

Last summer I was sitting on a beach thinking 'I'm 50 next year – what am I going to do?' just as I was looking at an advert from a company called Prepare2go, which specialises in African logistics and adventure trips. Prepare2go is run by ex Army Air Corps helicopter pilot Sam Rutherford, and he was organising a trans-African flying safari from London to Cape Town via the scenic East Coast route. I am not sure Sam had anticipated that someone would be mad enough to consider doing the trip in a single engine piston helicopter, but when we met in London to discuss the idea his enthusiastic response was that it would be 'quite an adventure'. Furthermore he offered to fly the trip as my co-pilot, which gave me more confidence that I could complete the journey in my R44 G-DKNY as I had only two years helicopter flying and 300 hours

under my belt.

The plan was to meet in Cyprus in February 2011 where we would undertake a short sea crossing to Egypt, take advantage of the good African weather and make Cape Town in 18 days.

The planning was quite simple. Sam's company would organise all the hotels, airports, flight clearances and fuel and I had to ensure the helicopter was capable of doing the 8,500 nm flight. After some experiences flying my machine in Libya last year and a number of conversations with military pilots who had flown helicopters in the Middle East, I also had my rotor blades fitted with tape specially made and certified by a company called Air Wolf in the USA to minimise the chances of my blades being damaged by landings in sand areas in the bush and desert.

On a cold murky January 18th I took the train to Wycombe and left the airpark for darkest Africa. Our first stop was Troyes just west of Paris where we spent the night, before taking off on a freezing morning heading for the Cote d'Azur. We refuelled in Valence and had a wonderful view of the snow-capped Alps as we headed for Cuers, where the fuel man had gone on a French lunch break. We went on to St Tropez where the fuel was of a much better vintage and donned our maritime survival gear for the first long sea journey across the Mediterranean to Elba; a quick refuel in Elba and it was on the Rome's Urbe airport – not bad in 36 hours from London. Here the weather changed. Our next challenge was to cross the high Apennines but the forecast for the next few days was awful so we covered the helicopter, did a quick bit of sightseeing



London to Cape Town in an R44

and took easyJet back to London.

A week later we were back. Our target was Corfu. We crossed the Appenines and headed over the Aegean Sea. The sun was setting behind us and the high snow-capped mountains of Albania provided a spectacular backdrop for our arrival in Corfu. Next morning it was off to Athens, over the high Greek mountains, past ancient ruins, before dropping down to the isthmus of Corinth and the Corinthian Canal to Athens. We had a quick 50-hour engine service in Athens then headed south over the Ionian Sea towards Rhodes. In the afternoon sun we had a fantastic journey over the sea past the islands of Paros, Naxos, Kos and Simi and reached Rhodes by nightfall. Next morning, with rain and headwinds forecast, we set off low level on a lonely three-hour trip across the sea to Paphos, completing the first part

of our journey with two weeks in hand.

Sam's plan was for the safari to start in earnest from Cyprus on February 12th. We were due to be joined by seven fixed wing aircraft ranging from a large twin and a turboprop to a small kit plane for the journey south. With time to spare we headed back to London to prepare for the next leg. A few days later, the Egyptian revolution occurred and it became clear that our planned flight from Paphos through Egypt via El Ashish and Luxor to Wadi Halfa in Sudan was not going to be feasible. Sam had warned us that in Africa 'anything can, and probably will, happen' but the fall of Mubarak was not really on the planning horizon. The alternatives were Syria and Saudi or Libya. Saudi at short notice is impossible with a group of small planes, so Libya it was. The main drawbacks were that it involved

repositioning to Crete, a long sea crossing to Libya and two very long flights across the Libyan empty quarter to Sudan. No-one ever said it would be easy. Libyan flight clearances were obtained and on February 10th we set off from London for Paphos and flew the helicopter back to Rhodes and on to Crete.

On Saturday February 12th we were at the airport well before dawn with the prospect of nine hours flying ahead of us to the town of Al Kufra, deep into the Sahara in eastern Libya. We left Crete at first light and headed south west over the mountains and out across a lonely sea. We had 280 miles ahead of us over the sea, protected from the elements by one engine, a life raft, lifejackets and marine (teletubby) survival suits. Three hours after leaving Heraklion we saw the coast of Africa ahead and soon we were on the



*Main photo: somewhere north of Darfur the R44 rests in an endless sea of sand
Below: the adventurers in flight – William Cortazzi (left) and Sam Rutherford in G-DKNY*



*Need to mark a disconcerting birthday? Why not emulate **William Cortazzi** and do a long cross-country*

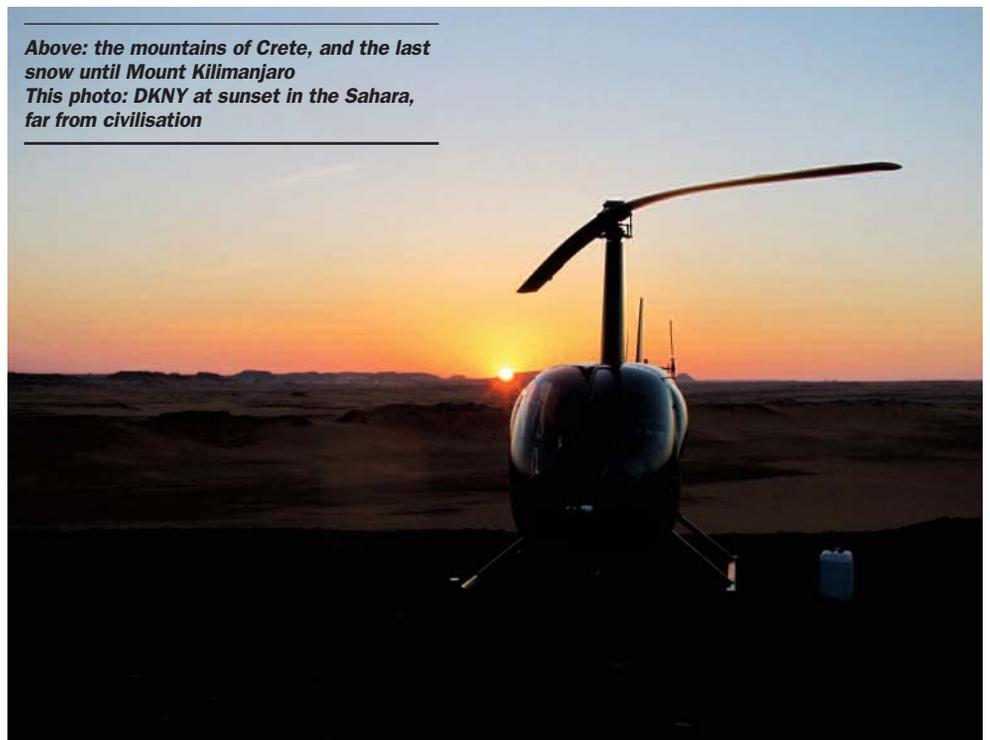


ground at Benghazi. The refuelling and entry formalities passed smoothly – little did we know that just one week later the airport would lie in ruins as Benghazi fell to anti-Gaddafi rebels.

Next, it was south over the Sahara. Now we were leaving civilisation behind. Radar and air traffic control vanished, the temperature got warmer and the landscape resembled a huge sandpit punctuated for the first part of the flight by large, isolated oil installations. Soon even the oil wells disappeared and we headed south towards Al Kufra, a dot on the GPS and perhaps one of the most isolated towns on earth. About 30 minutes north of Al Kufra, just as the sun was setting, we landed on top of a pinnacle in an area resembling Utah's Monument Valley for a spectacular stop before landing at the airport just before dusk.

There is not much choice of accommodation in Al Kufra – one hotel of dubious cleanliness, next door to the mosque (no need for an early morning call) with dirty bedding and no towels! With the nearest alternative 500 miles away and with nine hours flying under our belts, we took the rooms and slept like babies. Next morning it was back to the airport before dawn, only to 'hurry up and wait' as we tried to persuade the Libyan Air Force so sell us fuel. At lunchtime permission from Tripoli filtered through and fuel arrived. Our plan had been to fly to Dongola in Sudan, refuel and head for the ancient city of Merowe for the night but that was not going to be achievable in daylight. A quick phone call to Khartoum confirmed that the security situation was not good enough for a party of 16 Westerners to spend a night in Dongola, so we decided to enjoy the delights of Al Kufra for a further night and leave at first light.

**Above: the mountains of Crete, and the last snow until Mount Kilimanjaro
This photo: DKNY at sunset in the Sahara, far from civilisation**



Next day we were again at the airport before sunrise. With a long flight ahead, we were relieved to encounter a tailwind as the only alternative we had was to return to the delights of Kufra – there were no other towns along the route. The desert was spectacular. A huge range of mountains loomed ahead on the corner of Libya, Sudan, Egypt and Chad – well worth a visit if you are really adventurous! Then it was into Northern Sudan and a totally empty region – no camels, no jeep tracks, nothing. Eventually we landed at Dongola; thankfully our drums of fuel were at the airport and soon we were off, low level down the Nile in the setting sun, towards Merowe. Merowe is an ancient Nubian town well known for its mini pyramids dating back to 500 BC, and as

we approached down the Nile we took a quick aerial sightseeing trip before landing at the airport.

We had a bit of a drama with the local police – apparently our passports had not been stamped properly at Dongola, Merowe had no immigration and hence we were illegal. Two hours later we were allowed into town, minus passports, on condition we returned to the airport at 8am to fly to Khartoum. We were a day late, so our hotel was not available and we ended up sleeping in a workers dormitory – my emergency sleeping bag proved useful. Next morning, after a quick visit to the pyramids at sunrise we were back at the airport. Three hours later we were released for Khartoum and flew over more pyramids, over the Nile and past camels



Top: ancient pyramids near the ancient Nubian town of Merowe on the Nile
Above: fishermen on the Blue Nile wave at the unusual sight of a passing R44
Left: William flies DKNY south up the Blue Nile through Sudan
Bottom left: the river Nile, obviously a useful feature for desert navigators



on the edge of seas of dunes before the haze of Khartoum loomed on the horizon. The airport is chaos – one runway crammed with large, ancient Russian cargo planes and helicopters wasting our aid budget – but we eventually landed and got into town for a day's rest. One thing I was certain about was that Khartoum was a place I was unlikely to visit again so we made the most of the day, visiting a deserted national museum and seeing the meeting point of the blue and white Niles.

Off early again next day up the Blue Nile to Damazin airport where after refuelling from pre-ordered drums we left for Addis Ababa. Then a call came through on the radio that one of our party, a twin engine Cessna, had suffered a nosewheel failure on take-off and was blocking the runway. Southern Sudan is an inconvenient place for an unfortunate incident of this nature but with the runway blocked, preventing them from landing, most of our party continued on to Ethiopia. We returned to

see if we could help. We found the twin nose-down in a pile of foam surrounded by UN fire engines, with both propellers mangled. Luckily there were no injuries, but the temperature was rising, the airport management were fairly exercised and a UN plane was stuck on the ground by the blocked runway. The task of removing the plane was accomplished with the help of a large number of Sudanese organised by some Pakistani Air Force helicopter pilots who were flying for the UN based at Damazin. The twin's nose was lifted onto the back of a pick-up truck and the machine was pulled off the runway. After fighting off the airport officials who wanted to fill in endless paperwork for an 'investigation' we siphoned off some fuel from the stricken machine to enable the helicopter to fly the next day direct to Kenya.

Now it was getting dark and we needed to find a safe place to stay and try and arrange transport for those in the twin back to Khartoum – Ryanair does not service Damazin, at least not yet. We discovered that, by a stroke of luck, the British Ambassador to Sudan was in Damazin that night staying at what we were told was a police guest house. We left the airport in the back of a pick-up truck in the fading light towards the centre of town. First stop was the police station; no sign of any ambassador. Back in the pick-up for a 30-minute drive to the UN compound. This was fortified like Wormwood Scrubs and they were not letting in a few Brits and accompanying armed Sudanese, although they did suggest we tried a government guesthouse in town. Eventually we found a guesthouse with an encouraging police presence outside and found some surprised English people working for a UK government aid project in Damazin. The ambassador was indeed in town, but out to dinner. It was quickly arranged for us to stay at the residence of the local general in charge of Blue Nile province police. We arrived at a very secure dormitory where, after a long, hot day and a bit of traveller's stomach, I went to sleep on the first bed I could find. Two hours later, with my underpant-clad bottom sticking out of the bed, I walked the British Ambassador and the General. Decorum was rapidly restored and after thanking our hosts profusely we went to sleep.

Next morning the Ambassador, together with his security, army and police arrived to kindly offer a lift on the nine-hour car journey to Khartoum for our stranded friends. Once they had departed in a cloud of dust, we set off in two tuk-tuks to the airport. Soon we were airborne and heading south for Lokichichigio in Northern Kenya. First it was over the hills of western Ethiopia with only the odd passing airliner, mostly flying from Nairobi to Europe, to talk to. Then my fuel filter light went on – not great over southern



**This photo: the Cessna twin is recovered from the Khartoum runway after nosegear failure
Below: elderly United Nations helicopters with Pakistani crews in Khartoum**



Sudan. We must have picked up some contamination from the fuel from the twin in Damazin. I quickly looked at the pilot's handbook, which advised us to land as soon as convenient – probably Nairobi, 800 miles south! Eventually we arrived in Kenya, leaving Sudan and the desert behind us at last.

The Rift Valley

After a quick refuel and visa check at Lokichichigio, a beer and a bath at a farmhouse B&B near Nakaru sounded very tempting, and we took off to make the flight south. Luckily a tailwind helped, and we climbed over the beautiful, verdant green Kenyan highlands on the edge of Lake Victoria south towards Nakaru. We crossed the equator just before dusk, and with just enough fuel and light we saw the helipad in the garden of a beautiful farmhouse and made our approach. At 7,400 feet and 25 degrees, this landing is

quite challenging for a Robinson, particularly after nine hours flying and a fuel filter warning, but after a minor drama which saw us end up in the paddock rather than the helipad we hopped the helicopter over the fence into the garden and shut down to nurse a very welcome ice cold Tusker. Next morning, clean, well-rested and after a historic English breakfast we lifted for the relatively short flight to Nairobi Wilson airport. On the way we flew low over a game reserve on the shores of Lake Nivasha and were treated to the sight of a couple of rhinos grazing on the grasslands among zebra, giraffe and wildebeest. We climbed to 10,000 ft over the Rift Valley and were soon safely on the ground at Nairobi. That night we stayed on the airfield, at the East African Aero club, and left early next day for Tanzania.

First stop in Tanzania was Kilimanjaro. The weather was fairly cloudy but we got fleeting glimpses of the top of Kilimanjaro



drives in the bottom of the crater, then descended over the great Serengeti plain. Soon we were low level and saw our first herd of elephant as we tracked towards the strip at Ndutu.

We spent two nights in a camp overlooking the Serengeti seeing the huge herds of animals in this fantastic park. On our final day we left early and flew low over millions of migrating wildebeest and zebra, ever watchful of the odd passing vulture or eagle who could have caused us to come to grief. Then it was back to Kilimanjaro for fuel and on to the hot and humid coast for the short sea crossing to Zanzibar.

Stonetown in Zanzibar is a beautiful, if slightly run-down, town. It was originally an Omani slave-trading outpost and during the late nineteenth century was one of the major towns in Africa. Its beautiful buildings, faded glory and historic past make it an interesting place to visit. We were due to spend one night there, but unfortunately the Mozambique ministry of defence chose to take a close look at our flight clearances so one day became three and we got a chance to relax and enjoy the beach.

Eventually our clearances came through and after fighting our way through hordes of Italian package tourists at the airport we left Zanzibar, heading south over crystal



Top left: giraffe in convoy in the Masai Mara in Kenya

Left: zebra startled by the helicopter make their escape

Bottom left: an elephant makes unhurried progress across the Serengeti

Below: village on the Masai Mara in south western Kenya



as we headed south, encountering the odd giraffe over the Kenyan Masai Mara and waving to the colourful Masai herdsmen as we flew past. From Kilimanjaro airport we headed west, past Arusha and over the legendary Ngorogoro crater. At 10,000 feet we looked down through the telephoto lens to see lions sitting beside tourists on game

it's easy to feel very small in such a vast wilderness of sand



blue waters. We skirted low over the harbour of Dar es Salaam and were soon flying over pristine beaches towards Mozambique. There we went inland over spectacular jungle and came across two herds of wild elephant feeding in the forests. The weather began to change – no clouds were forecast but soon we were weaving to avoid low cloud and afternoon thunderstorms. We landed at the northern Mozambique town of Pemba and headed for the Pemba fishing resort, run by 'Brenda from Pemba' and her African family whose main preoccupation was game fishing on the Leonardo banks in the Mozambique Channel. While the huts were prepared for what must have been a rather large and unexpected set of guests

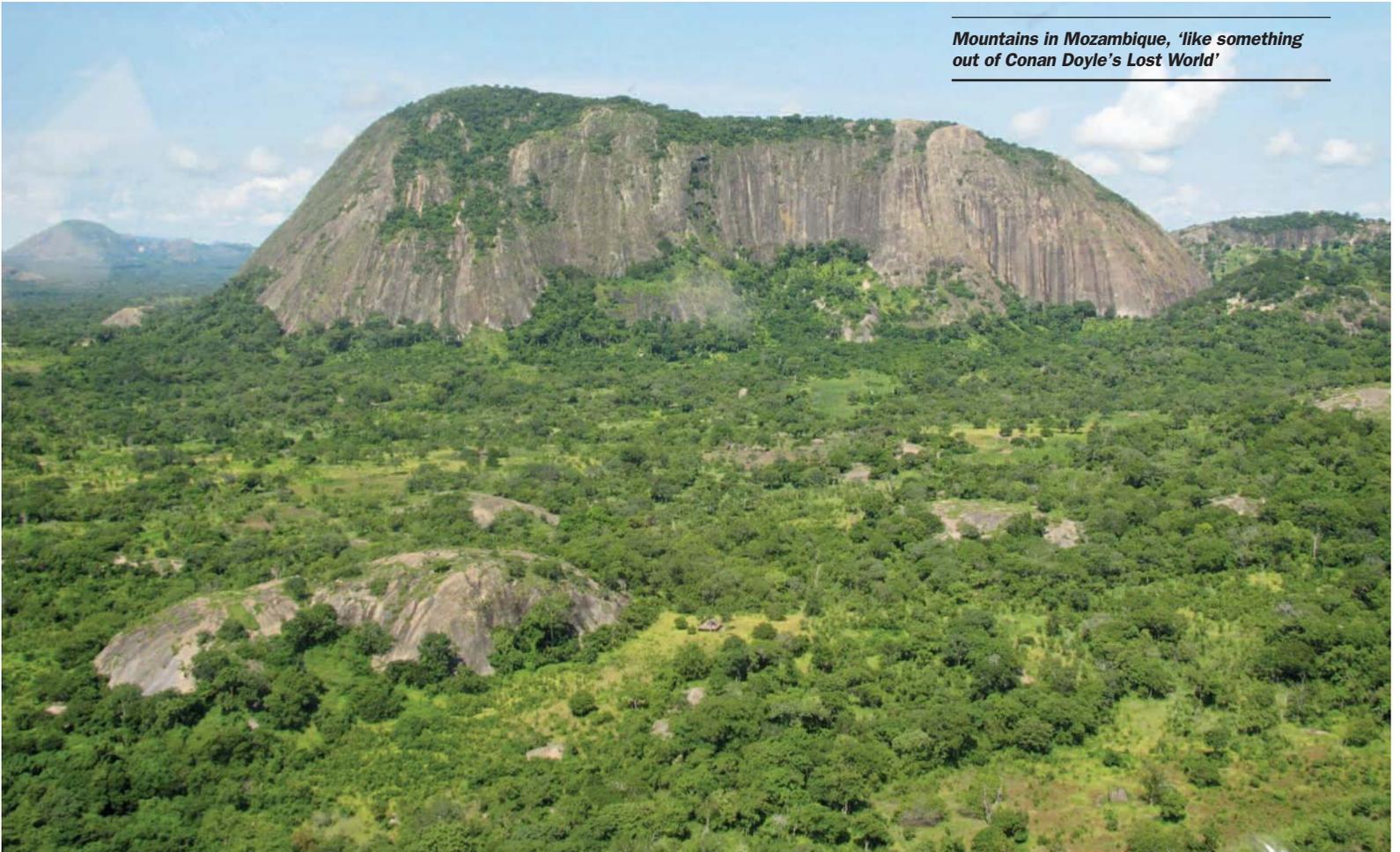
we sat by the fire, trying to discourage the malarial mosquitoes while listening to stories about the Somali pirates who preyed on boats in the Mozambique Channel as far south as Maputo. Our African friends were 'ready for them' and I am sure they would withstand any attempted attack very effectively. After dinner we watched South African rugby on the satellite TV driven from a generator before retiring with lots of insect repellent to a netted bed in a hut on the edge of the Pemba lagoon.

Heading south from Pemba the scenery became mystical – large mountains rising sharply like huge rocks over 3,000 feet from the floor of the jungle. It reminded me of Conan Doyle's 'Lost World' and I would

not have been surprised to see dinosaurs sticking their heads above the trees. Then we were over the Limpopo delta, flying over herds of wild buffalo surrounded by huge flocks of white birds as we made our way to the coast. The fishermen were a bit surprised to see a black helicopter and stopped to wave as we flew 100 yards offshore before landing at the port town of Beira.

Not surprisingly there was no official fuel at Beira. We were in the process of negotiating to hire a car for the overnight drive south to Vilancoulos when a kind local pilot landed in a Cherokee Six. He agreed to let us have 60 litres from a stock he had shipped up periodically from Vilancoulos which was just enough for us to make the 140nm flight. That night we slept in the VIP hotel in Beira – breakfast was met by an empty buffet table, a blank stare from the waiter and a mumbled comment about the kitchen being fumigated. Back at the airport with two hours of fuel for a 90-minute flight we departed for Vilancoulos. Soon we were flying against a 10-knot headwind and pressed on with visions of having to land on the beach short of our destination. Thankfully we made Vilancoulos with 15 minutes' fuel to spare. Refuelled, we headed east offshore to Bazaruto, a beautiful island with spectacular beaches and sand dunes being developed by wealthy South Africans. A late breakfast and a day lazing on the beach was very

Mountains in Mozambique, 'like something out of Conan Doyle's Lost World'



welcome.

From Bazaruto it was back to Vilancoulos and after clearing customs in the new terminal being built by the Chinese as they colonise this part of Africa, we headed west to the borders of the Kruger National Park and the Rainbow Nation. Everything began to change –

controllers had us on radar and large towns with motorways began to pass below. Soon we were on the ground at Kruger international airport and, after a quick customs check and a Wimpy coffee milkshake we headed for a grass strip at Barberton, home of legendary South African bush pilot Cece Pocock. Cece

cooked us a traditional South African Brai and gave us a through briefing about flying in South Africa – basically its much simpler than the rest of Africa and fuel is not a problem!

We planned a scenic route following the coast down to Cape Town. Next morning we took off over Swaziland and the Drakensberg mountains with Paul Simon on the headphones as we passed Ladysmith towards the coast at Margate, just south of Durban. Then we flew low level in glorious sunshine over huge numbers of dolphins and the odd shark and turtle along the wild coast, past East London and on to Port Alfred. We had dinner in Port Alfred with the mother of a good London-based friend and next morning flew low along spectacular dunes towards Port Elizabeth. There the weather changed – the sun disappeared under blankets of fog and the sea became angry, irritated by a 30 knot headwind. We battled along a grey garden route past Knysna, landing for fuel at Mossel Bay. The final flight took us over the ostrich farms of the Western Cape and the wineries of Franshoek and Stellenbosch before Table Mountain and journey's end appeared in the distance. Landing at Cape Town International, we headed into the waterfront for a well-deserved dinner. Next day it was BA to London, having completed 97 flying hours covering 8,500 nm – not bad for cross country flight from the UK in mid winter! ■

A group of interested bystanders on Bazaruto island off Mozambique



Sparkling sand dunes along the Indian Ocean at Bazaruto

