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Around Namibia in a Lambada touring motor glider, June 2006

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The June winter air was crisp and clear when Adri taxied the motor glider to the holding point at runway 33, Worcester. We were fortunate that a cold front had passed through the previous day, and we were leaving just in time before the next big front came racing over the Atlantic.

I watched Adri going through the pre-flight checks. For this trip she would be the "pilot in command". My job was navigation and landing on the remote airfields. I knew I could not have ever found a more competent pilot to take us on this epic Kalahari mission.

As we taxied onto the runway Adri called on the radio "Motor glider golf x-ray hotel entering runway 33 and rolling." I could feel the glider accelerating but she held it down for a longer ground run, as we were full of fuel, plus some basic clothes for Adri. I had a spare set of clothes, cameras and my laptop. The only luxury that Adri could afford to bring was a small hair dryer, tucked into the fuselage.

Once she raised the flaps and set course to our first waypoint, I knew our dream had become a reality. Soon we were approaching Wolseley, where we had to climb to pass over the Witzenberg mountains into the Ceres Valley. Then it was on to Kagga Kamma.

Calvinia was our first stop, just to stretch our legs and visit a toilet. Next was Upington, 373km away, and soon we were airborne and straight on track.

As soon as we entered Upington airspace I contacted ATC to give our position and intention to divert to the Augrabies Falls. We just could not resist the temptation to see the falls when the Orange River was flowing strongly.

After some scenic turns over the falls we headed for the airport at Upington. The ATC at Upington gave us clearance to land on runway 35, all of 4900 meters long! I opened the dive brakes over the threshold and did my normal steep and aggressive decent, but this was the longest runway that I have ever landed on! We taxied to the fuel bay and sorted out the formalities.

Adri took care of the fuel and immigration while I had to file a flight plan for the next morning. I also had a chat with the Met Officer. The ATC helped me with the flight plan and briefed me on the airspace. It was not long before we had parked the aircraft and were waiting for our lift to the B&B, right next to the Orange River.

That evening we enjoyed dinner with local wine while watching the sunset over the Orange River.

The next morning as we departed at 08h00, I activated our flight plan by radio with Johannesburg ATC and set the GPS for Ai-Ais, some 362km away. Conditions were calm, as was expected so early in the morning. Later Ai-Ais airfield could be seen like a scar in the desert.

Adri descended to check the condition of the runway before we attempted to land. She did a number of low passes but we decided not to land as we could see the runway had been damaged by the summer rain. The risk was too high, being so far from home. Next we headed for the Fish River Canyon and descended into the canyon to experience low-level canyon flying. Flying in a canyon is like slope soaring with the slope on both sides. You just don't know where you are going.



After this nail-biting experience, we headed off to Keetmanshoop. We'd lost time flying around in the Canyon, so Adri had to push it to get our position reported in accordance with the active flight plan. Eventually we made contact with Keetmanshoop and soon after, we landed. I took care of the fuel and Adri sorted out the customs formalities and landing fees.

After a short break and a snack, we were airborne on the 323km leg to Soussusvlei Lodge. We flew to the edge of the escarpment where Adri descended and then dived down towards the plains, just to experience the beauty of the escarpment. We were now in Namibia and the vegetation had changed dramatically. Low flying was now the order of the day. Adri flew above just above the thorn trees. In the open spaces she descended to just above the grass, where we could look up at the trees. Namibia had just had the best rain in 30 years so we were privileged to spectacular scenery in places without roads.

Shortly after landing at Soussusvlei the Lodge transport picked us up. Later we walked in the veld, just watching the late afternoon sunset. The accommodation and dinner was first class with dishes of various antelope meat. I also tried a portion of crocodile meat to the amusement of our waiters.

The next morning we were the first guests at breakfast, as we needed an early start. After takeoff we circled the lodge gaining height and set course for the Soussusvlei Valley. We flew low over the sand dunes and admired the shapes and spectacular colours in the early morning sun. What amazed us was that between the barren sand dunes was often grass, with Oryx grazing gracefully.



We flew right over the Dead Vlei and dune 42. This was definitely one of the highlights of the trip that I will never forget. We returned following the road and set course for our next waypoint, descending to fly low level between the sand dunes. The number of antelope we saw was amazing and because of this we were flying in "stealth mode", so as not to disturb the wild life. This way we remained just above the grass and sand dunes.



There was a long and dangerous route ahead as we pushed along the edge of the desert to our waypoint at Gobabeb. Our route was now west over the desert with no possibility of making a safe emergency landing. Adri carefully checked the dials and followed the GPS track for the coastal waypoint. We did not say much during this 58km leg, but we were both silently checking the status of the aircraft all the time, carefully listening to the motor. The coast eventually appeared and we started to head north, understanding exactly why it is called the "Skeleton Coast".



The sand dunes end where the water starts - there's really no place to land in an emergency. We flew over large colonies of seals, enjoying the mid day sun, and were taken aback by the amount of dead seals washed up on the beach.

Eventually we made contact with Walvis Bay ATC, who handed us over to Swartkopmund. After dodging the fog along the coast we landed at Swartkopmund, refuelled and enjoyed lunch.

The next leg of our journey was 163km to Rostok Desert Lodge, but we first had to fly over the Khomas Hochland. This is even more inhospitable than the desert we had just traversed. The best description is "eroded moon craters" with absolutely no road access. We flew low over this area to enjoy the view, but we knew if something went wrong with the aircraft, there would be no hope for us.



Rostok Desert Lodge was hosting their annual "fly in" and we were one of the first aircraft to arrive. Once landed, we were welcomed by lodge owner Wolfgang 'Kucki' Kuhhirt, of Kucki's Pub fame. The transport took us to the lodge and showed us to our room.



Rostok Ritz is a marvel in the desert. Kucki has created an oasis and a first class lodge. It must never be missed if you plan a trip to that area. Rostock Ritz is built on the slope of a hill overlooking the Rostock Mountain range to the north. In the southwest lies the colourful dunescape of the Namib Desert.



Shortly afterwards we could hear the sound of the other 20 aircraft overhead, and that evening we joined the other pilots for a fantastic dinner of venison. We met some interesting people at Rostock. Neil Digby-Clarke and his wife had arrived in Namibia in their Land Rover for a vacation, and ended up buying a farm. Neil is now a tourist reporter in Namibia. Another was François, an Air Namibia Pilot, and yet another couple from Swartkopmund specialise in wildlife video productions. They were all fascinating to listen to with their interesting stories.

The next day we took part in a navigation and water-bomb drop competition. Adri and I were fortunate to win a prize, though I'm not sure if it was for our competence, or for not killing too many people. The hospitality of the Namibian people is something to experience.

Next morning we set off for Bitterwasser, the famous gliding venue that we in the CGC compete against in summer. It was important for me to visit the home of my enemy!



After landing on the Bitterwasser pan and a short break, we set sail for Pokweni, 36km away. Jos and Annalie van der Merwe are old friends and we were looking forward to staying with them. We were also looking forward to our nice room there. Pokweni is close to my heart and my plan is to spend some time there doing some serious sailplane soaring and enjoying the "big sky".

That evening we were joined by Rainer and Barbara Fribose of "Wings and Tracks", the suppliers of our aircraft.

After Pokweni we set off for Windhoek and Etosha. A very strong crosswind made flying difficult. Arriving at Mushara Lodge next to Etosha, we buzzed the lodge to let them know we'd arrived. It was such a pleasure setting up on final approach for the dirt runway and seeing the windsock pointing straight down the runway. After an exhausting day a crosswind landing was the last thing I wanted. It was a gentle touch down and soon we unpacked the glider. The atmosphere of the African bush scenery was amazing, and soon the lodge Land Rover was there to pick us up. The Lodge offers only the very best and our room was beautiful, with thatch roof and African decor.

The next morning we were the only two on the game drive. It was cold on the truck but we had an unforgettable experience, sighting numerous antelope, zebra, giraffe, buffalo, warthog and lions.

Early the next morning we departed for Tsumeb, then on to the Caprivi Strip. Flying from Tsumeb to Bagani, the 429km leg was rather boring, but we flew low over the trees to get the most out of the situation. Suddenly we saw the Okavango River and the scenery changed dramatically, the GPS telling us 5km to go before Negepi Camp. Before I knew what was happening, I recognised the croc-cage swimming pool from Getaway magazine. We continued down the Okavango

River to be treated with the spectacular views of hundreds of antelope, buffalo, hippo, crocodiles, giraffes and elephants.



Arriving at the Bagani airstrip, our transport was waiting, and the lodge had arranged for a security guard to look after the aircraft. We were driven to the camp where Adri was shown to the tree house where we would be staying.



Outside I noticed a 4X4 with a Cape Town registration and next moment was dumb struck when my brother-in-law François O'Kennedy appeared, smiling from ear to ear. "What are you doing here?" We quickly checked into our tree house and joined them at their campfire. He complained that he had driven right across Namibia and not seen a single wild animal. I promised them an early morning flight along the Okavango River to see the game.



The Negepi Camp was special with the spectacular sunsets and hippo sounds at night. When day breaks you can see the fog on the river as the sky changes colour.

We took a makoro trip and were guided by an excellent local man that had an unlimited amount of knowledge on the area.

Next morning we were up early to enjoy the colours of the sky and the sounds of the hippos. After paying our security guard, we set course for Katima Mulilo, via Botswana. I had planned a rather complicated flight into Botswana, joining many of the airfields towards Maun, and then back into the Caprivi. It is swamp area and I thought it would be best to always be 15 minutes away from an airfield and possible safety.

Later that afternoon we contacted Katima Mulilo air traffic control and were given clearance to land. It is hard to believe that this now dilapidated airfield was, in the 70's, an active hub of the once mighty SADF. Arriving at Katima we were greeted by the airport staff with amazement and friendliness that can only be experienced in Namibia. They could not understand how such a small aircraft with such long thin wings could fly so far.

Here we were once again collected by one of the lodges and spent a wonderful evening next to the Zambezi, watching the sun set like a ball of fire over the river.



Early the next morning we flew low over the Zambezi in an easterly direction, watching the locals fishing from their makoros. Then Adri turned south towards Chobe National Park where we were treated to views of huge elephant herds. Adri was fortunate to see a lion running in the grass, but once she turned around we could not find it again.

It was a long haul south and we knew our adventure was coming to an end. Our next waypoint was in the Makgadikgadi Pan, a spectacular site for its barrenness. This pan stretches literally from horizon to horizon.



We eventually arrived at Francistown, where we re fuelled and cleared customs. We were now on our second-last leg to Pilansberg and then on to an overnight stop at Brits.

At Brits, Rainer and Barbara Friebose live on the airfield and were surprised to hear how far we had flown. They gave us accommodation for the night and also a wonderful supper. Early the next morning while it was still dark, we were already preparing for the flight home. News of another front approaching the Cape made us as anxious to get going again. As a contingency plan we would stay over in the Karoo if we encountered bad weather closer to Worcester.

Lucky the front did not come as quickly as predicted, and the Berg Wind from behind helped us along with an extra 40kph. Conditions were good all the way to Gariep, where the wind changed direction and became more side on. We passed Beaufort West but we did not land. The winter days are rather short and we were concerned about the conditions further south, so decided to push on.

Adri handed over control to me while we were descending through 8000 feet as we entered the Cape Town TMA. Flying over the mountains at the entrance to the Hex River Valley, the turbulence of the approaching front hit us and all hell broke loose. The aircraft was all over the sky but it was a pleasure to be a glider pilot again, flying the Cape mountains. I landed on cross-runway 30 to avoid the setting sun and taxied to the hangar. We unpacked and washed the motor glider, relieved and thankful to be home again.

My special thanks to Adri for motivating me, and sharing my passion for flying. Without her I could never reach for my dreams.

**Adriaan & Adri Hepburn
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