



Sling

England to South Africa - 24 to 31 August 2013

By Andrew Pitman

The final chapter of the 'Sling 4 to Oshkosh and Back' tour started for me with boarding an SAA Airbus A340 at O.R.Tambo International Airport, Johannesburg, routing directly for London's Heathrow Airport (EGLL.) After hours of delays and another flight's luggage ending up on our plane, I remember thinking: "thank goodness I am flying home in a Sling!"

I was met at Heathrow by my brother James and his family and we set off for middle England to spend some time with our mother in her little home village of Feckenham in Worcestershire. It was a tranquil, peaceful, fattening and thoroughly enjoyable time. A week later James and I were at the Bidford Gliding Club in Bidford, Warwickshire where James had parked our Sling a week before. With a full tank of Mogas we began the flight to Bournemouth.

We broke the journey at Turweston Aerodrome which straddles the borders of Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire. It was a Royal Air Force (RAF) Bomber training facility during the Second World War. There we met with people from the Light Aviation Association (LAA), similar to RAASA in South Africa, who wished to meet us and write a story on our adventure. We finally made it to our resting place in Bournemouth before nightfall. At 0530 hours we departed Bournemouth for Marrakesh in Morocco. Thanks to a young South African named Nick, who worked for Bournemouth Handling, every nook and cranny in ZU-TAD was filled with Mogas to give us 20 hour endurance. The planned route was Bournemouth to Marrakesh, Ouggadougou, Pointe Noire and then either Walvis Bay or Maun to South Africa. ZU-TAD felt 100% fit and the crew 110%.

The first long flight was a breeze with a good tail-wind for most of the day. Our weather experts comprising of Sias Dreyer in Adelaide, Australia and Kyle Beckett in Johannesburg kept James and me fully posted on the weather throughout the trip. What a Godsend they were! We picked up a decent tailwind from just off the coast of France and were directed

gradually lower and lower over the ocean to maintain 125 to 130 knots groundspeed. We knew about the tailwinds over the ocean west of France, Spain and Portugal before departure, so we filed our flight plan to benefit from them and also avoid crowded airspace over Europe. This proved to be a waste of time, as Bournemouth decided it was unnecessary to activate our flight plan. For why we will never know.

As we were handed over to France we realised that the French Air Traffic Control (ATC) had no idea who we were, or to where we were going. The same was true for Madrid and Lisbon. It didn't seem to matter much though, as they let us through their airspace without as much as a question. However, when we were finally handed over to Casablanca, the ATC there would not let us route directly for Marrakesh, but instead sent us on a wild goose chase down south-west to a place called Essaouira. From there they routed us to Marrakesh, at 4 000 feet, more or less up valleys between the western Atlas Mountains. This added a good hour to our flight, which after 11 hours in the air, pretty much ranks up as the second last thing you want after a technical fault! (After a number two by Mike, James tells me...)

James was ever polite to Casablanca radar though and accepted our fate, keeping his views on close-minded officials safely in the cockpit. It definitely felt as if General Aviation is in its infancy in Morocco as there was quite a high level of discomfort with a light VFR flight coming in over the Atlantic Ocean. It genuinely felt as if they just did not know what to do with us, from their perspective completely unannounced, no permission and no flight plan. Their rules say flight plan only, but of course they never received ours!

Arriving at Marrakesh, not really thinking we were yet in 'Africa proper', we were ushered to our parking place by a little yellow Citroen and on to the terminal building with all our aircraft documentation, pilot licences and Aero Club crew cards. We dispensed with the formalities for the aircraft and headed for customs, where we were promptly refused entry to Morocco for not having visas. Then started the long wait whilst officials tried to work out what to do with two travellers arriving on their doorstep in a small private plane, obviously unable to fly on after such a long flight. I don't think they had ever had to deal with a situation like ours and were genuinely baffled as to what to do. They didn't believe us when we said we had no back-up or handling crew on the ground. After two hours of patiently waiting in the terminal building they returned to us with a scruffy piece of paper with a make-shift visa printed on it for both of us. Our passports, though, had to remain at the airport. We were granted no more than 48 hours in the country.

ZU-TAD was running brilliantly and burning exactly the fuel flow indicated. Apart from the Electronic Flight Instrument System (EFIS) not having vector and terrain maps for North Africa loaded, there were no snags at all. Later that day we downloaded the data (freeware) from MGL Avionics website and resolved the problem. We only sorted out the EFIS some days later. The Sling purred over the oceans as if nothing could stop her - free and on the road, exploring new out-of-reach places on a daily basis.

Let loose on Marrakesh we caught a taxi into town which was an old Mercedes with just over 600,000kms on the clock. We found a decent hotel with free internet and started the daily task of updating the website, filing a flight plan, getting much needed refreshments and food and contacting loved ones. After a decent night's rest, despite an Arabic singer who droned on until 2am, I felt somewhat refreshed, but still felt as if I had just stepped off a week-long cruise in a life boat. I found myself swaying down the passageway after the long hours of being bumped around in the air like a tiny mosquito. We explored the Old City on a scooter before heading out to the airport to refuel, file our flight plan and pay landing and parking fees for the next day's flight to Burkina Faso.

We explored the ancient, narrow alleyways through the silk souks and shoe markets and dined on Tagine and fresh orange juice in the Medina. Later, after the airport, we retired to our hotel ready for a 03h00 start to the next epic leg over the Sahara desert. However, our early start proved fruitless as we arrived at the plane to find a flat tyre and a botched flight plan (no VFR at night) delaying our departure. A couple of hours later, with a new tube full of nitrogen and a fresh flight plan, we set off to lift 1 215 kg of Sling over the 13,000 feet Atlas Mountains. Though flying IFR, ATC agreed to grant us responsibility for our own separation from the ground, as there was obviously no way were going to get to the 18,000 feet minimum safe altitude with 24 hours of fuel on board. Quickly we realised

we were going to have to fly through the Atlas Mountains rather than over them and soon we were busy thermaling, 515 litres of fuel on board, to scrape over the higher passes, the mountain tops towering above us. We were crossing the most famous and most inhospitable desert in Africa. Just after one of James' famous screeches, Casablanca contacted us via relay through Ouarzazate to make it clear that we were not to enter Algeria, as per our flight plan, but return instead to Marrakesh to file an alternative route. Not wanting to fly over the Atlas Mountain range again, we elected to rather land in Ouarzazate and see if we could come to some sort of agreement as to how we could continue south.

Moments later we sat in the Ouarzazate tower with some very kind Moroccans, who treated us to mint tea and lunch. Then started the game of broken telephone, all messages being relayed to Ouarzazate via Casablanca from Algeria and Mauritania. It seems that initially the Algerians were trying to look like they were doing their jobs, but then the military entered the equation and exercised their muscle over the civilians and finally the Algerians and the Mauritians each tried to flex muscle on each other. Each made 'concessions' to us to appear reasonable, but such irrational concessions that even lunatics like us couldn't accept them. For example taking a VFR flight routing between two points with absolutely nothing, but desert between them, 450 km apart, that would require, initially, 800 km of flying, then later after a 'small change', 700 km of flying, much of it in the wrong direction.

Eventually we succumbed to our fate and agreed to fly instead to Dakar. However, In mid-air Casablanca forbade us to fly over Nouakchott, despite having permission from Dakar, which administers Mali's airspace. Thankfully, Las Canarias, a Spanish territory, agreed to allow us transit through its airspace, over the ocean, at night, on an IF flight plan at 4 000 feet. This turned out to be the longest, scariest and most torturous flight of the trip for me. In the early hours of the next morning I was unable to stay awake. With James sleeping I tried to stretch my legs, focus my eyes on distant objects and slap myself awake. I kept dosing off. At times I was not sure if I had fallen asleep or just lost concentration for a split second. I felt so delusional that I wasn't even sure who was on duty. Was I flying? Why was James asleep? Even the simplest tasks required massive concentration.

Jumping off the wing onto the Dakar asphalt, at 03h30 the next morning, was a powerfully emotional experience. During the months of preparation it had never occurred to me that something might go wrong, or that the trip would be so mentally and physically exhausting. That 22 hour flight we had just completed put Mike and James' previous two circumnavigations squarely into perspective for me. This was hard work and seriously not for the faint hearted.

In the Leopold Senghor airport in Dakar there is no need even to show a passport. A pilot's shirt with epaulettes does the job just fine! Mike had booked a hotel for us and a shuttle was waiting. Arriving at the Hotel Onomo,

In Dakar waiting for fuel



James waiting for a taxi to ferry him to the petrol station



which was fairly decent albeit not cheap, we showered and went straight to sleep, waking three hours later to get some sorely needed nourishment, before heading straight back to the airport to start the arduous task of refuelling, paying landing fees, moving to another building to pay parking fees, another for runway lights and yet another for navigation services. The Mogas alone took five hours to organise and once it was all transferred to the wings and ferry tank I tested for water. There was lots of it. I continued to drain water out of the wing tanks for the next hour until well over a litre had come out. However, there was no way of testing or draining the fuel in the ferry tank. We would just have to chance it and try to keep one of the wing tanks isolated in case of emergency.

As for our state, you must remember that we had been flying now for four days with only three hours sleep in the last 48 hours. We returned to the hotel to pack our bags and eat a huge steak, before filing a flight plan for midnight that night. Rock and roll is definitely the way to describe the flight from Dakar to Accra. The first five hours in the dark were through patches of clouds that gradually got thicker and thicker. As dawn broke we saw the beautiful emerald jungle below us and in front a bank of cloud rising to well over 15,000 feet. Sias and Kyle had been trying since 02h00Z to direct us, via the satellite tracker message service, around the storms and heavy precipitation. It appeared that there was no way around this one though, so we gave up trying and just headed straight into it.

It felt quite good to try and ignore the clouds and we continued for another four hours or so in complete whiteout, but surprisingly stable air. As we approached Accra we realised we were going to be landing in thick cloud so James started to familiarise himself with the Accra approach plates. Nevertheless, as we started our descent over the mountains surrounding the city we popped out into a hot, West African afternoon. What a beautiful sight it was to behold the city below us!

It took three hours to refuel by making runs to the Shell station in a local taxi using the jerry cans Mike bought in Accra on the way to the USA. We saved ourselves R12 000 by doing that – Accra has perhaps the world's most expensive Avgas and some of the world's cheapest Mogas. We paid all the fees, less than R200 for approach, landing and parking, and then headed off to the Hotel Airport View for a solid dinner and a good night's sleep. Accra is a fantastic city with a really excitable vibrant feeling about it. People were friendly, honest and helpful. Definitely a place to which I will happily return.

The flight to Pointe Noire, although eight hours long, felt like a hop after what we had been up to and although we were in cloud most of the time, was gentle and relaxing. We planned to take off at 06h00, but it turned out the airport only opens at 07h00 on Thursdays and we got stuck in the Thursday morning Kotoka Airport International rush-hour. We tried a quick one, offering an intersection take-off, but that did not work.

On approach to Pointe Noir we struggled to find our landing permission number, with ATC repeatedly asking for it. Luckily for us, one of James' past flying instructors happened to be the Captain of a commercial flight leaving Pointe Noir and he convinced ATC over his radio that we were neither terrorists nor undesirables, so they let us land. Sadly, this is where our luck ran out.

On landing we were instructed not to park, but rather to taxi over to the tower where we were escorted into the building. It turned out we didn't have the correct permission to land in Pointe Noir and it very quickly became clear that the officials were going to use this as a way to get rich. Realising that nothing was going to move quickly, James negotiated with the authorities

to allow us to leave the airport and find a hotel for the night, on condition that we returned at 10h00 the next day to sort out our problem. So off we taxied about a kilometre down the runway to the Aero Club Pointe Noire, where Mike had arranged hangarage for us for the night. Pointe Noire felt like a nasty, dangerous and corrupt place. We even saw a group of men with hyenas on leashes, if that means anything.

After a good night's sleep and a buffet breakfast where I doubled up and filled a bag with rolls, yogurts, fruit and boiled eggs for the flight back home, we headed back to the airport to negotiate our way out of thousands of dollars' worth of bribes. First, though, we made our customary trips to the local petrol station with our plastic containers and filled ZU TAD to the brim once again.

Dealing with the fuss was an unpleasant experience, but we managed to hotfoot it out of the ROC without parting with unconscionable amounts of cash. Ready for home, 24 hours cut price Mogas on board, we headed out across Angola, 200 feet AGL, under the clouds. I think we may have left the locals a little nervous. Further south the ground rose and we had no alternative, but to climb through the clouds and hope that it was clear above. Finally we popped out into clear sky and watched another beautiful sunset over the African subcontinent. Flying over Angola on a moonless night is quite an experience. There's absolutely no electricity in the rural areas, so one is in pitch black the whole time. The only light one sees is from veld fires burning across thousands of miles of countryside.

Enjoying the benefits of a 50 knot tailwind, arriving at Lanseria at 03h30 we were met by fire engines on each side of the runway, flashing their lights and spraying water in an arc over us. ATC cheered us on and welcomed us home like heroes. Faithful friends had stayed up all night and were waiting to hug us and celebrate with us in the terminal building. We were home, safe and back with our loved ones. What an adventure!

I want to send a huge thank you to everybody at our factory, for building such an incredible plane for us to boldly and assuredly hop from country to country, over oceans, deserts and seas. Thank you to all our supporters who followed us and sent us messages en-route and thank you to James, Mike and Jean for letting me be part of this adventure. It is undoubtedly the most exciting chapter of my life so far! 🙏

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