

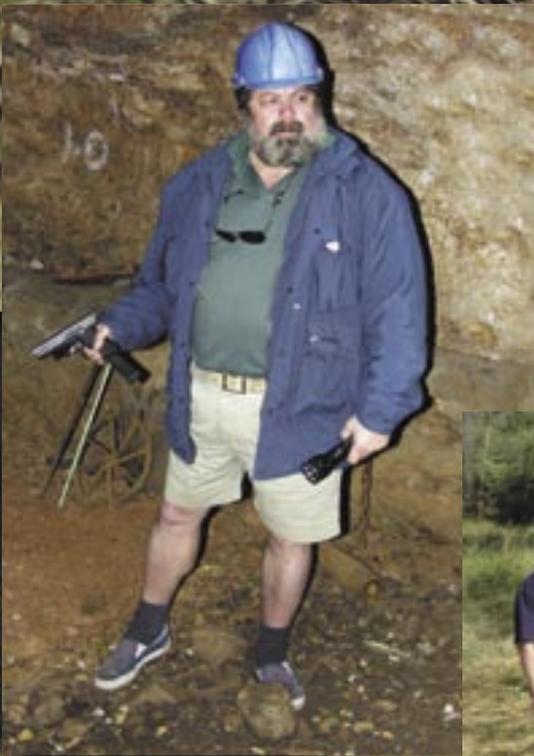
BUSH FLYING



SKY AFRICA

by Peter P. Icke

I met Karl Finatzer in the arrivals hall at Johannesburg International and he promptly took me to an American styled restaurant where I was expected to consume a T-bone steak the size of a toilet seat – some sort of tradition I think. I can't remember the time of day but my stomach was somewhere between wake-up call and breakfast time. This was going to be no ordinary week.



Above, elephant; right, Karl loaded for leopard; below, the group



Maybe I am getting ahead of myself here so I'll try to get back to some sort of beginning. Whilst searching the web for new aviation experiences I came across Karl's bush flying site (www.skyafrica.com). A short email triggered an immediate cheerful response from Karl and an email or two later I found that I had signed up for the nine day June 2004 "Sky Africa Bush-Pilots Training Course". Perhaps I should add at this point that I have only fairly recently returned to flying having retired from

British Airways some 10 years ago. It is true that I've logged about 300 hours of single engine piston experience but this was mostly a long time ago when aeroplanes had tail skids. So a question arose in my mind - do tens of thousands of hours at 35,000ft count for much in the bush?

Anyway, back in South Africa matters were proceeding at some pace. I met the other three candidates; "Uwe", "Mary"

and "Roeland" (we were an international group). A fourth member of the party "Peter" was reporting for a German aviation magazine whilst tackling a somewhat shorter course. The plan was to complete the three days license validation work at Brakpan/Benone or Brakkies (Sky Africa's base five nautical miles South East of Johannesburg International), and then to move up to



Kunkuru, a small game park with dirt strip and lodge some 35nm North of Johannesburg, which would be our base for the remainder of the course.

A word about the structure of Sky Africa: Karl (the boss and owner) runs the self fly and chauffeured Safari side of the operation whilst his daughter Barbara and Paul Lamond, both SAA pilots, run the flight training school, which offers training up to the level of CPL and Instrument Rating. They have a number of highly qualified flying instructors working for them – mostly airline pilots integrated into the Sky Africa schedule on a part time basis.

Karl owns his own fleet of brightly painted aeroplanes and they are all in tiptop condition. His favourite is the Cherokee 235-250 which, with its high compression pistons, develops 250hp at sea level. I had already chosen the Cessna 182 Skylane with a similar power unit and the other guys, going for the slightly cheaper option, were sharing a pair of Cessna 172s. My advice – go for the big engine.

I was put in the charge of Mark Lister, a bush pilot of some consid-

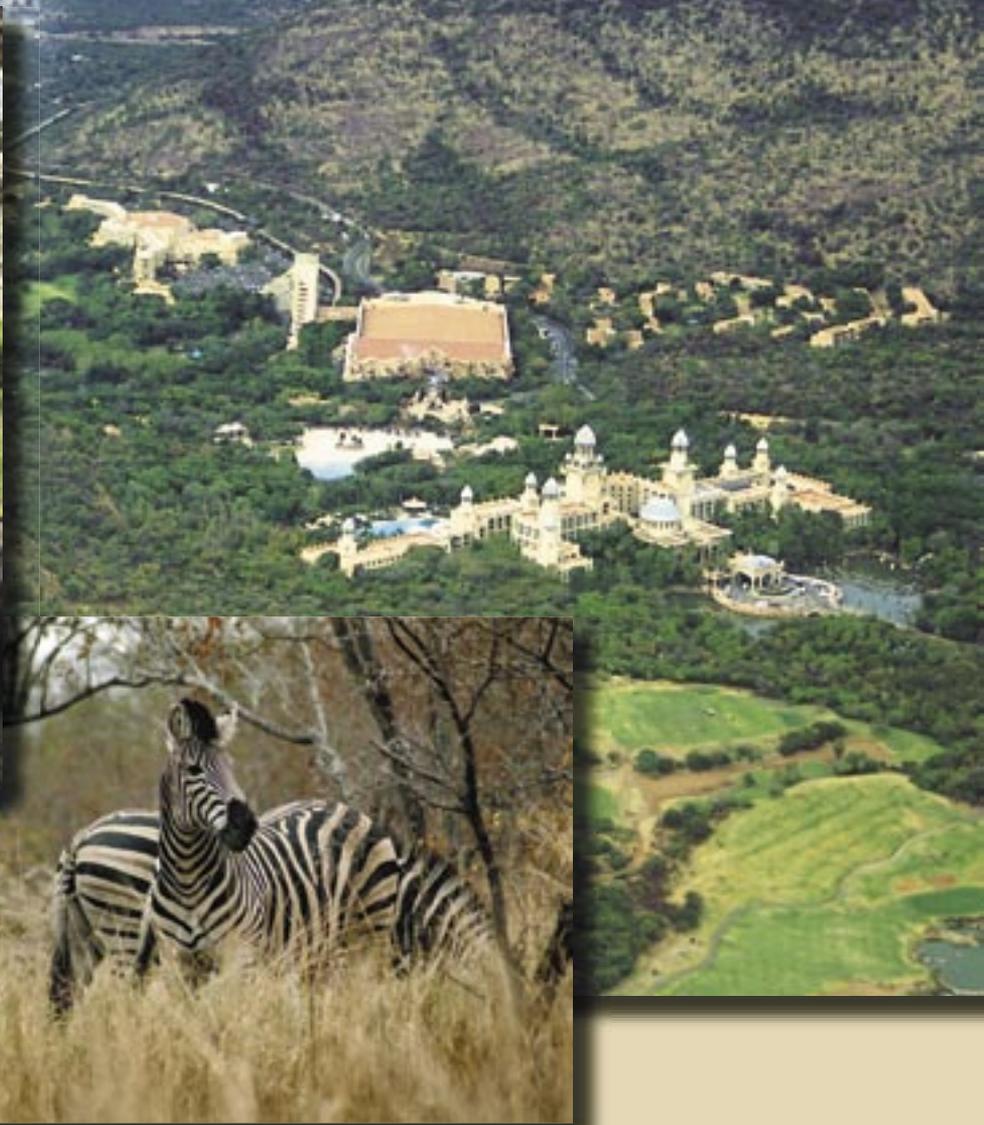
erable experience, and since the C182 was exclusively ours we were able to largely keep our own schedule and to some extent “do our own thing”. The other four aviators had to share two aeroplanes and three instructors; Barbara, Paul and Alister (a charter pilot with DC3 and DC4 time – lucky bloke).

License validation at Brakkies comprised briefings, lectures, air law exam and of course flying. Since the airfield is situated within the Johannesburg controlled airspace there are special rules to learn that apply to all circuits, departures and arrivals. The initial height restriction of 6000ft might sound generous but it isn't because airfield elevation is 5300 ft MSL. The flying test was rather similar to a UK license renewal check with the exception that forced landing simulation is all the way down and into the flare – no argument here about whether or not you are going to make it. However, none of this is any problem at all; the training standards are high whilst the atmosphere is happy and relaxed. If you have a passion for flying and a sense of fun this is the place to be.

On day 4 we packed our bags, loaded our three training aeroplanes and, up to

the eyeballs with data on short-field techniques, density altitude, anthills and Ostriches, we finally set off on a circuitous route to Kunkuru. The final leg of the day was treated as a test, the object of which was to find Kunkuru without any prompting from the instructor and then land on it without unhinging the instructor. We all made it OK (a triumph of training over anxiety) and became proud members of the intrepid order of the “Kunkuru Eagles Bush Pilots Association”. Each new member receives a unique title and having let slip, in a moment of stress, the call sign “Speedbird - Fox-India-Juliet” I had unwittingly provided mine “Speedbird Eagle”. Glen, another experienced bush pilot and mate of Karl's arrived later in the Cherokee and Karl turned up in his 4x4 with all the heavy base camp equipment and excess baggage.

Kunkuru, situated in the Rooiberg range of the Waterberg Mountains at 4,100 ft amsl, was originally the site of an old Fluorspar mine, which was closed down in the 1950s. Now it is a



delightful private 800 hectare Bushveld game farm; an oasis in the bush developed and run by a charming and hospitable couple John and Teresa Edmond. The dirt and grass runway is situated approximately North/South with high ground from North West all the way round through North and to the East of the field. Take-offs towards the North are not possible – rising ground out performs the aeroplane. Landings can only be made towards the North so it is necessary to have a clear idea of the point of committal beyond which a go-around is just not going to work out. Tailwinds on the obligatory South-erly take-off require a check forward after early rotate in order to gather speed in ground effect before climbing up into the negative wind gradient. So there are decisions to be made but then this is why we came into the bush.

Kunkuru runway inspection and game control was handled by one of the Rangers, whose name was invariably John, and his team of African helpers. None of the other bush fields that we

flew into had any ground support so landings were preceded by a landing direction decision, a 500ft pass in order to assess approach and overshoot terrain, obstacles, game in the vicinity etc. and finally a low level pass to inspect the runway and frighten away any animals that might fancy a leisurely stroll down the centre of the strip. And low pass it has to be; 100 ft is no good – you have to be lower; on the deck a noisy aeroplane becomes a possible predator through the eyes of an animal.

During the following two days Mark and I visited a number of strips; Bonwa Phala, Mabalingwe, Thabazimbi, Madikwe, Dwaalboom, Mabula and many more – what wonderful names – practicing a variety of techniques. Take-offs from soft fields, flying in and out of short strips, flapless into short dirt strips, handling runway gradients and crosswinds, flying with failed ASI and flying on trims alone etc. We also looked

at other problems peculiar to Africa; for instance an anthill on the runway is a concrete post to a swiftly moving aeroplane and the converse, a pit created by the anteater having totalised the anthill, is equally dangerous since such a trap could easily remove an undercarriage leg. A pile of sun baked Elephant dung could be as hazardous as a brick wall to the careless aviator who fails to inspect his runway before landing.

A point regarding orientation: The African winter sun comes up out of the scrub somewhere to the North East, travels backwards across the sky and then goes down rather suddenly in an equally silly place somewhere to the North West. This is true – I have witnessed. I hadn't realised the extent to which we global navigators sub-consciously use sun position whilst scratching around trying to find out exactly where we are. On a number of occasions I was tempted to correct

the DG by 180° just to get the picture right. I really never got used to it.

We practised some fun things like “reversals” - I think I would call this manoeuvre a crop duster’s turn. Nose up to about 45° and at about 65mph on the C182’s ASI a co-ordinated aileron and rudder input to turn the aeroplane through 180° so you are now pointing down 45° but flying in the opposite direction. A gentle pullout and there you are flying back the way you came without much lateral displacement. You might wonder what this is all about but let’s say that one day you’re just dumb enough to wander up the wrong African valley in poor visibility and that there isn’t the room to make a level steep turn to safety; a “reversal” might just improve your day. We also did a lot of slow flying to investigate the low end handling characteristics of the machine. The C182 is surprisingly manoeuvrable at low speed and has an astonishing full power climb angle at 65mph/20°Flap even at the high density altitudes in which we were operating – the magic of prop wash I guess.

Talking about props it’s worth mentioning the erosive effects of airborne dirt and pebbles drawn up into the spinning propeller by prop tip vortices whilst the aeroplane is stationary or moving slowly over loose ground. To alleviate this problem the procedure following ignition was: Check oil pressure rising/alternator on check voltage/VHF 1 on and GO. The rest of the checks and run up could be completed on firm ground or on the concrete threshold pads provided. The post landing procedure was: Clean up on the runway/Magneto dead-cut check and avionics off approaching parking place /Mixture idle cut-off and coast onto your parking spot as the prop stops rotating. Sounds a bit cowboyish but

it works, saves the prop and it is fun.

Back at Kunkuru there were safety and survival presentations, trips into the bush in a battered Land Rover and a memorable exploration of the Kunkuru fluorspar mineshaft. For this adventure we were joined by the astonishingly attractive Nicole. She



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was on a short break from her job at the German Consulate in Pretoria.

In South Africa it is considered foolish to share a confined space with a Leopard and bearing in mind that Leopards like caves it was definitely prudent of Karl – shooter and torch at the ready – to make a sweep of the mine before we finally stepped inside. The going was uncomfortable; not so – it was treacherous, and Nicole was the first to go down. She left a small part of her right hand where she fell but didn’t complain for a moment – I was very impressed. I heard another mishap further along the shaft and then it was my turn; slithering around in the sloping gallery my feet slipped away as I went shins first into the rocks and chip-pings beneath, without a word of com-

plaint of course: a precedent had been set and had to be observed. At the end of the gallery a rusty iron ladder lead up to another cave entrance where I collapsed in almost total darkness dimly aware of the close proximity of two panting bodies. One of the bodies (it was Peter) arrested my heartbeat for a

moment when he asked in his measured German accent “Vots zat noyz”.

There was undoubtedly a noise and I could swear it was getting closer. It was also very dark because all available torches were in use guiding the reluctant remnants of our party up the sloping gallery of doom. At the same moment I began to realise that the third panting body in our little group was Nicole so that ruled out hysterics - it just had to be stiff upper lip. A few interminable seconds later Karl pitched up, hardware and torch at the ready, and took off onwards and upwards.

The mysterious noise was made by bats; thousands of them in the gallery ahead, gyrating in radar controlled airborne

turmoil, vibrating the air around our heads. I don’t know about the secret thoughts of the others but I like bats and I am quite happy to share space with them. Pressing on across a bridge over a deep chasm and looking up it was possible to see further lofty chambers above; the evidence of years of drilling and extraction. And then, quite suddenly, we immersed bruised and bleeding into the evening air and it was back to the bar for beer and bandages.

That same evening after dinner we each received two documents: The “Bushpilots Certificate of Competency” from Paul and the “Kunkuru Eagles Bush Pilots Association” certificate and title from John. They were well delivered and well received against a background of ribald comment, banter

and leg pulling. And then to the bar for a musical evening. Before John became a game park and dirt strip constructor/owner he was something of a musical celebrity with a large number of CDs to his credit. So he pitched in with his guitar and Teresa, a retired dancer, provided backing and colour. Karl, who can do just about anything, was working his Hohner squeezebox – fortunately he'd left his bagpipes at home – and Barbara started yodelling. A little later she played a silver flute – at least I think that's what she did but by then we were on to chasers. I am so pleased that I remembered to drink a bucket of water before going to bed.

Our last night, which was planned to be “under African stars” at Hennies Farm on the Limpopo, had to be reorganised due to rather low night time temperatures. We flew up there in the morning but returned on the same day – over four hours of flying time. The scenery is just stunning and my lasting memory must be the low level search for Hippo along the Limpopo before climbing up into Hennies pattern to check the windsock for landing. The other three aeroplanes were already down there on the ground and I could see our lunch spread out on the tail plane of the Cherokee.

The last day of flying was, for the most part, unplanned. We had all agreed to meet for lunch at Rand airfield to the South of Johannesburg and of course it was necessary to load up the gear for our return to Brakkies late that afternoon; so, having said our farewells to all at Kunkuru, Mark and I set off to look for some marginal bush strips around Johannesburg.

Rand airport is full of old aeroplanes and is therefore the perfect place for a lunch stop. Karl had already arranged a DC3 and DC4 visit followed by an inspection of all the hangars dotted around the place. I suppose that it shouldn't be that surprising to find so many interesting and well preserved machines in such an air minded country but it surprised me all the same – my personal favourite was a gleaming, bright red, perfectly manicured Beech Stagger Wing.

Departure from Rand was a group thing – that is one clearance for four aeroplanes with individually allocated

call signs “Sky Africa 1, 2, 3 & 4”. We taxied in line astern, turned into wind in unison for engine run up and then departed in a stream. It felt good and I am sure it looked good – not a bad promotional exercise for Sky Africa. Fortunately for the ego I managed to pull off a half decent final landing back at Brakkies and that's about the end of it. Uwe and Mary set off on a Lowveld/Mozambique Safari followed by some formation aerobatics in jets, arranged by Sky Africa (It was Uwe's Birthday). Roeland went back to Holland, Peter went back to his magazine and I went back to Haslemere.

The course normally includes about 20 hours of flying but on this occasion, what with changes to the schedule etc., I accumulated a total of 21.7 hours. It was all dual training in a 250 HP machine and lectures, charts and paperwork, license validation charges, all accommodation, most meals, Land Rover excursions and endless fun were included.

Before I left Brakkies Karl gave me a copy of his book “Flying African

Skies” (couldn't put it down) and his comprehensive and invaluable “Bushpilots Bible” from which I quote:

“Conventional flight training does not afford you sufficient skill nor prepare you mentally for bush flying. It also does not give you basic rules of behaviour when out in the wild.

For this reason we have summarised our experiences and compiled a unique flying training course combined with basic bush craft, survival, application of common sense and airmanship.

The Sky Africa Bushpilots Training Course will convey a wealth of basic flying knowledge, as well as endeavour to instill some love and admiration for nature and the wonders of Africa to pilots wanting to wander “off the beaten track”.

And, most importantly, we will all have some fun at the same time.”

Peter Icke is a retired British Airways 747 captain and lives in Haslemere, Surrey, England.

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