

Report on our Namibian and Botswana Air Tour - June/July 2008

Or

An excursion into the land and into the mind.

By P.K. Odendaal

PART 1 - Namibia

This is a sequel to the article "Flying a Husky to the Arctic Circle - 2006"

My son and I bought two Aviat Husky Aircraft in 2006 to tour Africa - which we wanted to see for many years, but we could never afford it neither find the time for it.

So, 18 months later I called him on the phone and said : "Can you remember what we bought the Huskies for ?" - his answer was : "Yes I know but ... "

So I said, we are departing for Namibia and Botswana in two weeks' time - see that you are ready." After some more excuses, I prevailed. So we prepared for the great day which was to be 26 June 2008.

At the same time I told my wife to pack as we were going to a far land. Her reply was so predictable : "You know I don't like flying - and the aircraft bounces in the air - and we have never been so far with the Husky - will me make it - and promise me you will only fly during the early morning and late afternoons when the air is still." In the end she agreed, but I also told her that I would take someone else along if she did not go, and if she goes and gives me any hassles I will just unload her at any place.

So I prepare a flight plan, get some charts, figure out fuel and customs and appoint myself as leader of the Air Tour. After we started the journey however I realised that the honour to be the leader on such a grand tour was too big for me - I would rather call the tour a rebellion or insurrection - and I would have no qualms about being the leader of that, as I am a self acknowledged rebel - against routine, convention, mediocrity and hypocrisy.

Day 1

The day of 26 June breaks and we meet before sunrise at the Witbank Airfield full of excitement and with trepidation. I now know how Shackleton must have felt when he embarked on his expedition to the north pole.

When the sun went up we took off to this far away land. Yes I know - in a Boeing it is about 2 hours away - but wait until I tell you the speed of a Husky. Our first leg is to Mafikeng where we will refuel and then onto Twee Rivieren in the Kgalagadi Trans Frontier Park where we are booked for the night. My flight plan says 2 hours to Mafikeng and 2 hours and forty minutes to Twee Rivieren.

On take-off I ponder my vanishing goodwill towards mankind and especially pilots and what had happened to that and how bitterly disappointed I am in mankind (and pilots). I had invited all our club pilots 6 months ago to join us on this epic journey and this morning there was no one to accompany us. But the saying goes .. two is company and three is a crowd ... so I am satisfied.

Our track takes us slap bang over Pretoria City Centre, then over the beautiful Hartbeespoortdam covered in morning mist - a sight more beautiful to behold than to record on camera. From there we fly over many game farms on our way to Mafikeng. I see my son flies lower as we get to the game farms and I join him, but I did not know that he wanted to look into their eyes.

On reaching Mafikeng he lands first and tells me that he had just earned zero points for a rough landing. So the landing competition is on and my wife shouts from the back that we earned a point for a good landing. 1-0 in my favour - can I keep it up ?

To understand such a competition one must realise that for us a landing in a Husky is always a controlled accident and a successful landing is one in which no-one is injured. So Pieter's ego is seriously injured. He calls on reinforcements in the form of his wife to advise him on the height of the wheels - which is easily watched from the back seat - just before touch down so that he can judge this more accurately. A Husky does not like a flare more than 5mm above the runway - or does it only feel that way. So the landing competition takes on new dimensions.

After refuelling at Mafikeng it is already 10 o'clock and I can feel the noon thermals starting to develop - oh my !!! - if my wife just do not notice. The thermals get more bumpy and at 12 noon we are at a stiff gallop over the Kalahari desert - and she says nothing !! After landing at Twee Rivieren I try to soothe her with an apology for the bumpiness. "I did not notice" she told me !



Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park - Springbuck and dunes.

Our game drive was exciting and when we retired for the night I asked everyone to rate the day on a scale of 10. Most of us thought that it was 8 or 9 out of ten. So we decide to rate each day as we go, so that we would know which day was the best. Of course we wish to tell our friends afterwards how it was. After some thought I decided to tell only my family as I could not think of a friend that would be interested in such talk. Pilots and aircraft are so boring.

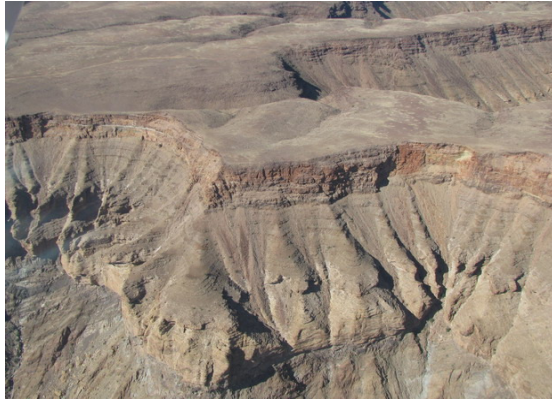
Day 2

The next day we are off to Upington to clear customs. I see my flight log shows 1 hour and 11 minutes. Just after take off my son asked me to inspect his rudder which he thought was loose. He was doing the take off after me and on lift off he noticed a severe roll and pitching moment to the right which he had trouble in correcting quickly and easily - one meter off the ground !! I inspect his rudder - almost looking it in the eyes like we did to the sheep the previous day, and found nothing wrong. I then suddenly realise it was the vortex of my slipstream which I left on take off - problem solved.

We did not fly with our aircraft call signs, but called ourselves Husky Formation - not that we flew in formation. It was a type of loose formation which degenerated into losing sight of each other altogether now and then.

Our flight from Upington would take us over the Fish River Canyon and then onto Keetmanshoop where we would clear customs and take in fuel. My flight log says 3 hours, but the wind is on the nose and it ends up as 4 hours.

The Fish River canyon was absolutely beautiful. We have seen the Grand Canyon - but this was more beautiful to us. From there we set heading for Keetmanshoop and I greet a few motorists, standing on a look out post on the rim of the canyon, with a lowwww flypast - did I see their eyes this time or was it just a fleeting glimpse ? We did however see the place of the eye of the hot water springs at Ai-Ais - was that the missing I ?



Fish River Canyon

Pieter's landing at Upington was not too good, but our landings at Keetmanshoop were greasers so I took the lead up to 4 to 2. Pieter's wife was adamant that his landing was so good that he deserved two points. So how do we recalibrate the landing points ?

Late that night when we awarded points, we all awarded 11 points for this day. So now we have a problem. We think normal maths only allows us only to give a maximum of 10 points, but we were sure we had to award 11 points. What do we do now. Pieter was the clever one who started the talk about calibration. Clearly our points were not calibrated and this gave rise to some witty banter about the insufficiency of maths to provide for the needs of man. In the end we decided to downgrade the first day to 7 points and award 10 points to day two. Problem solved - or was it ? Was I missing something ? or was the missing something I.

Sunset at Keetmanshoop stirs up various memories and emotions of distant lands and bygone times which is best shown in the photos below.



Sunset at Keetmanshoop

The problems we had at Keetmanshoop with Air Traffic Control (absent), Customs (on lunch) and fuel (our special arrangements did not work) are best left to the realm of statistics and probabilities before we might become one. We left with a tear in our eye realising the state of a once excellent Airport where Boeings were a common sight and where aircraft now only arrive occasionally.

Day 3

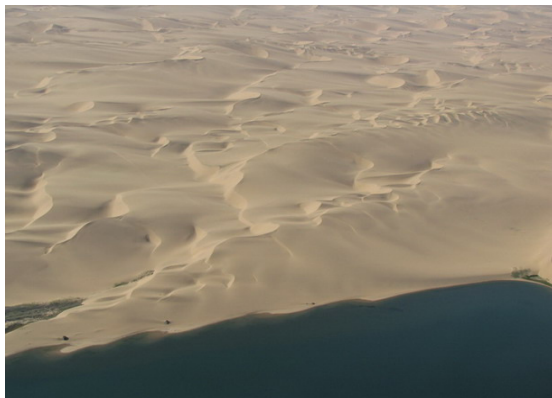
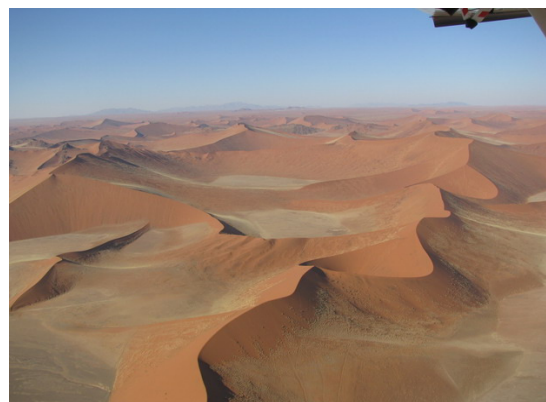
The next day our tour will take us to Sossusvlei and over the Namib desert to Swakopmund. Our flight log says 3 hours. We already know today will be very interesting. The beauty of the Namib desert is difficult to explain, but the photos shown below does it some justice.

After landing in Sossusvlei , Pieter will take off first and I will follow after him within a few seconds, but the dust was so overwhelming that it took minutes before it settled and I could take off - and even so, it was so hazy that I had difficulty in seeing outside.

We skimmed the dunes of the Namib Desert at between 10 and 200 feet and rejoiced at the opportunity afforded us to see such a magnificent sight. We also changed our course to pick up the Atlantic Ocean south of Walvis Bay - and what a beautiful sight that was.

It was here that I realised more fully that our planet was created SO BEAUTIFULLY and that it was for us to see that beauty and to search for it. And we sometimes find it in the most unexpected places. Some people say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but I disagree with that. It is rather like wisdom which cries out in the streets and nobody heeds it.

We found some mist over the sea near Walvis Bay, but it seldom moves deeper over land during noon - the time we arrived at Swakopmund. Waiting for us were our South African friends Corn  and Elize who were on a business trip in Swakopmund at the time. We specially arranged our tour so that we could see them.



Pieter's Husky over the Namib, the Namib near Sossusvlei, The Coast south of Walvis Bay and the evening at the Lighthouse Restaurant in Swakopmund.

Needless to say - they showed us the town and we had dinner at an excellent restaurant at the Lighthouse the evening. When Corné is near the conversation is always full of witty banter.

Late that night we arrived at our next mathematical problem. Everyone on the tour was adamant that today deserved 12 points out of 10 - so what do we do now. Will things get so good that we have to recalibrate our points everyday ?

Day 4

We spent a lovely day in and around Swakopmund and Walvis Bay and tried our skills on Quad bikes on the Dunes.

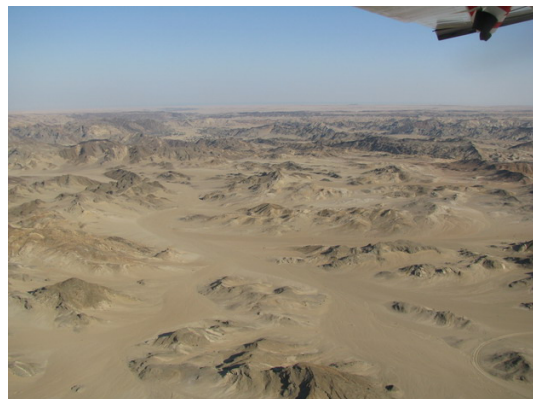
The evening we argued about points for the day again. Most members of the Insurrection wanted to award 10 points for the day, but I argued that I day that was without flying should not get mote than 7 points.



Day 5

We reluctantly say farewell to Swakopmund and to Corné and Elize and mount our steeds for The Etosha Pans via the Moon Landscape. Our flight log says 2 hours and 5 minutes, but we notice a strong northerly wind before take-off.

Just after take-off we come to the sobering knowledge that the wind is 42 knots (78 km/hr.) on the nose and that our ground speed is down to 62 knots (115 km/hr.). We are also very glad there are no roads and vehicles underneath us, as they would now overtake us at great speed. We are not used to flying in a strictly 115 km/hr. speed zone. Our aircraft do 192 km/hr. in no wind conditions - so we can bargain on a flight of more than 3 hours - over landscape described as the Moon.



The Moon Landscape north-east of Swakopmund

However any misgivings of the beauty of the place disappear when we arrive at the Ongava Airstrip next to the Anderson Gate of the Etosha National park where we will stay in the Okaukuejo Camp.

Arriving at Ongava we find that the wind on the runway is also very strong and it is a crosswind and Huskies do not like crosswinds and we are scared and the runway is lain with small stones and we are sorry for our propellers and we will do our best.

After landing we celebrate the event when we both got 3 points (uncalibrated) for our landing as they were greasers. What was the score now - I am informed that I still lead with 1 point despite the calibration problem.

Okaukuejo Camp turned out to be much more and better than we expected. The chalets were newly revamped and our chalet was 50m from the waterhole - wow !

I immediately cancelled our game drives as this would be game sit ins. Adele (Pieter's wife) kept constant vigil for us until 12 at night and Pieter took over from 3 in the morning. At the first roar of a lion we would charge out of our chalets - and wait for them.

The game that can be seen here is just mind boggling. Sometimes we have noticed 8 species at a time.



Game viewing at Okaukuejo Rest Camp, Etosha.

Continued on part 2