

SLING GOES EAST

The folks at Sling Aircraft are always up for an adventure, whether it's a race to Cape Town with a TSi vs a commercial flight, an Atlantic crossing to Oshkosh with three High Wings, a trip to Oshkosh in a prototype as the first leg of a circumnavigation or turning the Tankwa International Airport runway briefly into the busiest in the world, with the biggest gathering of Sling aircraft.

By Chris Buchanan Images: Supplied

This OEM based at Tedderfield in the south of Johannesburg, with factory premises at the airfield and in Alrode, has delivered aircraft to all four corners of the earth, both as kits and fully manufactured aircraft.

One region though that's escaped so far is east Africa – until two Dutch customers out of Kenya and Tanzania placed an order for a TSi and a High Wing. All that remained was for the planning of another epic adventure across the plains of Africa.



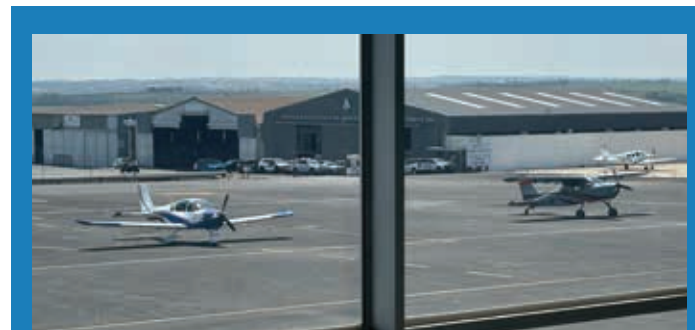
The adventure begins

It doesn't bode well for a long-distance flying adventure when you start off by going the wrong way! Sling Aircraft's James Pitman and Mike Blyth did exactly that when setting out on their journey to accompany the TSi and High Wing with their new owners to Kenya and Tanzania – James heading in the opposite direction from their first stop to picking up food supplies.

These guys have flown around the world but still experience the uncertainty of taking on an epic adventure, which manifests itself in a lack of sleep the night before setting out.

“There's always uncertainty – and if there isn't uncertainty, then it's not fun,” says James. Mike agrees: “The definition of adventure is not knowing what the next moment is going to bring for you!”

Arranging the right permits is a crucial step in any flying trip, and James confirmed the overflights for Mozambique and Tanzania (dodging around Zimbabwe to avoid the unreasonable cost), with a landing permit for Malawi. But an insurance policy issue was holding the Kenyan permits back.



Uncertainty...

James would be flying the High Wing Taildragger with new owner Wytze Salomons and his daughter Anouk, and Mike would fly the TSi with new owner, Willem Dolleman. The final destination would be the Dolleman estate outside Timau in Kenya. In the Sling tradition, as they left Tedderfield to clear customs at Lanseria Sling staffers lined up along the runway and gave the traditional bare bum salute as the two aircraft took to the air.

The flight plan beyond Lanseria was a seven-hour journey around Zimbabwe and across Mozambique to Club Makokola on the shores of Lake Malawi, where they were looking forward to swimming, catching fish and a few beers.

More uncertainty

But things don't always go according to plan. The first attempt to clear customs was unsuccessful due to "some technical difficulties" - so there was another overnight close to Lanseria with a second attempt the following day, which saw the two Slings depart for Malawi in perfect flying conditions.

The flight took the crews over green, summery African terrain on a smooth flight for a first class breakfast of packed sandwiches and selfie opportunities, catching both the planes in the same frame.

Anouk, a regularly barefooted "Child of Africa", was breath-taken by the huge expanses of the sub-Saharan continent: "I'm looking down and seeing how lucky we are to be flying up here, the vast emptiness is something you just can't see anywhere else."

After a smooth touchdown on the gravel runway of Makokola International Airport it seemed as if a miscalculation in fuel pumping to vent the main tanks of the High Wing had seen 40 litres evaporate into the African sky, and James confesses: "Pitman stuffing it up again!"



Customs on the lake

Passport control out of Makokola International spits you out onto the shores of lake Malawi and into just the tropical paradise the crew had been hoping for when they set off from Johannesburg earlier in the day – the perfect environment for swimming, fishing and a few well-earned beers.



ADVENTURE

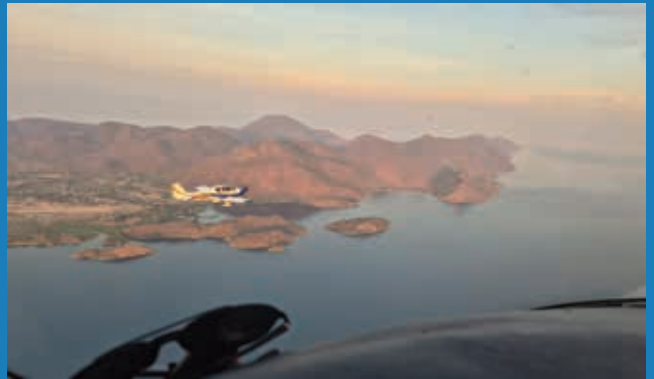
One short night and another perfect flying day saw the two aircraft depart Makokola at dawn the following morning for Wilson Airport, Nairobi – an extremely busy general aviation hub in the Kenyan capital.

Says Mike of his first impression of Wilson: “So first thing for me is that when you land here, there are just aeroplanes everywhere, including a whole bunch of broken ones. These big cargo and passenger carrying aircraft are just parked all over the place.” Testament to a fairly chaotic picture painted by Mike is a visit to Google Earth, which confirms aeroplanes absolutely everywhere.

Mt Kenya's shadow

Problems with documentation created yet more uncertainty, but a calm James tells the crew: “There’s a standoff, because we’re not giving them what they want, so we’re not getting what we want.”

And that’s where we leave Sling’s sortie into East Africa. Scan the QR code on this page and get to see the monument to the Flying Dutchmen in the Helint Aviation hangar at Wilson Airport, and the bumpy flight to Timau on the slopes of Mount Kenya in the full video of the trip.





ADVENTURE