

To our rescue came a pilot by the name of Lappies, who was also the owner of The Dunes Resort at Keurboomstrand. He arranged a hangar for our gyros, with a friend of his pushing his plane outside for the night so our open cockpit machines could enjoy some shelter. He also fetched us from the airfield, took us to the Skiboat Club for a few drinks before we were treated to a truly magnificent meal at The Dunes. After a really enjoyable evening we fell into our beds and slept like the dead. After another great breakfast Lappies drove us back to airfield and dropped us off before heading to George to catch a commercial flight. Anyone planning a stopover in Plett would do well to try the Dunes, truly a pilot friendly establishment! Arriving at the airfield we could see plenty of signs of the recent fires. Some of the hangars were blackened, with the perspex windows melted and drooping towards the ground and the surrounding area still smoke filled and smoldering. The Garden Route fires have been much in the news this past fortnight and despite the information given about over four hundred homes destroyed and hundreds of people displaced, the sheer scale of the devastation is hard to imagine, especially if you live further away.



Arriving overhead Plettenberg Bay airfield

Somehow when something happens far from where you live there always seems to be a disconnect, almost like a loss of signal strength over distance. Unless you are in the thick of things it becomes just another news report. Even for those actually there, on the ground it is hard to get a mental picture of the sheer scale of the devastation. As we pre-flighted our aircraft we had little idea of what we were about to see. Lifting off the ground towards to the north we turned out to the left and flew around the Robberg Peninsula before heading west along the coast back towards Cape Town. From the air a much clearer picture emerged, the scale of the devastation obvious... For 56km, from Robberg all the way to Sedgfield, the coastline resembled a wasteland.



Robberg Peninsula juts into the sea with the recent fire damage clearly visible



For 56km between Plett and Sedgfield the coastline is blackened and charred to a crisp

Blackened and scorched earth fell away to jagged cliffs and thundering waves, the passage of the fire halted only by the angry seas. Little islands of green appeared, with some properties having had a seemingly miraculous escape while neighbouring residences burned to the ground. The apparent randomness was hard to fathom, sometimes with a single property burning within a cluster of homes, almost on a roll of the dice.



One palatial home destroyed, the other untouched



Flying over the still smoldering town of Knysna



Arriving overhead Mossel Bay

Smoke still trailed skywards from hundreds of places where the fires continued to smolder almost two weeks after the tragedy started. Flying over Knysna the scene resembled a recent battlefield with smoke still filling the atmosphere. The famous landmark of the Knysna Heads at the mouth of the lagoon did not escape either... the eastern head was pretty much unscathed but the western head running back towards Brenton was completely burnt out. Only after nearly half an hour in the air, as we approached Sedgefield, did the sense of unreality start to fade and the scenery returned to the more normal Garden Route trademark lush green. We flew on to Mossel Bay, our minds filled with depressing imagery...

Landing at Mossel Bay for a refuel we checked the weather apps again as a frontal system was making landfall in Cape Town and strong westerly winds were predicted in the De Hoop area. While the wind at the field was very light, the forecast was pretty specific. A quick call to the tower at Overberg confirmed an average wind speed of 20 knots gusting to 28 knots. Gyros can handle a fair amount of wind and routing along the coast there is not much structure to cause turbulence so we decided to press on and try to reach Arniston where one of our crew has a house. Heading along the coast we passed Gouritzmond and encountered a band of low cloud. Dropping down to 500ft we passed underneath the cloud and within minutes were back into clear skies and light winds.



Refueled and ready at Mossel Bay

Arriving at Stilbaai, not even an hour from Mossel Bay, we did not need to refuel but in light of the forecast strong headwinds we decided to land and top off the tanks. This was our shortest stop of the trip and after a refuel that would make a formula one team proud it was back into the skies as we headed to Cape Infanta. Passing the Breede River mouth the gyros were given a little shake and the wind freshened up, making the forecast a little more believable. To this point there had been almost no wind.



Rounding Mossel Bay Point before heading along the coast towards De Hoop



Into the De Hoop Marine Protected Area and the wind

Rounding the lighthouse at Uiterstepunt and flying into the De Hoop Marine Protected Area we could see a wind line on the water up ahead. It was incredible, there was not a gradual strengthening of the wind, just no wind one minute then hectic wind the next. Our ground speeds bled away and the ride started to get bumpy. Our destination was not far away but the wind was wild. The tower reported increasing wind speeds and looking out to our left the surface of the sea was just a maelstrom of white water.