

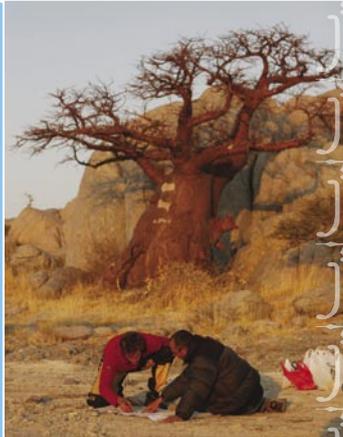


With no TV Marianne had to be entertained with high spirits

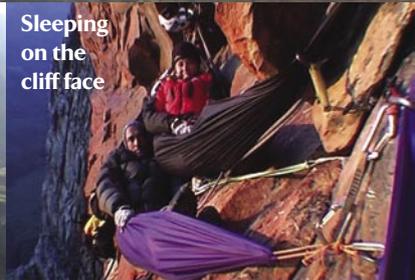


Remote mountain runway

African Rock Adventure



Roadside fun



Sleeping on the cliff face



Recently three "Adventurers", James Pitman (lawyer, rock climber, pilot, adventurer and wild child), Mike Blyth (pilot, non climber and self-styled old man) and Marianne Pretorius (professional photographer, SA's top female big wall climber, adventurer and a rose amongst thorns) sought to climb three inaccessible mountains. The whistle-stop trip covered 5900 km, took 48 flying-hours spread over 19 days at an average speed of 123km/h, and yielded incredible insights to what might be a rock climbers paradise.

The Challenge: to climb three of the highest rock walls in Southern Africa ("Moonshadow" on the Blouberg - 350 vertical meters over 8 hours, "Beyond Suntan Lotion" on the Great Spitzkoppe - 400 vertical meters over 26 hours, and "Oceans of Fear" on the Klein Winterhoek - 500 overhanging meters over 3 days), by flying to each location in a trike and a fixed-wing (Cheetah) microlight. Mike was able to stay with the Cheetah at 70 knots with the addition of a variable in-flight trim adjuster on his Cobra. Well-known for his flying exploits, Mike discloses that on the trip he earned the "old man" tag from James and Marianne, who were tasked to drag him up the 3-day "Oceans of Fear" climb on the overhanging face of the Klein Winterhoek Mountains.

Chatting to Mike, he rated the finest flying experiences to be landing on an isolated mountain runway, flying amongst the mountains generally and skimming the Namib desert. The Blouberg mountain runway was prepared by the adventurers in advance of the trip using a petrol driven brush-cutter and pangas. All other landings were "on-sight".

The trip was not without a variety of dangers including the climbs themselves, the mountain-side flying, bad weather, uncertain runways and dealing with a number of Africa's eccentric bureaucrats. The team's perseverance was tested when the Cheetah engine had to be overhauled on the side of the Trans-Kalahari Highway in Namibia, following

a total engine failure. However, their organisational skills saw them overcoming the "total engine failure to test flight" episode in less than 28 hours, including the delivery of new pistons from Johannesburg and their replacement on the roadside.

Marianne had a close call while climbing the final pitch of the Great Spitzkoppe in Namibia. Having climbed herself into a "no-return" situation after dark, she was narrowly saved when James managed to tie her off on the belay point, climb abreast of her and throw her a rope. As rescue was out of the question, the two were forced to spend a chilled and windy night hanging on the rock-face. Both are highly experienced mountain climbers. They rated the Spitzkop experience as a "damn close call". Less than 5 days later the three, and particularly Mike, found "Oceans of Fear" another testing experience. Mike summarises the experience as follows - "three days out, eleven hours walking, twenty eight hours climbing, two nights hanging in hammocks, no sleeping bags, one and a half liters of water each for 65 hours, brutal harness, chafing and one glorious 50 meter "king-swing".

With the benefit of hindsight would they do it again? "Definitely, absolutely, a big fat positive on that," is the instant chorus from all three over a glass of wine whilst editing some of the most awesome video footage that I have seen in a long time. Go to <http://community.webshots.com/user/alanmack777> to view and download some of the amazing photographs taken by Marianne, James and Mike of this incredible African Rock Adventure. Ed