

## MOERSE FAR FROM THE MOTHER CITY BY GYROCOPTER... Trip Report from the 2017 SAGPA Fly-In by Jean Tresfon

The 2017 South African Gyro Pilot's Association AGM, also known as #NorthMeetsSouth, was held at Letatsi Game Lodge in the Free State over the recent long weekend. The organiser's plan is always to hold the event somewhere central so that gyro pilots from all around the country can fly in and attend the festivities. Our group of five gyros from Morningstar Airfield decided to fly there along the most direct route (basically along the N1 highway) and then meander home over a few days after the event.



Packed and ready to go

The departure date was set for the Thursday, which dawned overcast and gloomy. At the field conditions did not look amazing but were certainly flyable and the forecast was for clear skies by mid afternoon. The temperature was a big concern for the open cockpit pilots with a light dusting of snow on all the surrounding mountain peaks. Aside from thermal underwear, flight suits and thick jackets, ugboots and gloves, several pilots in the group also had chemical heat packs which were stuffed into all sorts of interesting places in lieu of "central heating". After loading up the gyros with tools, spares, clothes, toiletries and lots of

extra fuel we took off shortly after 11am and routed out to the east. Cape Town is well guarded from the interior by some seriously imposing mountains and our first hurdle was Bain's Kloof Pass, which can be interesting at times and offers very little in terms of landing options. In the past we have experienced severe turbulence here and in some cases nerves were a little tight but this time the passage through the mountains was as smooth as silk. Entering the Breede River valley one cannot help but think of a giant patchwork quilt while looking at all the farm fields of different sizes and colours.

We followed the course of the Breede River south to Worcester and then turned into the Hex River Pass and entered the Hex River Valley with its amazing scenery. Heading overhead De Doorns we climbed up overhead the escarpment to be greeted by a complete change in terrain as the farmlands gave way to typical arid Karoo scrubland. This was always going to be an IFR (I follow roads) flight and the N1 stretched out to the north, showing us the way.



Approaching Bainskloof Pass



The patchwork quilt of farm fields in the Breede River valley near Worcester

Nearing Matjiesfontein we headed slightly out to the left and landed on a well maintained gravel strip at Keurkloof Farm. (This is a private strip and prior permission from the needs to be obtained before landing here). After a quick leg stretch and a smoke break for those so inclined we unloaded the spare jerry cans and topped up the tanks before setting off once again, this time into clear blue skies with not a cloud in sight and not a breath of wind...

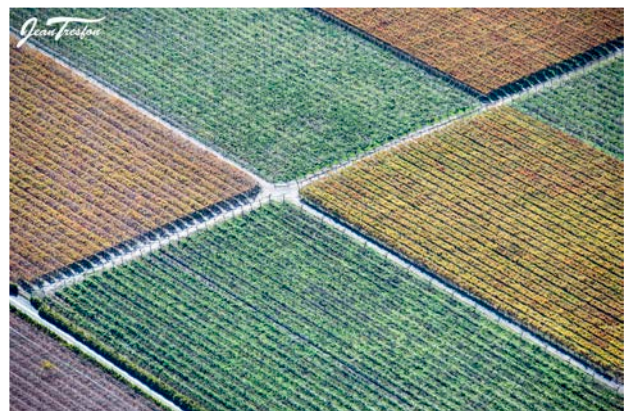
Just before Leeugamka Dam we entered the Beaufort West flight training area. Since I was last there in 2011 much has changed at Karoo Gateway Airfield. The gravel strip is now a long tarred runway, the airspace is controlled by an ATC and the area is home to a large flight school training Chinese student pilots for a career as airline transport pilots. Our first experience of these changes was hearing a student pilot on the radio with a very eastern accent announce a simulated engine failure and recovery. Our little formation was routed inbound north of the N1 before landing and taxiing to the fuel bay. The super friendly flight school staff kindly offered us the use of their massive hangar (sans doors after the massive storm from a few weeks back) to house the gyros and we retired to the guesthouse for a sunset drink on the veranda, which very quickly moved inside after the sun had set and the temperature plummeted. After a magnificent meal of ribs and chips (the only item on the menu!) we adjourned to the lounge for a short while before heading off to bed.



Passing the big mountains near Worcester



After climbing the escarpment the scenery changes dramatically



The orchards in the De Doorns area make for great abstract photos from above



In the massive hangar at Karoo Gateway



The Karoo Gateway airfield complete with tar runway and control tower

An army cannot march on an empty stomach and the combination of hunger and cold saw us enjoying a hearty breakfast and delaying departure until 10am when the temperature had risen to an acceptable level. Warming up the gyros we felt a bit like celebrities as one student after another asked to take photos of our strange little flying machines. After takeoff we turned north and again routed along the N1, this time with a slight headwind. Climbing up to 5500ft I encountered some turbulence and a 20mph headwind. The windspeed slowly increased and eventually we had a 30mph headwind no matter what altitude we flew at. Having had a bad experience with an overgrown runway and acres of thorns last time we landed at Richmond, we bypassed the town and made our fuel stop at another private strip at Ramino Farm.



On the ground at Ramino Farm

Several low passes were required before the flock of sheep were convinced they needed to vacate the runway and then we were back on terra firma for a short while. After refuelling was complete the owner arrived to chat and it was with real regret that we turned down the offer of karoo lamb for lunch. Taking off again the headwind gave us a last little shake and then slowly died down. Gariep Dam could be seen from a long way off and we routed along the northern shores passing abeam the airfield before following the road north past Bethuli to

our final destination. Arriving overhead Letatsi Game Lodge the gravel runway was immediately apparent and one by one we landed and taxied to the parking lot of the Lodge for a welcome drink and registration for the weekend. One of our crew had a flat wheel on landing and started fixing what turned out to be the first of many punctures. Finally after covering the gyros it was time to settle in.



Flying over the Gariep Dam wall



The yacht club at Gariep Dam



Letatsi Game Lodge, the our destination for the weekend

Without going in to huge detail about the AGM it turned out to be an awesome get together. All the politics and in-fighting within the industry took a backseat and there was a real sense of community as people who had previously exchanged harsh words ended up at the same table sharing a bottle of wine and a wonderful dinner. The following day saw the holding of both a “bomb-drop” event and a spot landing competition. The afternoon was spent organising fuel and making sure the gyros were ready to go in the morning. The awards evening was great fun and all the organising and hard work that went into the weekend was very apparent. Goodbye’s were exchanged around the fire before the last few pilots shuffled off to bed. We were woken super early on Sunday morning as the first gyros passed overhead and we followed slightly later after once again enjoying a hearty breakfast.

Somewhere along the way I had some dirty fuel and my engine was running very rough at idle. After checking with one of the AP’s present intermittently blocked idle jets were diagnosed and the decision was made to continue. The plan was to intersect the coast at Plettenberg Bay but lots of big mountains lay in the flight path. Our first stop was at Middelburg, more to warm up than for fuel. While clustered around the gyros we noticed the wheels looking like porcupines with all the duiwel-dorings stuck in the tyres. I gave myself a mental pat on the back for having “slimed” my tyres prior to the trip!



Middelburg Airfield and lots of duiwel-dorings

Some extra “central heating” was employed in light of the icy temperatures and then it was back into the air, using a lot more runway than expected by those of us used to flying at the coast. This leg saw us climbing up to 8000ft to cross some fearsome looking mountains before dropping down again for a landing at Graaff-Reinet. Although we received no radio calls in the circuit we found a large group of radio control flyers clustered on the apron after we landed and taxied to the fuel bay.



Waiting for fuel at Graaff-Reinet



The magnificent church forms the centrepiece of the town at Graaff-Reinet

They had a seriously impressive array of large jet powered models on display and while waited for the fuel to arrive we were treated to a mini airshow as the jets screamed overhead. With the hot sunny weather we slowly shed layer after layer of thermal gear then reversed the process in preparation for takeoff. With several more sets of mountains to cross and none of us having flown this route before there was some anxiety present but the perfect weather made it a doddle. Crossing those “bricks” in strong wind could get very interesting!

We followed the N9 through the gaps in the mountains, crossing miles of stunning game farms before landing at Willowmore for a last refuel before the coast. Two more flat tyres took some time to fix, which saw the sun starting to drop to a worryingly low level but fortunately we didn't have far left to travel. Not long after getting airborne we passed overhead Uniondale and the last set of mountains before the coast. For about 20 minutes the landing options were pretty



Arriving at Willowmore



Last set of mountains to cross before descending to the coast

scarce and then finally we could see the Robberg Peninsula jutting out into the sea ahead of us. Plettenberg Bay airfield turned out to be pretty busy and as I called inbound a Cemair flight behind us asked if they could have priority for the landing. Our little formation took a leisurely tour of Robberg Beach before heading back to the airfield for an uneventful landing as the sun set. Our plan had been to land and stay at Stanley Island but our contact there reported the accommodation full due to housing people displaced by the recent fires.