

African Aero Safaris

by Guy Leitch



Perhaps you have forgotten that personal flying is not only about getting there, it is just as much about the joy of the journey!

DAVE VAN DER SPUY of African Aero Safaris has developed both the destination and the joy of the journey into a celebration of flying and has made it his business to share this joy with others. The founder of African Aero Safaris, van der Spuy has built a business that mere mortals can only dream of.

The company makes it possible for pilots from around the world to enjoy the spectacular scenery and flying conditions that only Southern Africa can offer. In the process he gets paid to escort his wide eyed clients to the best game lodges and hotels. Like they say, it's a tough job, but hey, someone's gotta do it.

SA Flyer accompanied a gaggle of C172's and C182's on African Aero Safari's ten day Rhino Tour across South Africa, Botswana and Zambia. It was a journey of thrills, camaraderie, laughs and learning. The thrill of flying over vast herds of elephants; the camaraderie of enduring freezing desert nights followed by the sun baked glare of the Makgadigadi salt pans; of laughing at the shared joys of the journey while learning, like Jonathan Livingstone



Bush flight planning.

Seagull, what it means to really fly.

An aviation adventure of this nature attracts remarkable people. Perhaps most noteworthy were Ms. Jon DeLores Cellitti and Peter Love. A more unlikely pair is hard to imagine:

The 79-year-old School Inspector and Helen Bedd

Our story begins in early 2004 when Mr. Peter Love, a retired British school inspector has two ostensibly chance encounters in Egypt's Valley of the Kings with Ms Jon Cellitti, (aka Helen Bedd - of whom more later). A sprightly seventy nine year old, Love blooms under the attentions of Cellitti and shares his dream of one day flying over the Victoria Falls. The shiny wings on his peaked cap from Exeter Flying Club and the research he has done on African Aero Safaris make his dream more than merely an old man's wishful thinking. Cellitti catches his enthusiasm and after an extensive exchange of e-mails they resolve to live their dream of a flying safari in Africa.



Living an African flying dream.

The elfin blond from A.R.E.A.

Jon Cellitti is a dynamite little blond package - a merry widow of indeterminate age. Almost certainly old enough to be a grandmother - or even a great grandmother, thanks to perhaps a little, um you know, - work, she pointedly claims that her age is irrelevant. Perhaps just a bit conveniently, she claims to suffer from vertigo, which makes it obligatory for all gallant men to offer her a steadying arm. But beneath the vulnerable exterior of the petite widow beats the heart of a mega deal realtor from Burlingame, San Francisco. And, with wonderful implausibility, under the alias Helen Bedd, Cellitti turns out to be a paid-up member of the Association of Retired Espionage Agents (A.R.E.A) , and also a member of WoW, the Widows and Widowers Institute.

The Luftwaffe

The remainder of the international contingent is composed of the Luftwaffe: Michael Wippler and Peter Simchen are both from Dresden, in what was previously East Germany (whether they encountered Helen Bedd as an active espionage agent before the breakdown of the Berlin Wall is not known). Both are now however, family men who have taken leave from their thriving businesses to explore Africa in a C172. Their English is quaintly aeronautical. Thus, when asked to confirm something on the radio, a simple "affirm" or a read back of their call sign ZS-PEK is not sufficient for the punctilious Germans who inevitably respond with a splendid "Rodscher zat."

The South Africans

Adding local colour, entertaining Johannesburg motorcycle distributor Butch Hirsch and his wife, an Amazonian PhD in marine biology, who still uses her maiden name, Shael Harris. They brought along their pristine C182, ZS-FIX.

The tour leader is David van der Spuy, son of the late General Kennie van der Spuy, one of the two founders of the SAAF. For the first forty five years of his life van der Spuy jr developed a reputation as a wild youth racing bikes, boats and planes hard and then partying even harder. Recent marriage and kids may have slowed him down but he still has an apparently irredeemable need to challenge authority, specifically air traffic controllers and all the officials involved with cross border flights. The writer flew with van der Spuy in his smart C182, ZS-KDT



Cessna 182 landing at Sedibe on a previous expedition.

The safari

For the international pilots, the first few days have to be spent dealing with license validation requirements which involves briefings about flying in SA with emphasis on such things as density altitude, airlaw, emergency procedures, airspaces, insurance etc. Familiarization briefings at Lanseria tower were included as part of the preparation for the airlaw exam and PPL checkride. There was also time set aside to do the usual Johannesburg tourist things such as visits to Soweto. Ironically, it was not in Soweto but in the luxurious Palazzo Hotel in Sandton that van der Spuy's briefcase was stolen with all his cash for the safari plus GPS, handheld radio, cell phones, credit cards etc.

Day one of the actual safari started with the slowness of African time. The old adage of: "time to spare? - then go by air" applied as we sorted out documentation for cross border flights and did last minute shopping and currency swaps. Characteristically, van der Spuy set the tone for his dealings with officialdom by earning the ire of a martinet airport official who threatened to fine us each R10 000 for parking the aircraft in the wrong spot to clear customs! Such 'progress' is the typical failure of user friendliness of "the new and improved Lanseria".

Dave assigned titles of 'Formo 1' to 'Formo 4' to each aircraft and we agreed to use 123.40 to chat. Again ATC officialdom triumphed by not allowing a formation take-off - 'too military' they maintain. Finally we were airborne in a loose gaggle of four airplanes. Once over the Magaliesberg and clear of controlled airspace ZS-KDT led the group down to a few hundred feet above the ground and we cruised northwards with the two C182s wallowing at a sedate 100 knots, being the best speed of the slowest C172.

Low and slow was for me a revelation. Up till now, going places in an aeroplane meant taking off climbing to as high a flight level as possible for smoothness and then getting bored by the slow passage of scenery

and time. But African Aero Safaris turns the journey into a voyage of discovery. It means using your plane to explore the countryside, taking in all the features and secrets hidden from any height greater than 1 000ft above ground.

And so we cruised sedately across the rugged landscape, between looming granite mesas and buttes as old as time. West of Polokwane we flew over a gigantic plateau that contained mysterious virgin fertile valleys straight out of the writing of Rider Haggard. And this was all in our first two hours of flight, before we had even crossed the border into Botswana!

After swooping past soaring eagles over the Limpopo River we land at the huge tarred runway of the Limpopo Valley airport in the Tuli Block - a 7 000 hectare private game reserve that, thanks to its huge population of elephants and the dryness of winter, has the appearance of a shelled WWI battlefield. We know we are now in Africa because the terminal building is an open sided thatch boma and the robust female air traffic controller uses a handheld radio to organize customs and transport.

Within five minutes of leaving the airport we find ourselves in the middle of a large herd of elephants. As home to lion, elephant, eland and baobabs, it is soon clear why this area is known as the land of the giants. I stay at Mashatu's tented camp for the first night and then the main lodge for the second night. As the sister camp to world renowned Mala Mala, this is Africa at its best. The hospitality is seamless, the accommodation sublime and the experience is enhanced by rangers whose love of sharing their knowledge vies only with their love of the bush. It is winter and the nights are long and cold so our beds are pre-heated with a hot water bottle that I nestle between my chilled ankles.

As an added bonus, Dave (already nicknamed 'flight commander') turns out to have a vast knowledge of the bush and in particular the (feathered) birds. We later

discover that, not only did his father start the SAAF, but his mother was a distinguished botanist.

After two soul restoring days at Mashatu we take to the air again for one of the longest days flying, a 430 nm flight via Francistown to Sandibe Lodge in the Okavango River Delta. After takeoff we do the first of what will be many farewell beat-ups of the camp we are leaving as we head low-level for the Shashe river-bed.

Francistown is just another airfield with expensive fuel (at P4.71 or about R7.50 per litre) and P75 approach and then another P75 departure fee. Dave smoothes the way by handling the formalities of the paperwork, Gendec (general declarations) and flight planning for all the aircraft.

Leaving Francistown turns out to be the first act of what becomes a routine comedy. Our venerable septuagenarian Peter Love at times seems to get overwhelmed, forgetting to remove his chocks and close engine access hatches.

Once airborne, everyone seems to have a different opinion as to what heading is required and as the lead aircraft we busily traverse broad swathes of the featureless countryside rounding up the other three aircraft and sheep-dogging them into the required gaggle.

Heading west over the vast Makgadigadi salt plains, we drone ever onwards at a plodding 100 knots across vast tracts of bush without any sign of habitation of man or even beast. We pass low over the expansive pans and then abeam Maun, we are abruptly over the wetland wilds of one of Africa's prime wilderness areas - the only place on earth where a river flows in one direction half of the year and then reverses itself to flow back for the second part of the year. We cruise round in a big slow circle taking in the Okavango scenery before landing at the 1 000m long hard packed surface of Chitabe airfield. For our international pilots this is their first experience of an African dirt airstrip and we have to continually watch their airmanship to prevent them from prop-blasting dust over everyone.

Lacking only rhino, The Okavango Delta is officially not a "big five" area but there is nonetheless an abundance of game and the birding is spectacular. Enroute to Sandibe Lodge we drive through shallow pans filled with water and watch elephants shaking seed pods out of the skyscraping fan palms. Baboons bark raucously as we drive towards a column of dust kicked up by a vast herd of buffalo. We break for coffee and rusks as we watch the buffalo and immediately thereafter

encounter a cheetah breathing heavily in the shade of an enormous termite mound. It is watching a herd of impala in frustration while it gets his breath back before making another attempt to run down the fleet antelope.

Progress has come to the swamps and the Mokoro dugout canoes, traditionally made from Sausage trees, have been replaced with fibreglass replicas. But the ride is just as magical as we glide on a carpet of pastel lilies into an opening in the reeds, bathed in sunshine. The water isn't deep but it's alive with creatures of all sizes, ranging from tadpoles to gargantuan hippos guffawing at their own jokes and then showing us the size of their Mokoro eating mouths. The moment is timeless, heavenly and unforgettable. Then, back on the Land Cruiser, we cross paths with lion, leopard, kudu, wildebeest, buffalo and the ubiquitous elephant. In the twilight we encounter a rare prize, as a pack of wild dogs on the hunt slinks through the shadows of dusk.

Sandibe Lodge is a Conservation Corporation triumph. The name derives from the Bushman word Santantadibe which means "it does not belong to us". It reminds us that we are but privileged visitors to this Eden that will (hopefully) still be here long after we have gone. The lodge is wonderfully simple - a huge thatched roof provides cover for the dining and lounge areas and a roost for countless large fruit bats. The imposingly tall structure is nonetheless dwarfed by imperious Jackalberry trees, filled with the calls of Meyers Parrots. In the camp there is a personal valet to see to our every need.

That evening, replete after a gourmet meal and fine company, we retire to our simple yet spacious room with its raised deck overlooking the Sandibe River. As we reflect on a day fully lived, we listen to the rusty bed spring noises of the fruit bats and the eerie sonar pinging sounds of the Scops Owl. Outside our room an elephant bull called Hoover crunches noisily at the trees. The following morning Jon Cellitti tells us that she had been expecting Africa to be hot so she slept in a naughty black nylon nightie. We easily manage to persuade her that nobody will mind if she lowers her usual vampish standards for just a few nights so that she doesn't die of exposure in the cold swamp nights.

For Dave and myself the second day at Sandibe was an eye opener. As the camp was full we were relegated to the pilot's accommodation which turned out to be the assistant manager's less than salubrious accommodation, located in the middle of the camp's maintenance area and directly

opposite the generator's exhaust. Okavango bush pilots may have what at first glance seems one of the most glamorous jobs going, but their accommodation leaves a lot to be desired when compared to the sybaritic embrace of their guest's rooms.

After an early morning breakfast we supplement the fuel in ZS-PEK's tanks from the longer range aircraft. Then after a pre-flight briefing on the bonnet of a Land Cruiser, we fire up our by now trusty airplanes and are again low level over the waterways of the Delta, past teeming herds of buffalo and elephant. After landing and walking in the domestic arrivals entrance and then immediately out through the international departures at Kasane, we are airborne for Livingstone, Zambia. We fly down the Zambezi at an altitude low enough to chase our shadows across the lazy waters of the broad river. The ATC controllers are reluctant to accept "low" level as an altitude so we nominally fly at 4 000ft.

Approaching Livingstone we are cleared for the 'Flight of Angels' - to over-fly the famous Falls. Fixed wing aircraft are however restricted to above 6 000ft as microflights and above them helicopters operate at the lower levels. Livingstone ATC restricts us to only two aircraft at a time over the falls while forcing the other two to orbit his airport until their turn. True to form, van der Spuy argues but the controller easily gets the better of him by simply insisting that he has given an

instruction to be obeyed and that puts the troublesome Boer in his place.

On the ground van der Spuy again has to pour his slimiest oil on troubled waters before we are able to get away to Thorntree Lodge, a rustic privately owned lodge on the north bank of the Zambezi. Our bungalow is a few feet from the flowing waters.

We spend the morning at one of the seven great natural wonders of the world, the Victoria Falls. First we haggle with the vendors in the local craft market for mementos before we walk into the Victoria Falls Park for precipitous views from the edge of the gorge. Mist and spray makes the rental ponchos appreciated. After drying out from the falls we stroll to the main bridge and Peter Simchen parts with US\$85 to defy death on the 111m high bungi jump.

It's easy to loose track of time and we decide that if it's Monday we must still be in Zambia. On departure from Thorntree Lodge we drive to the nearby Simonga Basic School. For many this is an unexpected highlight of the safari. The school is valiantly struggling to eke the most out of its grossly limited resources but its pupils and staff are so genuinely happy to see us that even the most jaded heart is melted. We have brought gifts of writing materials and sweets and the unalloyed songs of gratitude from the children reveal to our international flyers the true heart of Africa.

Back in the air, Dave leads the entire gaggle in a flyby of the school that brings out all the children to cheer and wave. Then we retrace our route low level along the Zambezi River to Kasane. With much encouragement along the lines of 'Formo 4 - close up, Formo 2 - slow down', we begin to get the gaggle close enough to actually feel like a formation and we try for some air to air pictures with a digital camera - which proves a lot more difficult than with a conventional SLR camera.

After a top-up fuel stop, and the formalities of immigration and the Gendec to import aircraft, we head south along the border with Zimbabwe and the main road. Where the arrow straight road has been widened to act as "Emergency Landing Strip 1", we turn south-west and head into the Makgadigadi pans.

Near the edge of the vast surreal salt surface our flight commander leads the four aircraft down until our wheels are crunching through the thin crust of the surface. Shaded by our airplane wings, we gratefully sip bottled water and cannot but be awed by vistas as far as the distant mirages and of the smallness of man under the vast dome of the cloudless sky.

With what is effectively an infinitely wide runway we take off in formation. The next leg is a relatively short 94 nm to the town of Nati. Still at low level, we are rewarded with the unforgettable sight of the surface of a pan



Left: "Rodscher zat" - our two German friends: Michael Wippler and Peter Simchen.

Right: Victoria Falls.

Below left: School visit.

Below right: One of the few dirt field takeoffs.

Below: Checking the fuel was no problem for 79-year-old Peter Love.



abruptly coming alive and turning bright pink as a cloud of flamingos takes to the air beneath or wings.

The village of Nata turns out to be a truck stop but Nata Lodge has spacious and luxurious log chalets and Earl Grey tea. After the desiccation of the salt pans some of us plunge gratefully into the swimming pool, regardless of its being mid-winter, while others head off into the bush on quad bikes, where our van der Spuy shows us his prowess at wheelies followed by inadvertent somersaults.

The following morning is going to be a big day's flying so our Flight Commander manages to get us all up and going at 06h00 and, skipping breakfast, we are soon shivering in the predawn chill on the back of a game viewer speeding towards Nata airstrip 15km away. For a nominal fee some locals have guarded the aircraft and cleaned off the dust and the millions of smashed bugs from low level flying.

On approach to Francistown van der Spuy tells the controller that we have come from Nutumi which causes great consternation. What van der Spuy doesn't expect is that the ATC will call Nutumi and confirm that we were not in fact there. Now trapped in an arbitrary lie we all stand around forlornly for a further hour at the fuel pumps, wiping out the benefit of the freezing pre-dawn and breakfast-less start to the day while our venerable Flight Commander wriggles out of this one. We half expect to see him being led away in handcuffs but finally he re-emerges and we are cleared for takeoff. As a departing taunt van der Spuy requests takeoff to Pietersburg and the controller pointedly clears us to Polokwane.

Crossing back into sunny South Africa, the clouds begin to build and we land at Polokwane under lowering ceilings. After a few phone calls it is clear that we will not be able to fly over or around the escarpment and into Tzaneen so Dave arranges for the bus that was to meet us at the Tzaneen airport to come all the way to Polokwane to fetch us.

Tzaneen is a welcome change to the dusty savannah and bush. Cool, misty mountains provide expansive views over tropical plains a thousand feet below. I avail myself of the sensual delights of an aromatherapy massage and a workout in the superb Agatha spa that is part of the luxurious Coach House hotel. Dinner is sublime under the expert hands of Chef Gaylord Tearle and so replete, we retire to the luxurious suites to which African Aero Safaris has managed to organize an upgrade, thus more than redeeming himself from the

early cold start and spot at Francistown.

Next morning, still in trepidation of the forecast weather, we head back to Polokwane by bus, stopping at a mountain-top tea plantation whose panoramic views are unfortunately lost to us by the blanketing cloud. Back at Polokwane airport we kick our heels in the airport cafeteria for endless hours while we wait for the cloud base to lift. The airport is officially closed but undaunted, Dave works his charm with ATC and they clear just him to take off for a look-see. He returns and confirms that all is clear to the west and so we complete our refuelling and are soon heading for Welgevonden West airfield. Fortunately the cloud has cleared but the writer and the Hirsch's have to leave the safari early due to other commitments. I head back to Lanseria in their C182 while the rest of the intrepid travellers set forth for the last stop of the safari.

Makweti Lodge straddles a deep ravine and features swinging wooden bridges to the thatched chalets. This is a place to relax, read a book, listen to the sounds of the bush or lounge on your private verandah viewing birds and other wildlife that wanders by. It is an opportunity to write up your neglected journal and digest the incredible experiences of the past ten days. The remaining intrepid travellers report that one of unexpected highlights of Makweti was almost losing their ranger to a pride of hungry lions. It was only much shouting and a quick rescue by Michael Wippler that saved his bacon!

By now our Flight Commander has deemed our foreign fliers experienced aviators and proficient at navigating the wild spaces of Africa: he holds no doubts they can find their own way back to Lanseria. And so it was on the last day, that he confidently monitored their progress on his handheld, listening to the plummy tones of a 79 year old Englishman with his 'Wilcos' and the Teutonic 'Rodscher zaf' as the humble C172's found their own way back to Lanseria.

No words can do justice to the multitude of memories such a safari creates. For me it was about learning to celebrate the rambunctious joy and the rare privilege of private flight - the freedom to go where and when and how high or low one pleases. Like Jonathan Livingston Seagull I learned what it is to really fly and thus what it means to really be alive. Personal flying is a rare freedom that anyone who has the privilege of a pilot's license must never take for granted. African Aero Safaris and Dave van der Spuy made this possible and in the most luxurious of ways.