climb to FL085...this time around we had 30miles of fresh water to cross, made slightly more challenging by the build up of scattered Cumulus clouds. We dodged and weaved through and under some further Cumulonimbus all the way to Lilongwe, our refueling point and last stop in Malawi. After some further phone calls to the Zambian air force we finally got our flight clearance number and were set to cross the border.

The next destination was Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. By this stage we were getting quite used to customs formalities, but it was the pilot briefing that took for ever. They wanted 45US\$ per plane for temporary air service permits, payable only in US\$, which by this stage we were running short of. We managed to scrounge some together and exchanged some Rands for dollars to make up the difference, paid the fees, and decided that we all had enough fuel to get us to Livingstone; we were keen to get there and daylight time was running short.

From a distance we saw the smoke as if from a massive fire, but this smoke was from its opposite element. It was the water vapor rising above the Victoria Falls. ATC gave us free reign for the approach and we were happy to touch down with a couple of minutes' light to spare.



The Vic Falls: imagine what David Livingstone must have thought as the first European to witness this spectacle. When he reached the area the local Kololo tribe told him about "Mosi-Oa-Tunya", the smoke that thunders, and led him up to the falls. Today there is a bridge leading to a big Basalt "island" facing the falls, and from this viewpoint you get to witness the shear power as the Zambezi River drops into the gorge below. Take a raincoat however, lest ye get drenched...



Day 6

With a more relaxed but scenic flight ahead of us we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast before departing for the airport. Once there we went through the usual rig moral of clearing customs and filing flight plans etc. and strolled back to the planes to refuel. But it was not to be...the local electricity suppliers were working on the lines (scheduled) and with that the fuel pumps were out of operation. No one could tell us how long this was going to take...

Looking at the map the next refueling point was Kasane about 50nm to the west, which was our entry point into Botswana anyway. Peter was happy with OCD's remaining fuel, but MTK needed topping up. Thankfully I had filled up JBP the previous day on a trip to the airport to collect some things and sort out certain formalities, so with the use of a jerry can, the fuel drain by the nose-wheel and a lot of patience we finally siphoned 40L and transferred it to MTK.

Routing out overhead the falls we were told to fly at 6000ft or above to avoid the tourist microlight and chopper traffic below before continuing to Kasungula, the point at which Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana meet. From there we were cleared for landing at nearby Kasane.



This part of the world is renowned for the number of elephants and other wildlife that choose it as a home. As we flew low-level along the Chobe River we came across countless herds of elephant, giraffe, buffalo, and wildebeest. But as is generally the case in a fixed wing, you hardly have time to appreciate the sight before passing it, especially for the pilot who has to concentrate on obstacles to be avoided ahead of him. As we left the river for inland Botswana we climbed to about 1000ft AGL, and even at this altitude we could see the elephants congregated around desolate watering holes. The area was heading into dry season, the start of the migration of wildlife towards wetter pastures; the most famous being the Okavango Delta. Waters drain down from Angola to form this 15000km² oasis set in Botswana's harsh and arid desert. 50 miles inbound to our destination lodge we could already see signs of water below and within no time we were flying over a maze of lagoons, channels and islands. Only with a birds-eye-view can the scale of this natural wetland really be appreciated.



We found our landing strip in amongst the myriad of islands, most with their own strips, and reported left downwind 12 for Kanana. Our hosts waiting on the ground had already cleared the strip of any wildlife and we came down for another smooth landing on the soft sand.

On a game drive that afternoon a lioness jumped up out of the grass directly in front of the open Landcruiser, but immediately settled down again for her afternoon nap. She and two other lionesses were seemingly oblivious to our presence just three meters away. About two km further we found her cubs, hungry and anxiously awaiting their mother's catch, exposed to hyena and other predators. On spotting the first giraffe I demanded our guide's promise of one Zimbabwe dollar, but he only had a hundred thousand dollar note; even that wouldn't be worth anything by the next day considering their inflation rate. Instead he offered his expansive knowledge of the bush and the animals, his tracking skills guiding us to the elephant, impala and lechwe herds and making for a remarkable game drive. After viewing the sunset over a glass of wine and some snacks we found the male lion walking along the road towards the cubs and the females. Hopefully the cubs were his own as the male lion often takes out those of competition males, but this guy looked so placid walking along with our vehicle headlights following him that we could hardly imagine such brutality.



On reaching camp we found the lionesses also walking into the camp. This evening we would have to be careful, and would be accompanied to our tents by one of the guides. But first we enjoyed a scrumptious dinner and some drinks around the fire. For many people this is their favorite part of the day, chilling with friends around a warm fire under the African stars, with the sounds of the wild serving as a reminder not to get too lazy.

Day 7

The stoop of the large en-suite tents built on stilts, with a view over the floodplains, was a great place for an early morning coffee. We could see where the hippos had grazed in between the tents the night before, snorting and making a racket that would probably chase away even the tokoloshi (African ghost). But not the lionesses, also they had walked through our camp, as we could tell from their spoor on the main path.

All packed up and ready to leave we discussed how we would go about taking off from the strip. The sand was extremely soft and the strip about 700m long. There was only a very slight breeze blowing 090, but the heat of the day was building up. The trees lining the sides and ends of the runway didn't make things easier. But it proved to be simple; we lined up on 12 and using the short and soft field techniques taught in the bushpilot course we were up in no time, and had enough time to build up the speed to clear the trees.



Maun was our first refueling stop, and further en-route to Francistown we could see the herds of animals migrating across the salt pans towards the delta that we'd just come from. Crossing the Limpopo River border to South Africa the skies up ahead were looking frighteningly dark. "Déjà vu" I radioed to Peter, as he had been with me on the last trip when our entrance into SA was accompanied by great big masses of Cumulonimbus, torrential downpours and

the region's famous thunder and lightning. These storms are thankfully mostly localized and we could fly around and between them to land at Polokwane, slightly shaken but not stirred.

It wasn't over yet however. We still had an hour's flight to Hippo Pools, and after assessing the weather and talking to MET (great to have such services again) we were on our way again, dodging and diving through the Bewaarskloof valley to miss the worst of the storms and descend down to the Lowveld.

The Hippo Pool's runway is somewhat difficult to spot. Only when Peter radioed "Markus, you should be overhead now" did I look straight down and see the numbers. And even with its 800m tar one still needs to be awake on short final to avoid the big trees lining, the potholes in and the irregular slope of the runway. Fantastic stuff, these challenging strips definitely beat landing at big internationals.

On this our last evening in the bush we celebrated with a potjie pot (SA speciality) and a good bottle of red. It wasn't long however before the day's excitement made us sleepy and we enjoyed a good night's rest, waking up only once to the hippo's antics outside our window.

Day 8

We routed south towards the picturesque Blyde River Canyon, the third biggest canyon in the world. Using the mountain flying techniques taught in the course we found the cliff of the canyon with the updrafts and followed it all the way through. This was the point at which Luigi and his family would leave us, they were routing directly to Rand Airport to drop off their Saratoga. Peter and Jeanine, Carmen and I followed the Drakensberg range back to Barberton Valley to drop off some supplies we'd borrowed from CC.

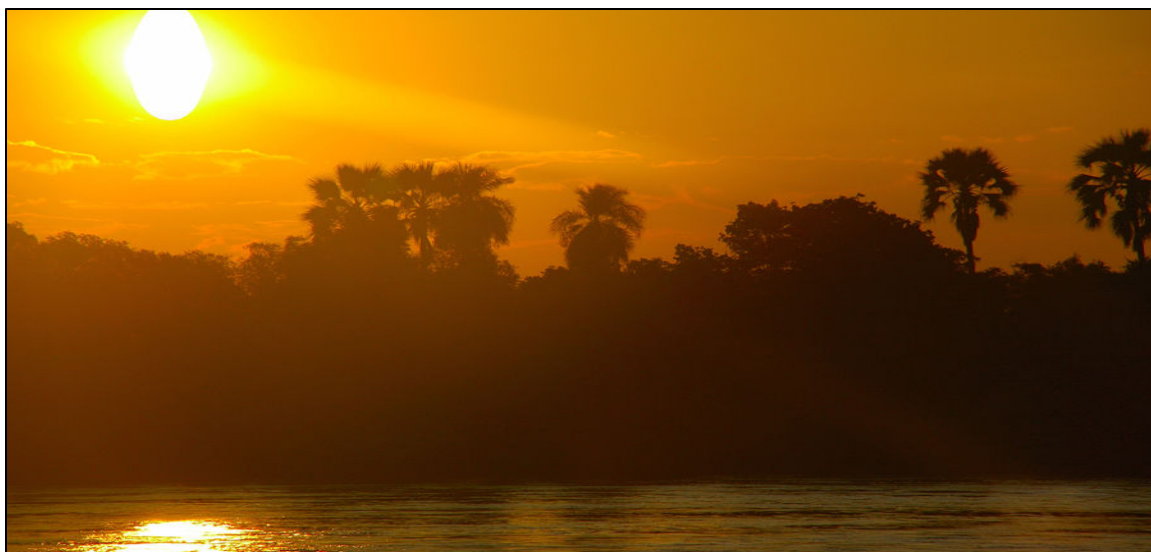


Saying our good-byes one last time we lined up for the last leg of our trip. Peter was flying to

Lanseria, I had to drop JBP off at Wonderboom. I thought I had it tough with Wonderboom ATC inundated with transmissions from aircraft arriving and departing. The last 35hrs flying time had made me quite lax with the radio and it was with some effort that I had to get used to the constant chatter of a busy CTR, waiting for that perfect moment to put in my request. Poor Peter however was told that he was not cleared to enter the Johannesburg CTR along the Pinedene Route as he was not familiar with the area. Peter was at a loss, he didn't know what to do.

As if sent from heaven another pilot piped up, told ATC that Peter was from Germany and had just done a long route through Southern Africa, but as he wasn't familiar with the area this pilot would happily fly in formation and guide him through. And so Peter established visual contact with this pilot and followed him along the route. Who this person was we don't know. How he knew Peter's origin and that we'd just finished a long leg through Africa is even more of a mystery. And the fact that he helped out even though he was just enjoying an afternoon flight just goes to show that there really is a special bond between us eagle-wannabees. It's great that Peter managed to get this person's email address; whoever you are you can look forward to a nice cold one next time Peter's in SA...and he's assured me there definitely will be a next time!

Further photos of this tour are available at <http://www.bushpilot.co.za/apr07>.



With many warm regards from the Bushpilot Adventures team,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Markus', written in a cursive style.

Markus