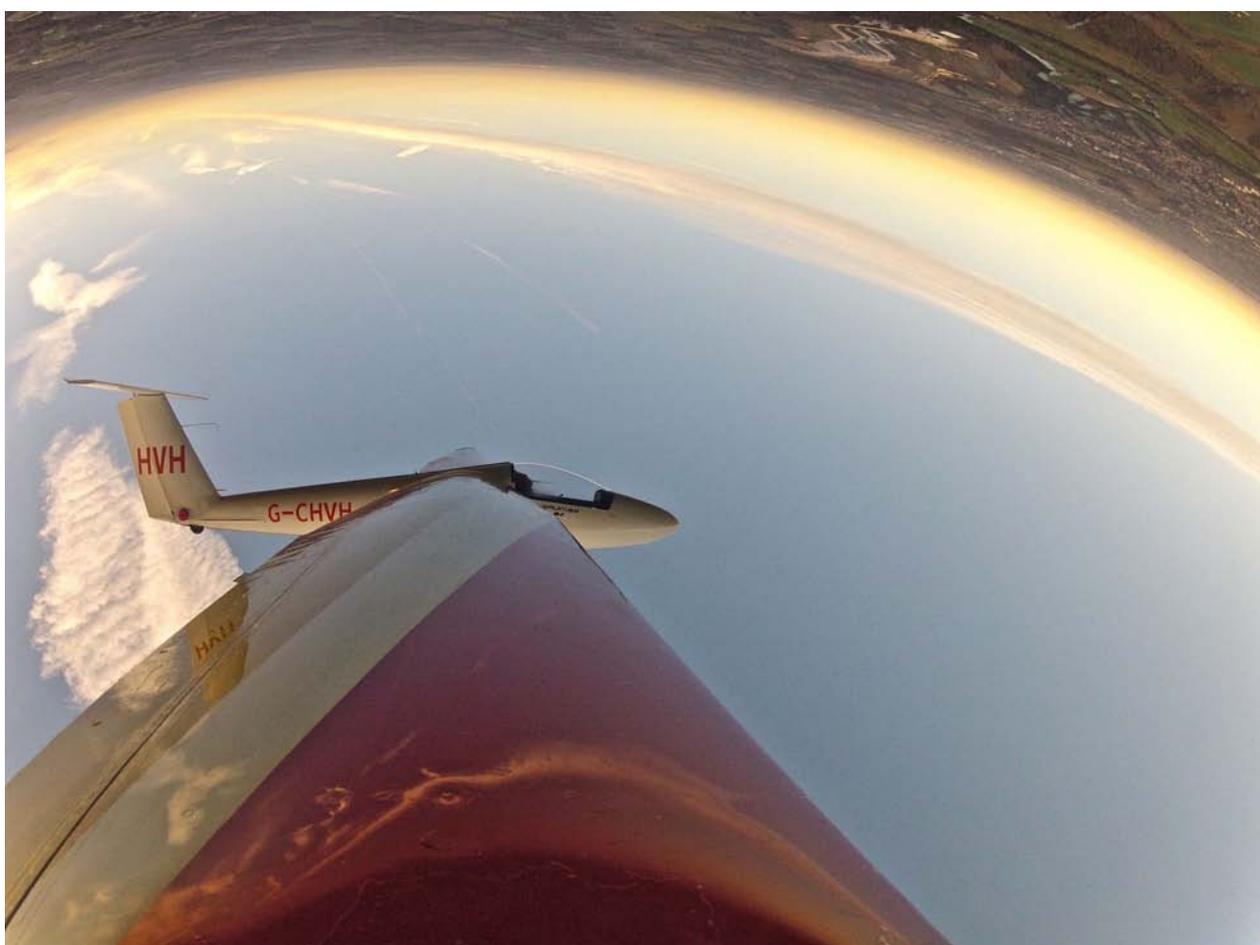


LONDON GLIDING CLUB, DUNSTABLE

Newsletter

January 2013



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Soaring And Stress In The Sun

Seduced by the language of soaring-safaris your adventurous correspondent set off in November for the African sunshine. The advertisement offered reliable Gold height and distance flights from its 4,500 feet altitude base at New Tempe Airfield, Bloemfontein.

Those who know will agree that I am no expert, but the prospect of 19,500 foot altitudes and 500 km distances was enticing especially when compared with our more docile 3-4,000 foot cloud bases in Southern England. Besides Dick Bradley, the seven times South Africa National Champion who runs soaring-safaris, offers a fine fleet comprising ASW27, ASH25 and 26, LS4, LS6,LS7, Nimbus 3, Ventus, Discus, all for hire at specified daily rates.

'All levels of experience catered for' he claims, to those who might be deterred by no previous experience of the conditions. I had 249 hours experience compared with many thousand hours by my colleagues. What did I find?

New Tempe Airfield

The airfield lies on sun-drenched flat ground just a few kilometres west of Bloemfontein, which in turn is reached after a short flight south from Johannesburg. We who are used to the green fields and dark green woods of Dunstable will quickly appreciate the huge open spaces, multiple brown hues and high cloud bases of southern Africa.

The main gliding runway at 4,500 feet ASL is aligned 36-18 with a narrow paved strip which caters for the usual northerlies that blow in that region during the Africa summer. In addition there are other wide grass runways aligned 31 and 27 with un-landable spaces in between where the long grass is infested with glider-breaking anthills. The office, hangars, a shaded glider park and Club House lie on the eastern side of the airfield. Far off on the western side are substantial facilities for powered flying and parachuting.

And ominously about two thirds of the way down the glider strip on its western side is a copse of high trees, more about which later.

Fliers

But that is not all. Soaring Safaris has an enviable reputation for high and long flights such that it attracts pilots from far afield, who come back year in and year out to enjoy Bradley's exceptional facilities.

These visitors included at the time of your correspondent's visit a dozen experts, amongst them Dunstable's own Ed Downham who would that same week achieve a 903 km out and return UK National 15 metre record, a Danish gliding champion, a Norwegian F16 fighter ace of 22 years' experience, as well as fliers from Lasham, Deeside and Portmoak, North Wales and elsewhere. Some of them had brought their own gliders. They formed a convivial group who also enjoyed the Club facilities and a barbecue arranged by Dick at least once a week, sometimes more often.

Briefing

Briefings are held at 10.00 am sharp every day, the genial Dick presiding. They include full weather assessment based upon South African meteorological services supplemented on this occasion by Ed Downham's expertise with Top-Meteo, whose findings broadly coincided.

Just as at Dunstable, airspace considerations also dominate due to the Bloemfontein TMA which closes off airspace to the east, and the Kimberley TMA, 100 miles to the west, which constrains flying in that direction. As a consequence New Tempe occupies the narrow southern end of a funnel



The narrow airstrip with the copse of trees on the left.

shaped piece of airspace with upper levels at 14,500 feet becoming FL 195 further north.

Warnings

That was the factual part. Flying seldom starts before 11.00 am so the briefings provided ample time for additional warnings, some of them intimidating. For example, thunderstorms are frequent in the African summer afternoons. Keep away from them. If your return flight coincides with one reaching the airfield, do not attempt to land but land out in a safe location.

Bloemfontein lies amongst high veld farm land; there are plenty of suitable and safe places to make an out landing. First choice is newly mown stubble fields; second choice, brown ploughed fields which are usually huge and flat; third choice, the edge of white salt pans. Try to land close to one of the few roads that cross the area and, if you can, near a farm house with a swimming pool and a BMW in the forecourt; these are likely to be inhabited by a friendly farmer. 'Uncultivated veld is not recommended, access may be difficult and the long grass may conceal ant-hills, Aardvark holes and other obstacles, that may damage you and your gliders'.

Sunshine: the UV and cosmic rays are very strong at 4,500 feet let alone at 19,500. Wear sunscreen factor 30 at least; take plenty of water to drink while you are flying and in case you have a long walk after an outlanding. Sunstroke and dehydration are real risks that should be avoided.

Big Game

Your correspondent asked about the big cats, lion and cheetah. These are long shot out but some farmers are now electing to breed wild animals. What do you do if, having landed out and walking to find a farm house, you are confronted by a lion?



Another view of Runway 31

Dick Bradley is expert in this matter. 'Lions respect courage and are fastidious', he explained. 'You must not show fear. Do not run. Look him in the eye! Scoop up some manure and throw it at him!' 'Where do you find manure?' 'Do not worry about that; you will have provided your own.'

The Flying

It was time to fly. I requested the normal check flight and to familiarize myself with the thoroughly alien surrounds. Dick had only one two-seater, he apologized, the ASH 25. I had never flown anything bigger than a Duo Discus, and my normal 15 metre Discus itself.

Have you flown an ASH 25? It is not easy, quite a different experience from anything I had flown before. It is flapped, requires huge amounts of rudder and rolls slowly. The first aerotow, pulled up by a Cessna, was a disaster, all over the place, up, down and around. After a while Dick took over.

Dick Bradley showed me the eastern, southern, western limits of the airspace, all delineated by roads, reaching 11,000 feet in good thermals, but I was still struggling with the unfamiliar ASH 25 controls.

On the second day, we did it again this time going farther afield with brown savannah, salt pans and some big dam reservoirs below. Then a third day, a 300 km out and return during which we reached 16,000 feet and had a 160 km final glide with not a single turn to left nor to right, but direct back to New Tempe; quite astounding.

Solo

It was another blue day. I had dreamed that night of writing a letter to a Mr VNE.

'There is your glider' ordered Dick, pointing to a gleaming white Discus, JMM. I sought to familiarize myself in the hot sun with its already familiar controls, oxygen, GPS (my own Oudie) and so on. 'Radio check'... 'take up slack' then 'all out' I called. The takeoff probably coincided with a thermal coming through and a gust of cross wind from the west through that clump of trees. The Discus was all over the place, across, up, down, huge application of stick and rudder. 'What is going on' I wondered. 'Are the controls connected?' Just hang on, I thought. I hung on.

Tug and I cavorted into the sky, 10 knots up on the variometer, then 10 down, repeated frequently, a violent roller coaster in the huge thermals, my head hit the canopy. At 6,500 feet, which is 2,000 feet above the airfield, I pulled off in a thermal and before you could say 'heavens alive' I was at 10,000 feet and still going strongly up.

Dick had said, 'Keep within gliding distance of the airfield. We do not want you landing out on your first flight here'. No fear, I was going nowhere. I headed north towards the sparkling Krugersdrift Dam, saw the ASH take off and head up high.

The turbulence in the energetic heated up blue thermals was terrific. It was important to keep within VNE rough air; the dream was working itself out. As it was now 10 down, I involuntarily headed back. Where are the landmarks, two v-shaped lines of trees? It was like being in a tumble dryer, I reported afterwards.

At 5,500 feet and 70 minutes later I reported 'downwind, landing on 31'. A big wide right hand sweep, full airbrake, and the wide grass runway came to meet me. The brakes did not work; it took a long time to stop.

Live Another Day

Inspection showed that the brake cable had become dis-



The Big Hole at Kimberley

connected; quickly reconnected.

Next we had a difficult day of strong winds, when Ed did his 903 km out and return to the north-west, followed by two days of torrential rain, thunderstorms, plenty of time for amusing briefings about dehydration and lions amongst much else before my final flying day.

My GPS needed an auxiliary power supply; a Scottish colleague kindly provided his spare power pack. 'Put it in your pocket and press the blue button when you take off'. Keep the tail wheel on the ground', Ed Downham had advised, it will help you keep on the narrow paved runway. It is not wide grass as at Dunstable.

like a bumble bee, and ended up in my left pocket; wow; 2,000 feet above ground level. I was unused to all this, quite unlike Dunstable.

I flew home. Someone through the ether called 'gear down', it already was, I had never pulled it up, and then '31'. I landed safely.

Be Advised

Flying in South Africa can be most exciting, especially for the unprepared. At 28 degrees latitude it has the equivalent sunshine energy of 28 degrees north which is about the southern tip of Morocco.

Be advised, go by all means. It will not be easy, and if you are good, it will probably be fantastic.

And there are other benefits, wonderful places to visit: the Big Hole at Kimberley, one mile in circumference, where diamonds were first mined in South Africa is only 90 minutes' drive away. Addo Elephant Park is a day's drive away and Cape Town with its Table Mountain is within easy reach by air.

Christopher Claxton

Photos Christopher Claxton



Addo Elephant Park

I did what I was told. This time the cross wind was from the east, a few hefty bumps and I was up. In the turbulence the borrowed power pack jumped out of my right hand pocket, flew around the cockpit several times

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