

DUST ON THE TYRES

A couple tour Africa's dusty airstrips and fly over the Okovango Delta and Victoria Falls

By Mike Cronk

Hanks Aero Adventures has a lot of experience putting together self-fly safaris and seemed the obvious choice for our flying holiday. A two-week safari with them meant flying with a safety pilot between remote bush strips and spending a couple of days at a game lodge at each stop.

Four C182s departed the Hanks' base at Lanseria in South Africa with a two people in each: my wife and me in one, a pair of American tourists in a second, the Hanks taking the lead in a third and the Hanks' niece and her husband in the fourth.

Before we left the UK my wife, who took the right seat for the trip, had completed an



MAP BOTSWANA

AEROPLANE: Four Cessna 182PS

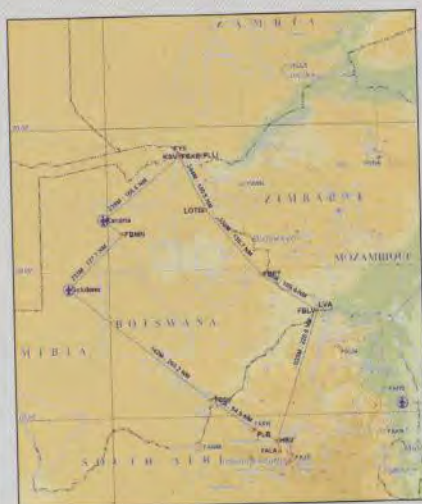
PILOT: Mike Cronk

DISTANCE TRAVELLED: 1796nm

FUEL USED: 600 litres

AVERAGE SPEED: 120kt

TIME TAKEN: 20 hours flying time



Expect to meet pilots of all different nationalities on a flying safari in Africa

AOPA flying companions course at Old Sarum (and as the hours are in her log book I am hoping it might persuade her to finish a PPL). We also ordered a 'Pilots Advanced Preparations Kit' that provided a lot of detail about what to expect. The kit had a guide to local air law and a CD of air traffic control RT to help us get used to African accents. Maps of the Johannesburg area and coordinates for planning a cross-country were also enclosed. Finally, there was information about altitude flying. Many of the airfields are high – Lanseria, for a start is 4,517ft. High temperatures can add another 1,500ft to pressure altitude.

Although JAA licences are recognised, African rules require visiting pilots to have their licences validated. This involves completing an open book law exam, a handling check-ride and a qualifying cross-country – all with an instructor. This was arranged though the Lanseria Flight Centre and included in the cost of the trip. It also gave us the first opportunity to sample



Mike's 'Preparation Kit' containing African air law, CD recordings of ATC and charts

ZS-IWP, the C182P we would be flying for the safari. IWP had a relatively high hours airframe but the engine was nearly new.

The only bills we had to pay throughout the trip were fuel, the odd bar bill (where the lodge does not provide an inclusive package) and meals at the beginning and end of each trip. Lifts to and from the airport, a hire car for getting around Lanseria and detailed pre-flight planning were all included in the fixed price.

We spent our first afternoon working through the pre-flight pack, which had each leg individually marked on the map and an



**“ roads, dirt tracks
and large water holes are
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aerial photo of the airfield for landing.

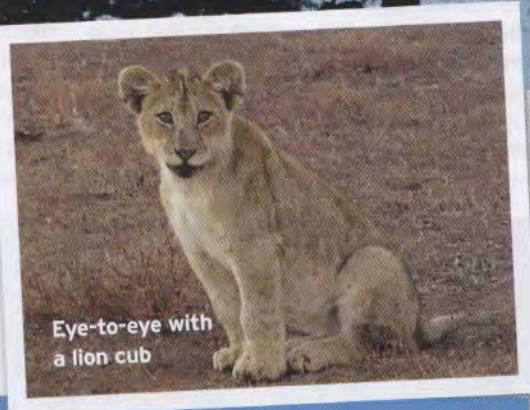
As the landscape is often featureless, a GPS is a real help. I made a point of planning each route on a map and also preparing a detailed pilot's log, not least as I wanted to understand the significant magnetic variation we would be flying with. It reaches 17 degrees in the Johannesburg area and declines as you go north. At least roads, dirt tracks and large water holes are usually marked on the maps (details that are not always shown on the GPS).

Day two was spent doing the check-ride. Flight levels are used above 2,000ft AGL and QNH is used in preference to QFE for landing and takeoffs. This was OK when an ATC was available but at a number of airfields there was no radio and no means of knowing the local pressure setting. A calculation based on the GPS altitude solved the problem.

Once outside controlled airspace, self-announcing is the norm. Individual frequencies are allocated for each country and pilots must regularly advise other aircraft of their altitude, location, direction and intentions. A 'chat' frequency (123.45)

enables aircraft flying together to stay in touch – we were monitoring two frequencies most of the time.

Day three was the cross-country, which included a touch and go at a remote field. On day four, the Hanks took our paperwork to the CAA, while we took a day off and explored Lanseria and Johannesburg. ➡



Eye-to-eye with
a lion cub



Hanks Aero Adventures take
care of all the logistics - 4x4
rides to and from the airstrips



Strategically placed thorny bushes to keep hyenas away

LANSERIA TO LIMPOPO

To our frustration, day five saw us kicking our heels in Lanseria with the arrival of some UK style weather. This delayed our first leg to the Sabi Sands area of the Kruger National Park. Between Lanseria and the coastal lowlands stand the Drakensberg mountains. Weather systems in the Indian Ocean can mean warm moist air comes inland

shrouding the escarpment in cloud. Needless to say the Brits in the party were blamed for the weather! As it looked as though the cloud was not going to clear we spent an extra day in Johannesburg and decided to fly straight to our second stop of the trip, the Limpopo Valley, Botswana, where we were staying at the Mashatu Game Reserve.

Departing Lanseria meant we had to go out

through international departures and get passports stamped. Flight plan filed, we got away on time and routed to the north, overhead the Hartbeespoort Dam, the HBV VOR, Brits airfield and then to Limpopo.

On leaving the Lanseria CTA, we changed to Johannesburg Special Rules West frequency (because of the crowded airspace). At HBV we switched to Johannesburg Information and then to the unmanned frequency 125.5 for self-announcing position reports en route. It was also important to read back all of the ATC information and if you don't they will keep repeating it until you do. Additionally you will be asked to give endurance and estimated zulu arrival times at various points on the route and report any likely changes. It is a good discipline and one that makes proper flight planning important.

We'd filed our flight plans as a group of C182s which meant that Nick did much of the general reporting, leaving us individually to deal with Approach and Tower on arrival at airfields. Limpopo Valley airfield was just under 240 nautical miles from Lanseria and our 12.30 departure meant we were touching down just after 14.30 hrs local time.

Limpopo is at 1,774ft, has a tarmac runway 12/30 and a radio service giving wind and QNH.

With our aircraft unloaded and tied down we went to face customs and immigration.



The group enjoy a drink while watching the sky change colour as the African sun sets

LIMPOPO-FRANCISTOWN-LIVINGSTONE

Departing Mashatu we made our way to the airfield for the next leg to Francistown. It was at this point that Nick's aircraft refused to start and we suspected battery problems. Aircraft were swapped and the Hanks' niece and husband started the aeroplane with booster leads and flew it back to Lanseria.

The flight to Francistown was straightforward and took an hour. Again the landscape was pretty uniform. The only bit of excitement came with a bird of prey trying to lift its victim off the centre line of the runway as I was rolling out to the end. Fortunately we managed to avoid each other... just.

Francistown has four runways, the longer 11/29 tarmac being preferred to the shorter 16/34 gravel. It is a destination for much of the mining industry who extract Botswana diamonds. While waiting to refuel and pay landing fees, we spent time talking to a German pilot based in Johannesburg who regularly ferries miners between South Africa and Botswana. The next leg took us up along the Botswana side of the Zimbabwe border – we were all keen to avoid overflying their airspace. At 280nm it was the longest leg so far. To keep on the correct side of the border we routed through the LOTIS reference point and overhead Kasane and Impalila Island down towards Livingstone.

Switching to Livingstone Approach we announced that we wanted to do a circuit of Victoria Falls before landing. Abeam the airfield we changed to the Falls frequency

and entered the clockwise circuit at 6,000ft AGL – high enough to give a good feel of the huge scale and dramatic nature of the Falls.

On the ground at Livingstone a porter assisted with our luggage. Customs and immigration were quick and our transport was waiting to take us up to the Royal Livingstone hotel. This was set in a unique (but discrete) riverside location overlooking the falls. We had two

nights on the ground which gave us a full day to explore the falls. In spite of waterproofs we still got drenched crossing the Falls footbridge by the cataract. The bridge is the best place to appreciate the sheer volume of water that is flowing down the Zambezi.

LIVINGSTONE-KASANE-KANANA

The following morning we flew the short hop to Kasane, our entry port back in to Botswana. We made two more circuits of the Falls before the 30-minute flight. The last section of this leg is where Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Botswana meet, with each country having their own frequencies. It meant we all had to keep a pretty close watch on who we were sharing airspace with. The stopover at Kasane was fairly short and we were soon on our way to Kanana.

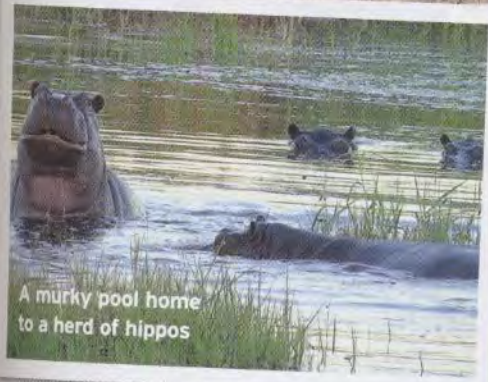
This destination was going to be one of our first bush strip landings on a calcrete surface – a local material which is rolled when wet and forms a solid base. The Okovango Delta has a number of local strips and the airspace can be quite busy with bush pilots flying visitors and staff in and out of the different lodges. With another strip near to Kanana we had to keep a good lookout. The big

“ We wanted to do a circuit around Victoria Falls before landing ”

A subtle reminder that animals roam the runways



A murky pool home to a herd of hippos



Fortunately our first international arrival went easily, not always the case when flying around Africa. Our hosts from Mashatu met us with a jeep at the airfield and were very welcoming. Mashatu was certainly one of the best safari reserves we stayed at during the trip. Wildlife was abundant and our three-day stay more than made up for the missed stop in the Sabi Sands area.

Accommodation was 16 stone cottages with large picture windows looking out on to the reserve. An outside covered bar and breakfast area overlooked a water hole alongside an open eating area where dinner was held around a campfire.



Watch out for dust! Aircraft taxiing, taking off and landing throw it up into the air

Adventure Self-fly safari: Botswana

Fly all day and then
watch Africa's
beautiful sunsets

challenge, though, was allowing the dust to settle before turning final. We followed the lead Cessna in, but as we turned base a C206 decided to depart. The dust it left in its wake had us holding on a three-mile final with the third Cessna in our party doing the same behind us.

After landing we discovered the surface was very loose; the dust and sand was several inches thick in places. It was going to make departure interesting!

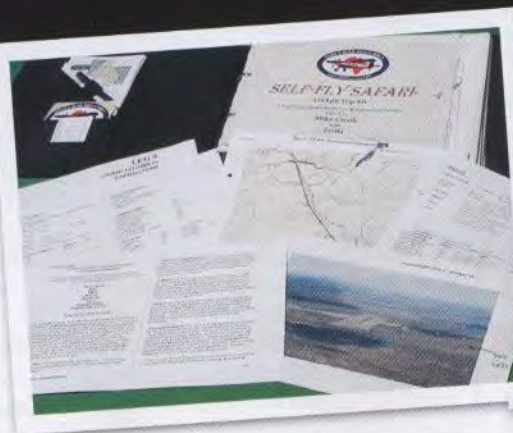
We had been advised to place a thorn bush around the aircraft tyres but the ranger who came out to pick us up said that the local hyenas had not taken to supplementing their diet by chewing tyres so we took the chance.

The three days at Kanana showed the Okovango at its best with a mixture of game drives on the back of open top vehicles as well as both powerboat and trips on the small canoes called Mokoros. We saw the delta from a number of perspectives and were not disappointed by the game. The accommodation was tented, but each tent was erected on timber platforms and had bathrooms with hot and cold water, electric light and proper beds. Each one looked over part of the delta and as the lodge was unfenced you had to get used to hippo sloshing past your tent in the middle of the night.

KANANA-MAUN-OAKDENE

The next leg to Maun to refuel was only 39 miles, so most of the pre-flight discussion was about getting airborne and avoiding the soft sand half way down the 800-metre strip.

Maun is the regional airport that serves the



delta, so is the base to a number of companies and bush pilots. We were down in just over half an hour and on the pumps waiting for fuel. It was an opportunity to grab some lunch and also wait for our fourth Cessna, which was on its way to join us. However, when it landed a small hydraulic leak on one of the brakes was detected, probably caused by debris from a dirt strip.

Our final destination for two nights was a farm strip called Oakdene which served Edo's Camp in the Kalahari. The flight down was uneventful, though one is always conscious of the lack of landing options. Occasional dried up pans or water holes pass under a wing which might be a landing option but any emergency landing is likely to be difficult. Pre-flight checks gain significance when flying over such terrain; dipping the tanks at Livingstone I found one wing tank completely dry. It made me think of the risks of fuel being siphoned off.

Oakdene was a long grass strip at 3,940ft and owned by a cattle farmer. He flies his own twin out of the strip – not bad at 82. After landing we set off for the camp very aware of the change of scenery from the



watery Okovango to the sandy scrub of the Kalahari. Edos was a tented camp, but instead of a delta outside the tent we had a water hole, which at night was floodlit, providing an opportunity to see rhino for the first time when a mother and youngster came down to drink at dusk. It was also the first opportunity to go on a game walk, which was certainly more daunting than the flying, not least when you were within only 40 or so yards from two mature white rhinos.

The last two days seemed to fly by. We invited the flying farmer to supper on our last night and heard about his stint as a DC-3 pilot in WWII. It was a fitting evening for our last night in the bush before the long flight down to Sir Seretse Khama international, Botswana's main airport at Gaborone.

OAKDENE-GABORONE-LANSERIA

The following morning we had a group photo in front of our Cessna before taking off for Gaborone. A small hard standing allowed us to build up speed at the beginning of the strip to get past an area of loose sand. We then applied full power with two stages of flap and the yoke back to minimise the

impact of the bumpy strip. Once airborne it seemed a slow climb up to FL 075 for Gaborone. At just under 300 miles it was going to be a long flight over what seemed the same scenery all the way. The only difference on this leg was the haze which put us close to IMC on occasions. Despite diverting around a couple of military training areas on the way down (Gaborone Information was also keen we should avoid them) a 20kt tailwind had us at our destination quicker than expected. A base join for 08 finals seem to go on for ages with the 9,800ft runway stretching off into the distance. Fuel on board, immigration and customs cleared, lunch inside us, we were ready for the final return leg to Lanseria. The final leg was 141nm and we were routing via the NESEK reporting point, Pilanesberg and HBV with an expected 80 minute flight. It was not long before landmarks that were familiar from the cross-country test ten days earlier were appearing under the wing. For this leg we had carefully planned alternates, as the Lanseria TAF was suggesting we could be seeing a 27kt crosswind – well beyond the limits of our aircraft. Grand Central, an airfield only 20 miles east of Lanseria, would have an into-wind runway if needed, but no customs and immigration, which would have required a call to the local police if we had landed there. At HBV we started our descent down from FL 075 across the Johannesburg Special Rules area to Lanseria's TMA. The

“ the waterhole was floodlit and we had our first sight of a rhino ”

strong crosswind had not materialised, but we were all a bit surprised to be asked to join base leg for 06 left, Lanseria's main runway with a 10-12kt quartering tailwind. Despite this we made it safely down. IWP had served us well. She was a joy to fly, though at times in the heat and altitude I had wondered how long it would take to get to our cruising flight level. It was a slight sad moment to push her back in to the hangar for the final time.

We had flown just under 20 hours and 1796 nautical miles. As a relative novice the trip was certainly challenging, but also

extremely rewarding. It not only helped me develop my own skills, but I also had to put into practice many of

the things I learnt about on my PPL but really didn't need to use in the UK. It also gave me the confidence in my own ability to continue to push the boundaries of my flying within sensible limits.

Knowing what to experience I would consider going alone next time – though I might miss the camaraderie of fellow pilots for company. It was extremely satisfying to have nearly ten days of flying uninterrupted by weather, other than the cloud on the escarpment at the start of trip.

On arrival back in the UK we found it had been wet for two weeks and our other flying friends had all been grounded, which made our adventure all the sweeter.

To find out about your own adventure, visit the website www.selfflysafaricom ■

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