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# feels like freedom

*A career as a commercial pilot travelling the world left Frenchman Philippe Berjaud smitten heart and soul with Africa. After retiring, he piloted his two-man kit plane from France to Hoedspruit in an epic flight of 14 000 kilometres to take up residence in his African home*

Words Bev Tucker; Photos Philippe Berjaud



Zandspruit Bush & Aero Estate Airshow is on June 13, 2015

Espresso and steam hiss from a gleaming chrome machine in the cool kitchen of Philippe and Isabelle Berjaud's Hoedspruit house. As he proffers coffee and a selection of *petits fours* far too beautiful to eat, Philippe says, "I'm French, I love France, but I always wanted to settle in Africa. I lived in Côte d'Ivoire many years ago. I travelled a lot in French-speaking Africa and I have many friends in Senegal and Congo. I also went to East Africa a lot."

He formed a close bond with the continent, especially West Africa and the northern deserts of Morocco, Senegal and Mauritania. There followed a career with Air France flying routes originally opened up in the 1920s by the legendary Aéropostale pilots. He flew the Sahara and other African routes countless times in a flying career that took him all over the globe, as a pilot with Air France.

When he retired, he and his wife Isabelle searched for a second home that offered relief from the winter in the northern hemisphere. Their search turned up options in several countries including Senegal, Madagascar and Kenya, which made it onto their shortlist. Ultimately, they chose South Africa for its "relative stability and reasonable property prices. Kenya was very expensive and in other countries you can only lease land, never own it. Often you find the same land has been leased to a number of different people." What sealed the deal on a property in Zandspruit Aero and Bush Estate in Hoedspruit, was that Philippe could land and hangar his plane virtually at his front door. Sold.

The home they chose is secluded in natural bush, yet close enough to the aspects of civilisation that help make life enjoyable – such as electricity, grocery stores and restaurants. The couple settled here in 2012, with the intention of dividing their time between their house in Africa and their home on the west coast of France. The last item on the packing list was Philippe's plane. They use it as casually as other people use cars. "We wanted to get it to South Africa because we need it to get around when we're here."

Fortuitously, Philippe's son Mathieu is a pilot. Like his father before him, he flies for Air France. He took a month's leave to be co-pilot on the father and son trip that took them from France, across North Africa via Spain, and ever southwards over tracts of impenetrable rain forests and remote savannah until they eventually crossed into Namibia. A few days recuperating in the luxury of Sossusvlei Lodge was called for before they pointed the nose cone east to Limpopo Province to touch down in Zandspruit just in time to celebrate Christmas 2013.

Philippe, who has been flying for 47 years, shrugs off any suggestion of difficulties. "Nothing went wrong... well, maybe a little trouble," he allows. "When we were building the plane, the engine was experimental. At one point I had to stop the engine in flight because of a big oil leak." Unlike most light aircraft which run on aviation fuel,





the Rebel Elite kit plane, a Canadian high wing tail-dragger, has a diesel engine. The key to successfully completing a journey like this is thorough preparation. The planning and paperwork for permission to traverse, as well as landing permits in each country en route, required more effort than the flight itself.

There was no trouble to speak of (“some small storms”) and no spear-rattling from hostile inhabitants – “If you are friendly and nice to people, they normally will not give you trouble”. For the rest, spending days on end trapped hundreds of feet above ground in a metal cockpit, stewing gently in 40-degree heat with nowhere to go but onwards or down, was not a challenge. That was the enjoyable part. The plane’s fuel capacity did cause some concern at times. “We used a lot because we were a little bit heavy with two people as well as all the tools and spares we might need.” The plane has up to 14 hours of fuel endurance, but carrying as much weight as they were, gave them only about half of that on a typical day, with good weather.

Perhaps the greatest calculated risk was crossing

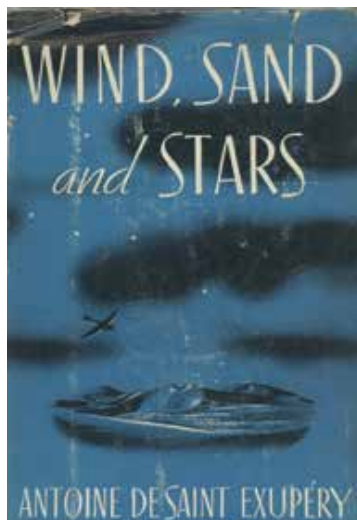
**“THE QUICKEST WAY WAS TO VEER OFF COURSE OVER DENSE TROPICAL FOREST... YOU RELY ON THE ENGINE BECAUSE IF IT STOPS, WELL, YOU BECOME A NEWS STORY”**

Gabon. They had not applied for landing permission (fees in Gabon are extremely high), but expected to clear Gabon airspace with just enough fuel to land in the DRC. On the day, the weather forecast let them down. Their original route followed the coastline, which would have worked in good weather, but there were strong, unpredicted headwinds. “We had a maximum of 7,5 hours of fuel on board and we could not make it in that wind. We had to get across the border within our flying time because we did not have a permit to land in Gabon.” They took a gamble. “The quickest way was to veer off-course over dense tropical forest. We were flying at 300 feet, which is very low, which is when you rely on the engine because if it stops... well, you become a news story.”

What they took away with them were the vistas. “The Western Sahara and Namibia are simply amazing, so beautiful. Also flying over the equatorial forests of Gabon was very special.” It’s reasonable to imagine that after following the tiny shadow of your plane across vast tracts of emptiness that it may leave one with a sense of fear and vulnerability? Perhaps a longing for the safety of numbers? “No, I never felt it like that,” smiles Philippe. “For me it’s a feeling of freedom.”



## EPIC AVIATION READS



**Wind, Sand and Stars, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1939):** Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of the beloved children's classic *The Little Prince*, was also a pioneering pilot for Aéropostale, the world's first intercontinental airline, founded in 1918 as a mail carrier. In the 1920s he piloted small planes over the vast Saharan wastes on the Toulouse-Dakar route, opening up mail routes there and in the Andes. He encountered cyclones, marauding tribes and lonely nights. *Wind, Sand and Stars* interweaves his adventures into a richly textured autobiographical narrative, which includes the story of his crash in the

Libyan Desert in 1936, and his miraculous survival. "Self-discovery comes when a man measures himself against an obstacle," he wrote. *National Geographic* lists *Wind, Sand and Stars* among the top 10 adventure books of all time.

**West with the Night, Beryl Markham (1942):** Markham's autobiography offers a window into a life in East Africa before WWII. She grew up as an only child in a remote part of Tanzania. Her companions were Maasai warriors who taught her to hunt and survive in the bush. She was a contemporary of Karen Blixen (author of *Out of Africa*), and was taught to fly by Denys Finch-Hatton (who died in an aircraft accident). Her book recounts her many adventures and the dangers she faced flying primitive transport planes solo in uncharted areas. At the time, no pilot had flown non-stop from Europe to New York. No female pilot had made the westward flight solo, though several had died trying. Markham set out to claim both records. On 4 September 1936, she took off from Abingdon, England. After a 20-hour flight, she crash-landed in Nova Scotia. Despite falling short of her goal, she became the first woman to cross the Atlantic east-to-west solo, and the first person to make it from Britain to North America non-stop.

*INFO Both books are available from [www.kalahari.com](http://www.kalahari.com)*



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