

It wasn't a dust devil that nearly killed me. It was an elephant



Outback Namibia

Stuart Belbas packs his tandem engine and heads down the Trans Kalahari Highway





As I brewed my coffee on an open fire I watched the sun rise over the Kalahari Desert, and it occurred to me that I live for moments like this. People had always told me that Africa will steal your heart and I wondered if that was really true. But that's exactly what happened to me on this trip.

I would normally embark on a flying adventure my twin brother, but he was on his own sailing trip, so I asked one of my best friends, Mike Wray, to come with me. Mike is not a pilot so I took a tandem glider too, so I could share the flying experience with him.

I hadn't originally planned to take an engine half way around the world, especially to a country like Namibia where I could easily free fly, but the more I planned my journey, the more I realised that I would want to fly across the country's hundreds of miles of grasslands.

These savannahs are transitional lands, where the dry sands of the Kalahari slowly, over 1,000 km, transform into the jungles of the north. They form an immense vastness of dry golden grass, where nothing but a few zebras and other animals roam under a hot sun. It would be very difficult to free fly here.

And so it was that I found myself travelling with more luggage than ever before, including my motor. Unfortunately though, I found myself in Windhoek airport travelling light. I'd arrived without any baggage and it was to be several days before we would see our bags. However it gave us time to explore Windhoek, Namibia's capital city, and to pick up the jeep that was to be home for the next two weeks on our 4,000 km round trip adventure.

Finally, after three days of waiting, we packed our bags

into the back of the truck – an incredible Nissan 4WD equipped with long-range fuel tanks, sand tracks, roof tents, fridge/freezer, GPS and satellite phone – and set off on the 500 km drive to Sossusvlei. Driving out of the capital was quite a special experience: one minute we were in the type of traffic you would expect in Manhattan, the next we were travelling down a dirt road, ambitiously signposted the 'Trans Kalahari Highway', without another car in sight.

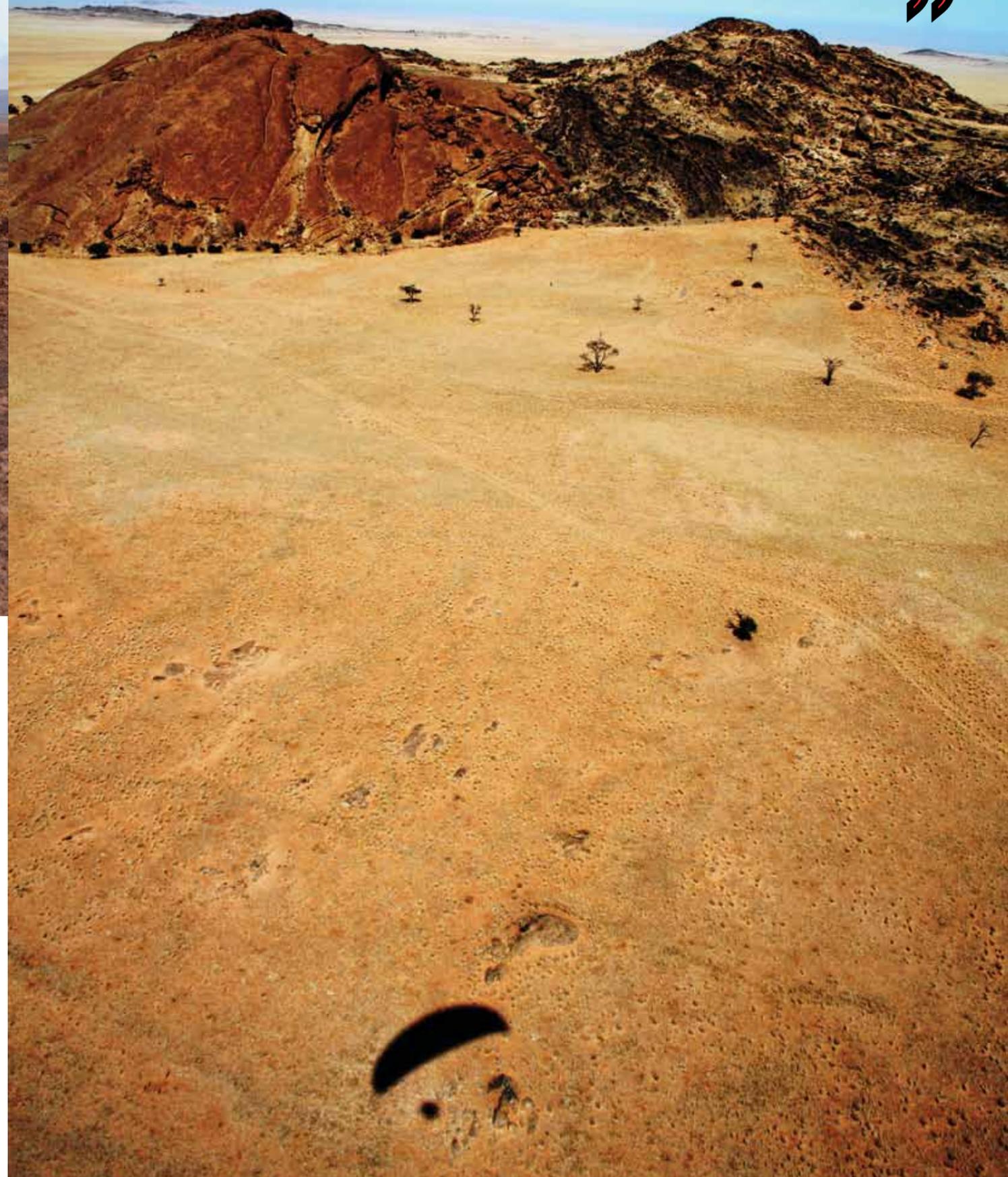
Dune Soaring

We arrived at Sossusvlei just before sunset. It was a magnificent sight as the 300 m dunes rise straight out of the flat desert and glow bright red in the late evening sun. The place is essentially a dry river bed, almost 1,000 m wide, where the Tsauchab river once tried, but long since failed, to reach the sea before it got swallowed up by the endless Kalahari sands. It is now a protected national park. You can't camp here at night, so the next morning we waited in the darkness for the gates to open at 5am. It is 30 minutes drive to the first dunes and it is truly worth being there to watch the sun rise.

As I watched the desert sand turn from grey to a bright shade of red, I put my engine together. It had received a few bangs and bends courtesy of British Airways, but apart from that it was very quickly ready to go and I was eager to get in the air.

I spent sunrise and sunset flying under power, but in the afternoon the winds picked up and I enjoyed soaring the towering dunes without the need for an engine, dragging my bare feet through the hot sand. Mid afternoon it got too windy to fly, so we opened up our roof tents and enjoyed a

Endless golden grass stretched as far as the eye could see





siesta before a final sunset flight under power.

As ideal as all of this sounds, there were some scary moments as the wind got strong, and it turned on suddenly. On a few occasions I was soaring quite happily when out of nowhere I found myself blown over the back of the dune and forced to land in the lee. The desert winds can be tricky; if you set off to fly in Namibia, be sure that you are confident at reading the sky, or go with someone who is.

Endless Horizon

As we headed north, leaving Sossusvlei behind, we entered the grasslands. The first part of the savannah was Kuiseb Canyon, which is not so much a canyon but a huge area of rolling small hills no more than 50 m high.

It was getting close to sunset as we sped along the dusty road through this strange, stunning landscape so we pulled over, whipped out the glider and the motor and within 10 minutes we were flying. It was my favourite flight of the whole trip and ended perfectly as we landed next to the truck moments before the sun finally disappeared. Grabbing cold beers from the fridge we sat and watched it drop below the horizon. Just perfect.

Another perfect moment came in the heart of the savannah grasslands. I can't tell you what it was called –

the nearest place on our map was an animal watering hole called Ganab. We'd left our camp in the Kuiseb at sunrise and it was still early morning. We'd already seen a herd of Zebra race away from us, and a gigantic vulture was circling above, marking the first thermal of the day. Endless golden grass stretched as far as the eye could see. It had to be done.

We pulled over and again within 10 minutes were climbing high above one of the most incredible sights I have ever seen – like flying over a yellow ocean with dotted desert islands. I have never seen such a flat landscape. It seemed to go on forever. As I peered down I felt that if you walked to the end of the boundless, flat countryside below me you would drop off the edge of the world.

Eye To Eye

The biggest problem with flying in Namibia is the dust devils. On several occasions I took off on a down-winder with Mike following in the truck. It was a great way to travel: I would fly for miles, switching from power to free flight and back to power again, while always heading downwind and always with my support vehicle in sight. Low over little villages in the middle of nowhere hundreds of kids would rush to see what all the noise was about. Some of them

would wave like mad while others were clearly too stunned to do anything but stare.

Usually I would cut these wonderful flights short as powerful dust devils started to develop. In the afternoon these dusties were very common, and it was only when I struggled to keep control as one ripped through the jeep while we were driving that I realised just how powerful they really are.

But it was not a dust devil that nearly killed me in Namibia. It was an elephant. It happened in the northern Kalahari. We were quite far north having flown over 250 km in less than a week and I had decided to land and carry on in the car with Mike after another turbulent flight.

It is very rare to see desert elephants so we both got very excited when we saw a large herd slowly crossing the track ahead of us. As we sat on the roof of our truck I couldn't believe it: my camera had stopped working. I desperately wanted a picture of the first elephants I had ever seen. (If I had known then how many hundreds I would see a few days later in Etosha I wouldn't have worried about the camera). Finally, as the last elephant came by only 15 m from where we sat, my camera started to work again.

The herd had looked so unbothered by our presence, and they appeared so harmless as they plodded gently by,



that I thought it would be ok to follow them on foot, at a safe distance, and try to get the photo I had missed. But in my excitement I stupidly found myself alone and over 100 m from our jeep when the bull elephant decided he felt threatened and charged me.

I truly thought my time had come. But I got lucky and he stopped. Had he not, there is no way I could have out-run him; it was a stupid thing to do and I am very lucky to be able to tell the tale.

From there we started to close in on the region of Etosha. The elephant experience was a reminder that soon we would need to stop flying as we were nearing lion territory. Africa had taught me yet another lesson. 🐘

Stuart Belbas runs Verbiere Summits (verbiere-summits.com) and offers courses in paragliding as well as BHPA and FSVL conversion courses from PPG to PG

Trip Notes

I've logged over 2,500 tandem paraglider flights but this was the first time I had flown tandem under power – and thankfully it all went very smoothly. Most of the launches were from the flat with just a good breeze to help. What was also nice was flying solo with a 250 cc engine. With the extra power I got some great height gains in a very short time. Most of my cross country flights were a combination of free flying and powered flying, while others were circuits, taking off and landing at the same place. I researched my trip using Google Earth, which was a good way of doing it.

Total distance flown:	358 km
Longest PPG flight:	108 km
Air time:	40 hours
Wings:	Gin Zoom and Firebird Twix tandem.
Engine:	250 cc WalkerJet.
Best height gain:	1,400 m