



Okavango Via The Milk Run

WHEN MOST readers who should peruse this were not even a twinkle in the old man's eye, way back in 1957 that is, I had the good fortune to fly as a first officer on the old "Gooney Birds", more commonly known as Dakotas or DC-3s, on one of the most fascinating routes anyone could wish to fly.

The route in question was Windhoek – Livingstone – Salisbury (later Harare), in particular the Windhoek – Livingstone sector which passed over the Okavango swamps.

Okavango – the very connotation of the name had long fascinated me, conjuring visions of untamed Africa as it must have been before the advent of so-called civilisation, and that is precisely what it turned out to be – then and even as late as the 1980s when I had the privilege of experiencing the swamps at ground level.

In the 1950s, however, before undertaking the Windhoek to Livingstone leg, we had first to earn that privilege by getting the old Gooney to Windhoek, a full day's grind on what was termed "The Milk Run" from Johannesburg to Bloemfontein and thence to Kimberley, Upington, Keetmanshoop and finally Windhoek.

Following an 0700B departure from Johannesburg, the Gooney crew would arrive in Windhoek in the late afternoon feeling wrung out, jaded and dehydrated, for once west of Kimberley, flying over that arid terrain in the ever-increasing heat, especially in summer, a particular brand of puke-inducing turbulence was encountered to which only the salted and hardened were immune. It took only one passenger to be sick, which would inevitably set the rest going.

There were times when the poor hostesses had my heartfelt sympathy, for if any one of those passengers happened to be a trifle slow in reaching for the "puke bag" in the pocket on the back of the seat in front, or failing that, even missing it entirely in the turbulence, the entire cabin would reek of vomit, while the poor lass, herself pale around the gills, would be called upon to clean it up!

Jet age passengers, cruising serenely at thirty or forty-thousand feet might encounter the odd "cobblestone effect" from clear air turbulence or the occasional bit of rough air while rounding a storm or during climb or descent at low level, but this could never compare with the incessant, seemingly endless, sickening wallowing of the Dakota during the heat of the day when flying at nine or ten-thousand feet over arid, bare terrain.

The thermals may have been welcomed by glider pilots, but they were decidedly anathema to the occupants of a lumbering, powered aircraft endeavouring to maintain a constant altitude.

Strangely enough, while sitting in the cockpit, one was not subject to the same sickening sensation, possibly because of having reference to the horizon ahead and an abundance of fresh air eliminating the odour of puke. Knowing this, it was not uncommon for a wan-looking hostess to seek temporary relief on the flight deck to recover before returning to the fray in the cabin.

Navigation over the vast, featureless semi-desert terrain of South-West Africa (Namibia) and Bechuanaland (Botswana) was something of a problem until one learned to pick out features such as areas of russet and yellow sand dunes, particu-

lar rocky outcrops and even particular patches of scrawny scrub and, of course, the many dry river beds, all alike, which threaded that vast area.

A small town such as Keetmanshoop did not sport the luxury of a radio beacon and the sandy landing strips blending into their surroundings were not readily visible until almost on top of them. However, having located Keetmanshoop, the final leg to Windhoek, although not bereft of that incessant turbulence, was a piece of cake from a navigational point of view; one merely having to keep the main road to the north in sight until the distinctive gap in the arid, but picturesque, mountains to the south of the city hove into view.

After that long, turbulence-plagued day, the crew would thankfully check into the then celebrated Continental Hotel for a shower and a beer on the large terrace where anybody who was anybody would be bound to put in an appearance on those Saturday nights not only to see, but to be seen.

Due to the remoteness of Windhoek in that era, the crew were invariably sought out to post letters and parcels – that was before the age of hi-jacking, bombing and sabotage – in either Salisbury or Johannesburg, usually being rewarded for these favours by that most famous of delicacies produced in the area, Kudu biltong, sometimes by the sack full!

The following morning, after another 0700 hours take-off, it would be east-north-east across more featureless semi-desert until reaching the Okavango swamps, easily located because of the extremely powerful Maun beacon situated right on the Okavango river which feeds the swamps. It is one of the most unique wetlands on earth by virtue of



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being situated bang in the middle of a semi-desert.

Flying on a VFR flight plan, the common practice was to descend to a couple of hundred feet over the swamps. The passengers, mostly Germans bound for Salisbury where they would catch one of the major airlines to Europe, looked forward to these game viewing excursions as much as did the crew, for word had been spread via the grapevine that this would be one of the highlight of their South-West African experience.

Once over the swamps, having descended to a couple of hundred feet AGL and having the advantage of forward vision, we would announce to the passengers on which side to look out when anything of interest came into view. Thereafter, we would orbit the herd until the passengers had had their fill of filming with their Paillard Bolex 8 mm movie cameras (no video cameras in those days) and amend the ETA accordingly, courtesy the radio operator and his Morse key – not strictly legal, but accepted by all and sundry as being in the best interests of promoting tourism.

It was not uncommon to come across vast herds of buffalo, roughly estimated as some 700 strong, with zebra and wildebeest in slightly lesser proliferation. There were herds of fifty or so elephant which would bunch together and move off in undignified haste at the approach of this noisy intruder from the sky to face the menace, leaving the matriarch or herd bull – I was never sure which – to face the menace. Sometimes they would rear up on hind legs, forefeet flailing the air and trunk held aloft, obviously trumpeting defiance.

At times such as this, one was wont to listen very carefully to the note of the engines, for there could be little doubt as to the intentions of those huge pachyderms should we happen to go down.

There were scenes of huge crocodiles slithering into the water from sandy banks and Letchwe, those swamp adapted antelope, spraying their way through the shallows, making incredibly good speed despite the handicap of knee deep water, and tranquil lily adorned ponds.

Waterbuck abounded in the reeds while submerged hippos, seemingly unperturbed by our noisy intrusion, continued their slumbers, secure in their watery beds. There were occasional, supremely graceful spear fishermen, somehow contriving to remain upright in their narrow

dug-outs while gazing upwards at this intrusion into their domain.

Attempting to map read over large areas of the swamps was an exercise in futility for they never remained constant, particularly in the rainy season when water courses could change overnight. We accordingly maintained a very rudimentary dead reckoning plot on the Lambert's Conformal which invariably proved surprisingly accurate for, after climbing back to an acceptable altitude and setting heading for Livingstone, the ADF there would usually indicate within a reasonable arc ahead when in range.

Thereafter, nature's own beacon would appear on the horizon, being the plume of water vapour which was a permanent fixture over the Victoria Falls.

Naturally, once over the falls, further orbiting was called for while those who by then had not run out of film, whirred their Paillard Bolexes focused on one of Africa's greatest spectacles below.

The return flight from Salisbury the following day followed a similar pattern in reverse with a fresh bunch of passengers eager for their first glimpse of unspoiled Africa. However, towards the end of my sojourn on the Gooney pool, the practice of low flying over the Okavango almost came to an end when a colleague suffered the misfortune of having a vulture come through one of the windshields, fortunately not on the side where he was sitting. Nevertheless, he was covered in carrion, feathers and entrails.

Due to the increased drag caused by the gaping hole where the right windshield had once been, they lost considerable speed and the fuel consumption increased so alarmingly that at one stage they were even considering the possibility of having to put her down on a dry pan short of Windhoek. However, make it they eventually did with very little fuel in the tanks.

After landing, such was the force of the impact that the vulture's heart, together with a few attachments, was found at the rear of the cabin!

In the intervening years, schemes have been mooted to harness the waters of the Okavango to irrigate surrounding areas, but to date these have been wisely rejected by the Botswana Government.

It is to be hoped that this attitude will prevail for the Okavango delta is unique on this planet and hopefully will continue to earn more through tourism than any horrendously irrigation scheme would. →