

'Bush Flying' South African Style

by Tamiko E. Warden

There's something quintessential about the idea of bush flying. It conjures images of wild stretches of land, the roar of lions at night, strips of dirt by tented camps and pilots of another breed. I always knew I wanted to fly in the bush. The tarmac and smooth transactions of radio operators in the U.S. disappointed me - it failed to hold the challenge, the respect of the forces of nature that some unknown life in the bush would bring. And then I moved to South Africa.

Flying in South Africa forced me to rethink why I wanted to fly. You can fly cities in South Africa, but it is a matter of minutes before you leave the tangle of city roads. It is a matter of an hour or so before you are beyond the radio operators, leaving only the mountains, the roads that grow fewer as you move out, long horizons of land and bush.

Map reading becomes an essential skill - and not the ability to find roads or buildings. Sometimes there aren't any. Map reading means being able to find the place where the railroad line runs, a slender line tracing the land, swiveling with the turns of the earth, shaping the contours, guiding one to the nearest town. Large grain silos mark the edge of town, where grain is loaded on the railroads to ship out to the hungry populace.

The edges of mountains are tantamount, as is the run of dry riverbeds and the places where they cross, or the markings of a thick cattle fence - these are all the marks of the earth in bush flying. Map reading is more about reading the earth, learning to know her shapes and contours, the way the crust cracks open and rivets itself guiding a pilot towards a destination marked in pencil with only the coordinates to lead one to the

point.

Navigational aids can be wonderful, but when they don't exist map reading becomes all essential. The guidance to reach a far-off bush lodge can be "head north for 20 miles, turn right over the cattle fence, look for a farmhouse, then flight due east and you'll hit in about 3 miles." I heard one story in Botswana where the bush pilots of the Okavango Delta used to use a white refrigerator that had been left by some lodge when the truck hauling it broke down. They would fly north along the cattle fence, fly up to the fridge, then turn right and go west to hit the game lodge. Then one day the lodge came to pick up the fridge. That day the pilots kept looking for the fridge, and some of them flew all of the way into Angola looking for that fridge.

Sometimes it's not so much that the aids aren't there, as that they don't work. Sometimes one doesn't hear about it till you get there, and call the rental place to ask why the ADF isn't working. It is, they tell you. When you reach the next place you hear that the NDBs have been out for some time - government ran out of money to maintain them.

The only maps in use in South Africa are WACs - and they don't allow for a lot of detail. Cape Town, Jo'burg and Durban have more detailed charts, but if you're used to maps that update every six months, it's a bit of shock to read the fine print on the bottom and find the maps are at least 20 years in old in some cases. It's good to remember as roads do occasionally change, towns pop up that weren't there before and sometimes rivers marked on the maps don't exist anymore.

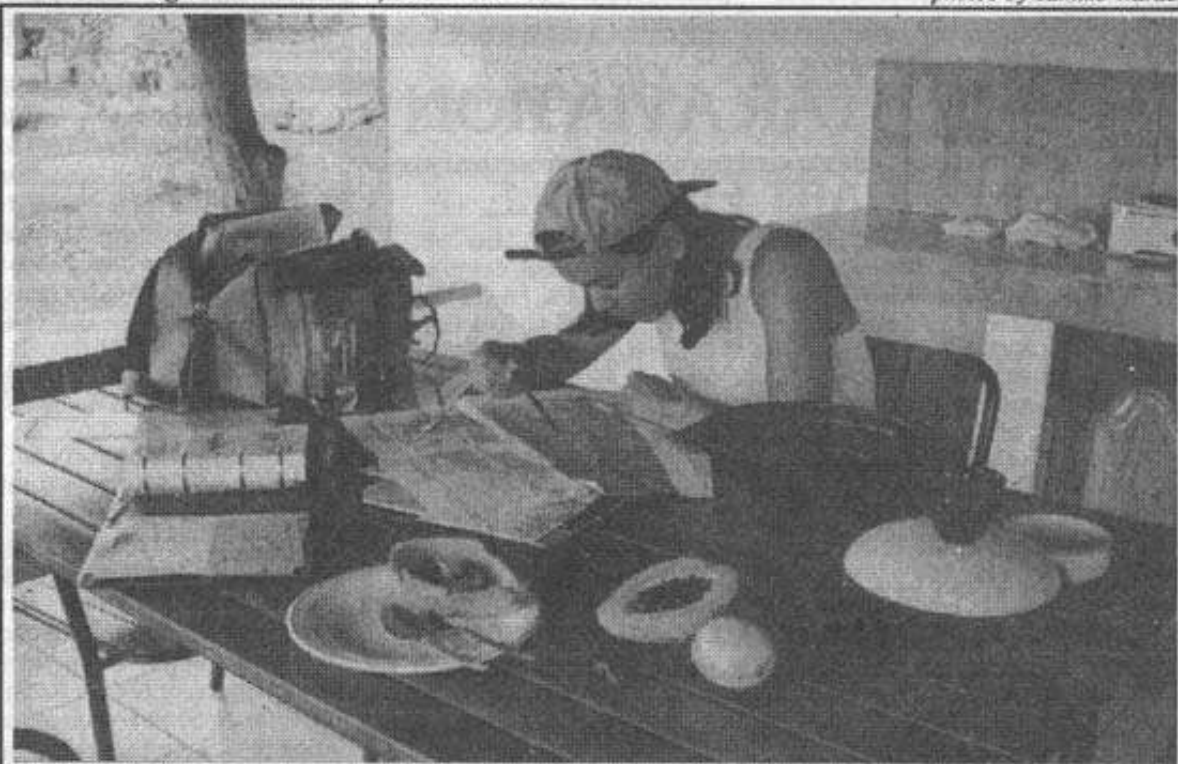
There isn't a lot of traffic in bush flying, but when you do get on the

Cont. on Page 39



Sunset in Kruger National Park, South Africa.

- photos by Tamiko Warden



The author busily charts the next leg of her trip.

South Africa ...

Cont. from Page 38

ground with other pilots; you couldn't find a friendlier bunch. My personal favourite place to fly is the country of Namibia. It's the best place to pick up advice and I've used a few hand-drawn maps of airstrips to get into new places.

Weather reports are another thing. I remember one trip with my sister where we flew with an eye out for summer storms, which can be deadly in the afternoon, out of Zimbabwe down to Botswana and back to South Africa. On the way through I stopped to file a flight plan and ask about the weather. It looks fine, they said. I was a bit dubious, but filed a direct plan and took off Fifteen minutes later I

went smack into a rainstorm, visibility zero. I immediately turned back and went to refile my flight plan. I called for weather again to ask how it was, and they said it was fine.

At that point I gave up and called South Africa, where the Pretoria office gave me routing over a nearby mountain range to skirt the storms. When I landed the tower called me and asked me to phone Johannesburg information. How come you flew via Pietersburg when you filed a plan to fly direct? they asked me. I tried to fly that plan but ran into weather, I said, and went back and refiled with a second route. Well, we never got it, Johannesburg told me. It turned out my second flight plan was never filed. It brought a shiver to my spine, because if I'd gotten lost they would have been looking a long time - in the wrong area.

I learned in Africa, and in bush flying, to trust no one and work on my own judgment. The people I trusted most were other pilots who had been through the territory - some even flew over the terrain without charts, which continues to astonish me.

Another challenge is the presence of game on the strips. Usually it's just cows, and a precautionary landing sweep over their heads will scatter them. But then sometimes there are elephants, or impala, giraffe or other game. The authoritative "Leisure Guide" on landing strips show little pictorials of potential animals to watch out for. Sometimes it will even advise covering tires with brush to keep hyenas from chewing them at night.

Flying low-level means truly low-level - bush pilots look at nearly brushing the gear on the treetops as being low-level. Once I flew with an old hand out of Cape Town, just 50 feet above the surface of the water. The ocean was incredibly beautiful - I could see sea lions on the rocks, the details of a sunken ship, the depth of green into the sands - and it scared the hell of out of me. They laugh when I tell them that flying along the coast in Southern California means maintaining 1,000 feet.

With the ever-changing weather, particularly in summer, practice at precautionary landings is essential. It's necessary to fly low over some farmer's field to

look for potholes, ant-bear holes and anything else that might keep the plane from taking off again once the bad weather has passed.

And getting fuel once outside the main towns can be a challenge. I usually call

ahead and request fuel, or otherwise the wait is up to three hours for the local guy to load a barrel into his pick-up truck and come in from town. And even then it's a squeaky little hand pump that sprays the pilot in the process. Normally you need to buy the whole barrel, 200 litres, but I've usually been lucky enough to split the barrel with someone else. No one buys a half-opened barrel that's been sitting out in the bush for some time.

But getting there to some of the most spectacular game lodges in the world makes it worth it. Usually the owner/manager (who is a pilot too) will be looking out for the buzz of a plane overhead the lodge, and head out in a Land Rover to meet the plane. Then the first place is usually the bar for a Rock Shandy, a local special with bitterwasser, lemon and tonic, and a seat by the mosquito netting of the lodge to listen to the sounds of hippos grunting across the river.

Accommodations are often rustic but spectacular and right amidst the bush. At night the sounds of hippos, lions, or other animals mark the darkness. We've woken to walk outside for breakfast to find hippo tracks right across the back of the bungalow, or hear stories of lions coming across the camp at night. They warn us to keep our food packed well away, and doors closed, or baboons or monkeys will play havoc with the luggage. It's all so much part of being in the bush. It only seems fitting that the way in is by plane - being transported to another world.

Flying in the bush answers some of that for me - the ability to transport into another world in a matter of a few hours. It's a world that existed many generations back, and hasn't changed all that much. It's still basic pilotage skills to get there, and a warm welcome on the ground by a group of people who have come the same way, made the same mistakes, and have plenty of stories to tell late into the night over glasses of lovely South African red wine.