

SLING at the Helli Lasch Challenge

The glory of a perfect flying day is sure to get any aviator's blood pumping. And for a glider pilot, few places come close to the conditions in the Kalahari Desert.

SHOOTS of 'Open!' and 'Release!' reverberate across the blacktop runway as tow ropes are hooked up. 'There's an element of gliding that is almost as much art as it is science. You need to be pretty much at one with the aircraft. There's a feel, and these glider pilots develop such a nuanced sense of the atmosphere and the environment,' says Sling's James Pitman.

In February 2025, Sling had the honour of being invited to tow gliders at the bi-annual Helli Lasch Challenge. The event, which takes place on the magnificent Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve, brings three glider world champions to fly with South Africa's most accomplished gliders and a group of younger development pilots.

Team Sling, comprised James Pitman and test pilot Riaan Denner, himself a glider



ABOVE: The two Slings did a great job launching all the gliders at 10,000ft density altitudes.

pilot who has recently competed at the world gliding championship in the US. It was a good showcase of the performance of the Sling 2 and Sling 4 TSi when used for glider towing.

A Rotax 915iS engine (141 hp) was fitted to the Sling 2, while the Sling TSi has the standard 160 hp 916iS Rotax. The density altitude was around 10,000 ft because it was so hot.'

Both planes could tug any glider, no matter how heavily ballasted. Most of the sleek, white gliders were the JS series by Jonker Sailplanes. With 13 gliders needing to get airborne in short succession each day at Tswalu and only the two tug aircraft, pilots have to have their

wits about them at all times.

'There's a lot going on. You need to land downwind with a 60-metre rope hanging out the back of the plane, stop before you get to the gliders, turn around, hitch up, take up the slack, and then go again', says Pitman.

Once airborne, Pitman says, 'You want to keep just the right tension in the rope. You don't want a scenario where it's jerking, becoming taught and catching up again. And of course you're looking for an elusive thermal. You may think the thermal's over here, but the glider pilot thinks it's over there, so there's a debate!'

Typically at Tswalu, gliders

would fly for three hours at an average speed of 150 km/h so pilots are covering about 450 kms on a day.

With a host of risky escapades already accomplished, Pitman says the event was “a steep learning curve I’ll never forget, set in one of the world’s most dramatic game reserves.”

‘How wonderfully generous of the Oppenheimer family to make available their magnificent 160,000-hectare game reserve, including the game rangers, the vehicles and their runway, to such a small group of people with a particular interest. What a privilege! Thank you to the Oppenheimers,” Pitman concludes. ✈️

BELOW: Preparing the gliders.



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**you’re looking for
an elusive thermal**



**Tswalu is known for its
unmatched hospitality
and great vistas.**



Sling

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+27 (0) 11 948 9898 | slingaircraft.com | sales@slingaircraft.com | AMO 1264 | Manufacturing Organisation M677