



Club member **Peter Wilson** describes his solo journey around Africa in an R66 – and his ambitious new plans

I have been a traveller all my life. I was brought up in Zimbabwe, I live in Europe and have worked all over the world. I came to helicopter flying late in life when I had the means and the time. I learned to fly 19 years ago and have been a weekend instructor for much of that time. Flying round the UK in 2004 and rubbing shoulders with friends doing crazy things like climbing Mount Everest or cycling around the world gave me the idea of doing something epic with a helicopter.

A serendipitous meeting while flying in Scotland led to the development of a working relationship with Nigel Winsor, who became my mentor for sustainable

development, and an introduction to Save the Children and Motivation. I was struck by the arguments for living within Earth's means and doing something to raise awareness of the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development. It also made a lot of sense to fundraise for two charities, one big and one smaller, who champion the rights and choices of children, women and the incapacitated.

Planning from scratch has been a huge undertaking very few really appreciate. Setting objectives, understanding the logistics to put in place, raising sponsorship, configuring the right helicopter took time. When I retired I had the time to devote to it, and with the help of

many kind people I went about developing the Three Journeys Round project just like I had done my own businesses. The platform was a journey round Africa, a journey round the world and a final journey round Latin America. The idea was to meet individuals making a difference by living within Earth's means, and tell their story.

This project has been two years in preparation, the last six months much more like full time, and the last two months frankly hectic! However, I'm ready. My wife and I arrive early at Booker on Day 1, I check the weather and file my flight plan.

Well-wishers assemble. At G-DIGA I pop on my life jacket, and there are photos and hugs. Leon presents my mascot Thingy to me and wishes me good luck. I light up the turbine, get the Delorme tracking



equipment working and establish the two-way communications with General Aviation Support Egypt (GASE). While I will be by myself, Eddie and Ahmed of GASE will follow my progress, providing permits, logistics and support in the air and on the ground.

Wycombe Tower gives me a Sierra departure and after a few more waves and nods I fly away. Clearing customs at Le Touquet I fly to my first night stop at Darois. Leaving Dijon on Day 2 the poor weather improves all the way down the Rhone valley. The 500 feet flight along the coast from Bezier to

Perpignan was worth it – tail winds of 30kts. Rounding the coast from France to Spain it was severely turbulent, then 25nm later, 2kts at Girona! It is very hot at 24C. I can only imagine what the Sahara will feel like. All systems working, just minor adjustments to establish a rhythm, which I practice again on my way to Granada, my last stop in Europe.

Day 4: Crossing the sea to Africa is a special moment, coasting out of Europe and into Africa. My planned routing is messed up and a 1.8 hour flight became a 2.8 hour flight with a 40nm approach to

Oran. These folks have little exposure to General Aviation helicopter flying and made me approach like a commercial fixed wing. After a technical stop I fly on to El Golea for a night stop.

I fly from El Golea to Tamanrasset, making a technical stop in In Salah. Leaving Tamanrasset the tower wanted me to change to Algiers Control but as usual I couldn't get hold of them, so I went back and forth trying to establish two-way comms until eventually Tam TWR said bye-bye and left me to keep trying on my own. So on Day 6 I am flying at about 115 mph across about 350 miles of hot, sandy nothing, at FL075 (as instructed) in a Robinson R66 turbine helicopter.

I could of course hear Speedbird (British Airways) and other jets flying very high talking to Algiers. I eventually get hold of Algiers and go through all the 'negative HF, distance from Tam, ETA at this way point and estimate for Agadez', etc, then promptly lose contact again. About an hour in the haze was

Peter Wilson recently travelled solo by helicopter through 23 different countries to complete a journey around Africa of about 16,600nm in 73 days. This is part of an epic project, which he calls 'Three Journeys Round'. The purpose of the journeys is to raise the profile of 'a better planet through sustainable development' and fundraise in aid of Save the Children and Motivation.

Peter, a retired engineer and pilot who is devoting his time to sustainable development projects, is telling the en-route story via social media and sharing the journey tracked by satellite beacon.

Read about this project <http://www.threejourneysround.com>



Peter with airport police at Is Salah in central Algeria
Top left: Peter Wilson with sponsors' logos on his R66

Trip facts

FL075 in Algeria & Niger and FL085 in Sudan & Egypt. Then the highest altitudes were reached in Kenya, Empakai Crater (9,500ft) and DRC/ Rwanda border (9,000ft).

Highest airfields were Nanyuki (6325ft); Windhoek (5,557ft); Nairobi (5,542ft).

I flew low level often in Sub-Saharan Africa.

My longest water crossings were 290nm (Eastern Med.), 260nm (São Tomé to Pointe Noire), and (157+88) = 245nm (Cameroon to São Tomé).

I diverted three times: weather, fuel and parking availability.

I travelled solo through 23 different countries.

16,600nm in 73 days, 22 July to 03 October 2016.

43 flying + 18 visiting + 12 delayed = 73 days.

Delays for weather, fuel and permits.

I used 68 airports, 4 private landing sites.

Average of 3.7 hours each of 43 flying days.

Average of 2.2 hours over the 73-day trip.

Longest day at the controls was 7.3 hours flying from Lokichoggio, Kenya to Khartoum, Sudan.



getting thicker, and quite suddenly I was in a complete 'brown out' – sandy coloured sky up, down, around and below. I opt to descend from FL075 to 3000ft. It is hot, 35C when I get down there. The visibility is no better, and there would definitely be zero contact with Algiers at this level. I ask the

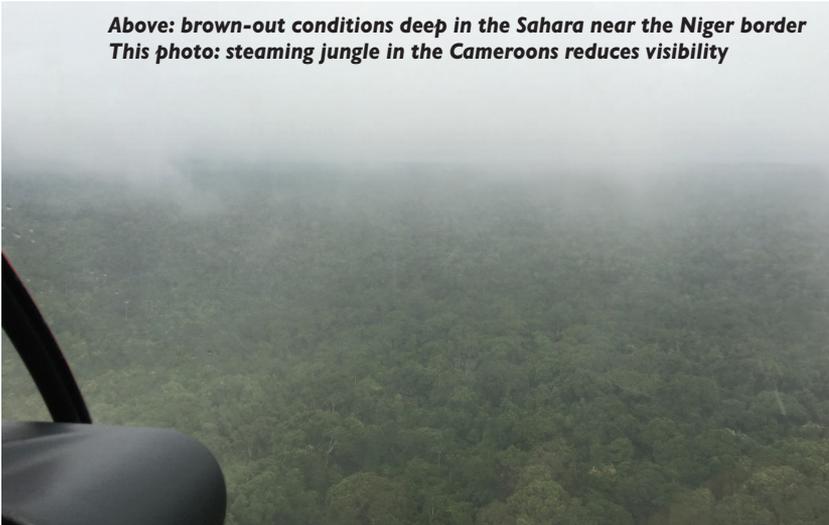
jets above to relay my intentions and go through a series of three relays, comforted that Algiers knows what I'm doing. I cross into Niger without radio contact. I use every device I have to find a frequency and eventually I pick up Niamey Control via a Speedbird relay. OK, they know where I am.

Niamey passes me to Agadez Information about 100nm out. And bizarrely I am able to pick up Gado, the Agadez Controller (and marshaller and handler and fueller and taxi driver).

This is the longest I have ever had to fly in 'bad weather'. Eventually after what seemed like two hours, the haze lightens up, clearing as the ground changes to rock with more dark features, and the last hour was much easier. Gado is a cheerful soul and handles me all the way in to Agadez.

DIGA is performing well, and the regime of dismounting and mounting beacons, cameras, navigation equipment and satphone is now slick. On landing I am usually swamped by officials who want questions answered like 'what is the aircraft callsign' while standing next to it on the tailboom. Whipping out my GenDec and passport now sorts that out. I have managed so far to get fuelled immediately on shut down. This is

**Above: brown-out conditions deep in the Sahara near the Niger border
This photo: steaming jungle in the Cameroons reduces visibility**

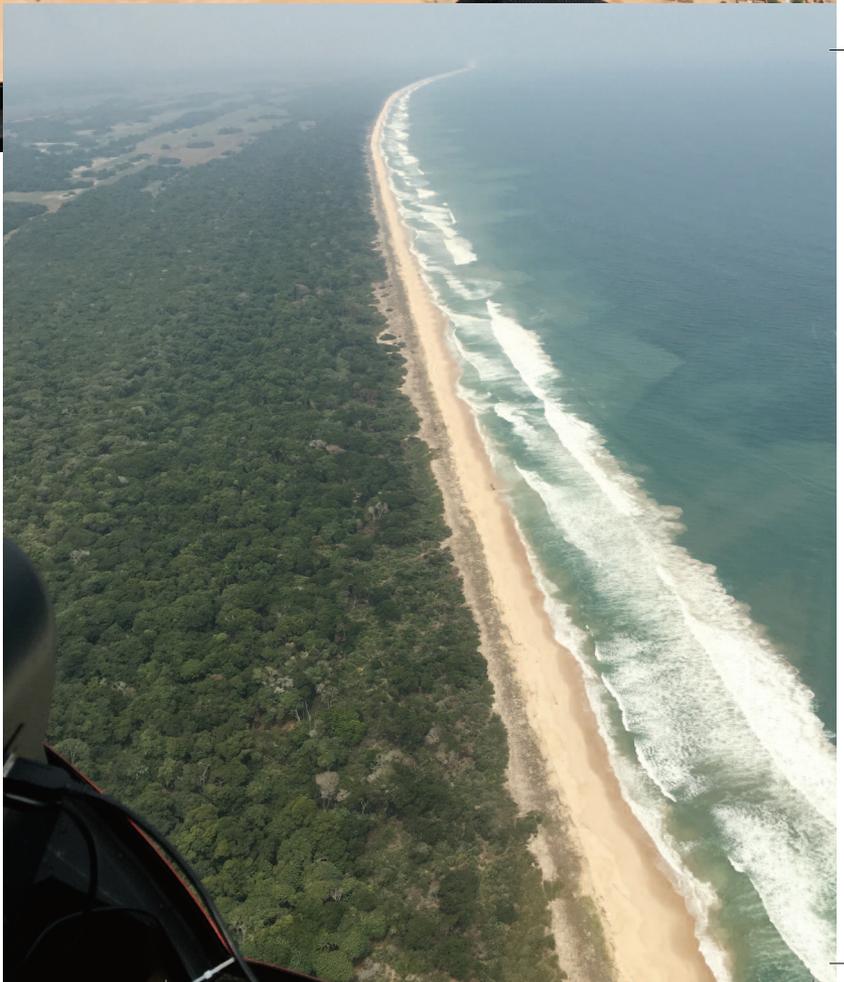




Above: approaching the runway at Agadez in Niger
Right: On the coast of Gabon en route to Point Noire

great because I can dismount my mobile equipment and bags and lock up and cover up. The covers are working well to keep out the elements, and the temperature down, and so far have kept out any light fingers.

Navigation-wise the routes in North Africa are straight lines using beacons, and so it is easy to set up the iPad, Garmin 795 and 420 and have each at a different resolution and showing different statistics to answer the inevitable 'estimate for/report position/etc.' questions. The controllers are essentially talking to what they think is a very low commercial flight.



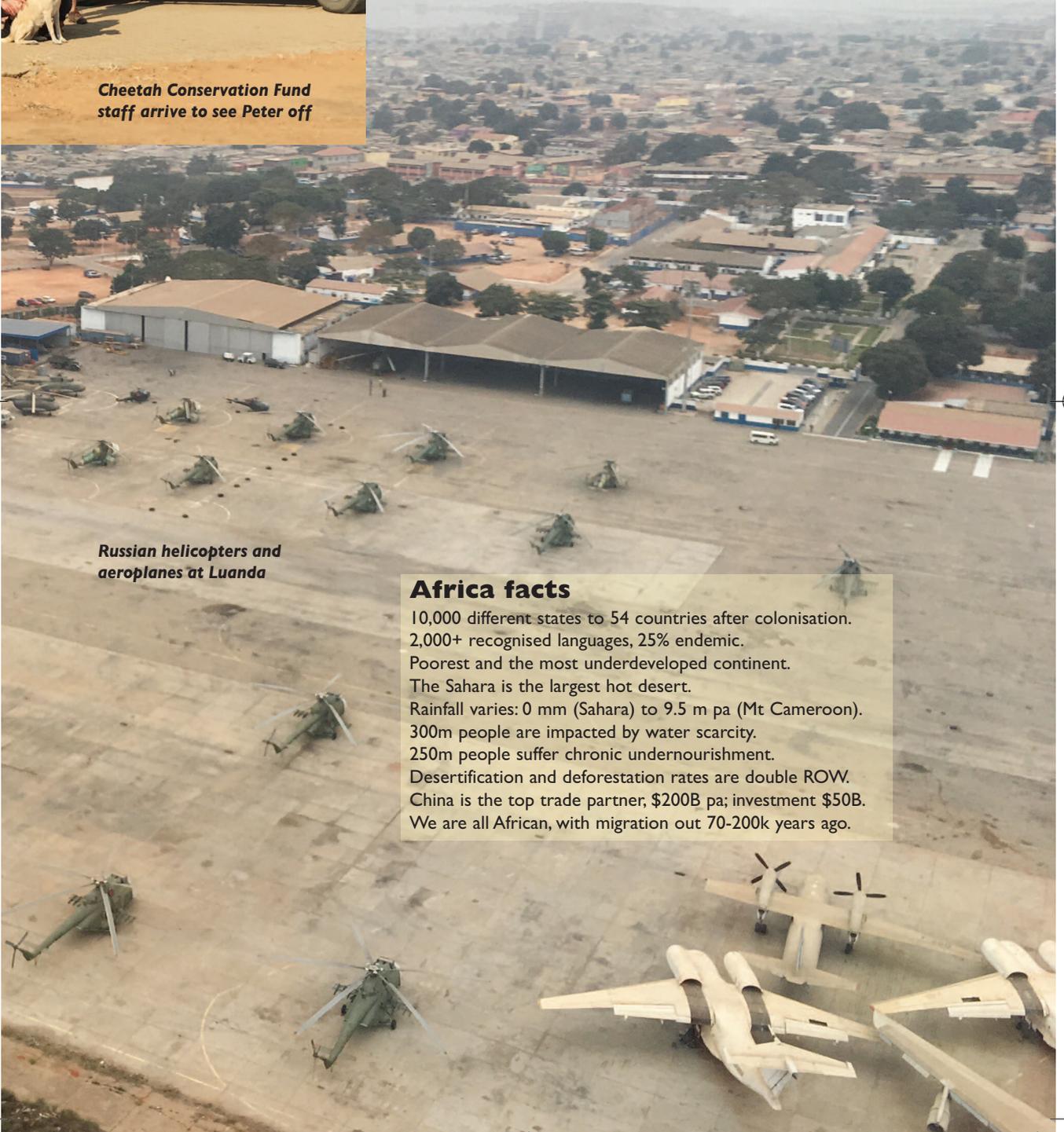




Cheetah Conservation Fund staff arrive to see Peter off

The distances across inhospitable terrain are vast and the corresponding views are spectacular. I have never seen the Sahara close up, and now I have spent 12 hours flying south across it with about two hours more to go before the scenery really changes as I get to Kano in Nigeria. The Sahara: its vastness; its emptiness;

its beautiful forms and of course sand; its haze, its dust, its heat, like an oven and yet there are tiny green bits, oases, here and there. It is simply stunning. My challenge is staying in contact with controllers. When I get a Speedbird relay, they are gobsmacked at what I am doing because they probably know what an R66 is.



Russian helicopters and aeroplanes at Luanda

Africa facts

10,000 different states to 54 countries after colonisation.
2,000+ recognised languages, 25% endemic.
Poorest and the most underdeveloped continent.
The Sahara is the largest hot desert.
Rainfall varies: 0 mm (Sahara) to 9.5 m pa (Mt Cameroon).
300m people are impacted by water scarcity.
250m people suffer chronic undernourishment.
Desertification and deforestation rates are double ROW.
China is the top trade partner, \$200B pa; investment \$50B.
We are all African, with migration out 70-200k years ago.



My other challenge is getting accurate weather between the airports. There is no provision because there is nobody living there.

From Agadez I fly to Kano, Kaduna, Enugu and Calabar. Nigeria was full-on, 140m people all looking for an angle at full speed. What a wonderful country this would be if it weren't so corrupt. Fuel shortages cause me endless problems. Crossing the ITCZ is a challenge for both my flying and weather management. I experience delays due to fuel, weather and permits. I enjoy enforced stops in Calabar and Douala. I am unable to persuade the Gabon CAA to let me fly down the coast without HF equipment, so I had to go round them!

Leaving Douala and arriving in Sao Tome on Day 20 was a delight – 260nm over the open sea, to a big runway with a small airport and many nice, smiley people. DIGA gained a colony of ant stowaways here. I must have picked them up on the covers when rolling them up on the floor. They ran around inside her all the way to Upington in South Africa.

From Sao Tome I fly to Pointe Noire, Luanda, Catumbela and Lubango. Angola was special, meeting up with two charities, namely JAM and MAF. MAF have been in Lubango for 13 years. Blagging a flypast of the Cristo Rei on the hill near the military base had everybody listening on the radio wondering

why I was allowed to do it – hey, don't ask, don't get!

From Lubango I fly to via Rundu to Maun in Botswana. Flying the Okavango Delta low level I will never, ever forget. From Windhoek I go on to Otjiwarongo to meet Dr. Laurie Marker and make a very, very special visit to the Cheetah Conservation Fund. Namibia is incredible. Desert yes, but in the shape of sand dunes of enormous proportions, plus fog on the beach at 14C with sun at 24C a mile away – surreal. I fly from Otjiwarongo to Walvis Bay then down the coast to Luderitz and Oranjemund. Finally I enter South Africa at Upington.

South Africa is beautiful and the Cape something special.

Living within Earth's means

Sustainable Development means living within Earth's means. It is a balance between *how many* people use Earth and *how* people use earth. We use the equivalent of 1.6 planets-worth of Nature to provide the resources we consume and to process the waste we produce. Protecting enough of nature's wild habitats, wild animals and plants, pollinators, etc. against environmental drivers such as habitat loss, pollution, climate change, etc. is critical.

Game changers

There are three game changers, namely; ending extreme poverty; respecting absolute planetary boundaries, and accounting for people and the planet, and not just profit. (Everybody has rights and Nature is not free).

The extraordinary Sossusvlei in the Namib Desert
Right: the cover worked well, keeping out the elements and light fingers





Flying at 200 feet all the way up the coast from Stellenbosch to Durban was very relaxed, travelling along a gorgeous coast with dolphins and whales lolling about. I stop at Mossel Bay and East London. The flight from sea-level Durban up through the valley of a thousand hills rising up to 6,500 into Johannesburg was spectacular.

DIGA came through her service in Durban one day ahead of schedule. Dave Cross from HQ Aviation flew out to do the inspection, and the folks at Starlite Aviation who hosted us couldn't have been more helpful.

I fly from Joburg to Kruger and on to Vilanculo. By Day 40 I have had a few more interesting experiences; the white knuckle

ride over the hills at 8,500 feet in turbulence to get into Eros (Windhoek); the dead end valley with cloud to the ground arresting my progress to Cape Town; and the turbulence at 5,500 feet AGL on the way to Mozambique, which was horrible.

In Mozambique I am back at sea level again, 40 days in with about 30 to go and some lovely folk to catch up with in the next few countries before I head back into transit mode across the desert. Mozambique is beautiful, and extremely poor – 60% unemployment – although I have seen a lot of poverty so far. From Vilanculo I fly to Blantyre and into Mvuu Camp, before flying on to Dodoma, Tanzania.

Malawi is wonderfully

pleasant flying, low level, nobody to bother you. The rivers, animals and sunsets are stunning. Lake Malawi is like a sea, and flying up the lakeshore is a brilliant low-level experience – reminiscent of Cape Town to Durban.

My diversion direct to Dodoma en-route will go down as one of those Swiss cheese planning errors. Having to make the in-flight decision to go to Dodoma was a bit hairy. Confusion developed over which Mbeya to fly to and whether it had fuel – a new airport had opened and the old one had closed recently. I judged I had a nil tailwind to Dodoma compared to a headwind to the alternative. So I flew across Lake Malawi direct to the PONR as plans were

ONLY by raising the living standards of the poorest, in an environmentally friendly way, will population growth stop at 9 billion people in 2050. Hans Rosling,

<https://www.gapminder.org>

ONLY by respecting absolute planetary boundaries will the biosphere still support humanity beyond 2050. Johan Rockström,

<http://www.stockholmresilience.org>

ONLY with economic development serving society, which operates within a stable biosphere, will humanity enjoy sustainable growth. Kate Raworth, Doughnut Economics and Pavan Sukdev, The Economics of Ecosystems & Biodiversity.

Reaching for Sustainable Development

Living well and within Earth's means is not out of our reach. Earth is extraordinary place but she needs our help to save us!

We will need to change lifestyles, which will be a social, technological and political journey to the mid-century, 2050:

- Stabilising the population in a low carbon world.
- Feeding a 9 billion world with sustainable food.
- Building ⅓ of the cities we still need in a sustainable way.
- Managing biodiversity effectively, building resilience & benefitting economically.

Read about this project

<https://www.threejourneysround.com/context>



Beautiful Stellenbosch, outside Cape Town



**Left: endless beaches on the Garden Route to Durban
Below: HQ Aviation's Dave Cross servicing DIGA in Durban**

scenery of Tanzania from Arusha to Mwanza are beautiful to behold from the air. Flying inside the Ngorongoro crater and up to the top of Oldonyio Lengai (2878m) volcano was tremendous – I got to about 10,000 feet and it was still 14C, 1024hpa. The thermal winds are unnerving when you are so high up with something hard next to you and nothing below you for thousands of feet. And when the Ram Mount suckers pop all your electronics off the windows into your lap it doesn't help!

Lake Victoria reminds me of some of the flying off the coast of Goteborg in Sweden, with many beautiful inlets and islands. Getting into Goma I am delayed in Mwanza while the CAA in Kinshasa mess about. The permit they finally issue is incorrect and I am unable to fly into Virunga National Park. The flight in was across Rwanda below Kigali and up between the high hills at 8000 feet, descending to Lake Kivu and into Goma on the lake.

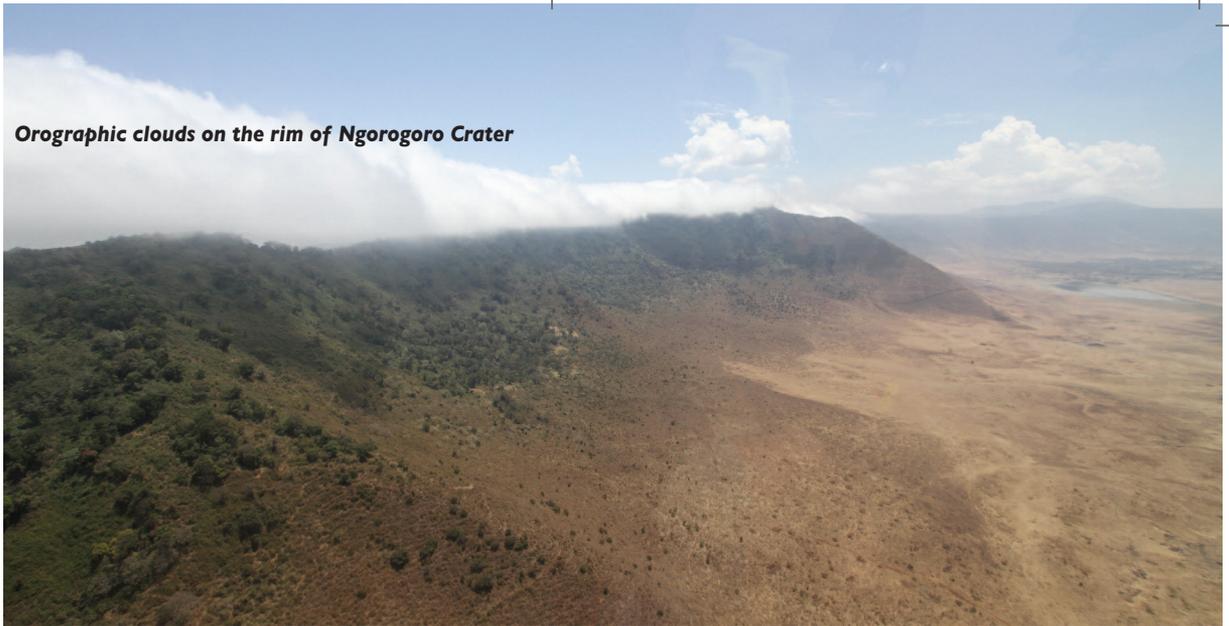
checked and changed. Climbing to get across the hills played havoc with the iPad average calculations, and that played havoc with my head for a while. However, I found the

best winds at altitude and flew steady for endurance landing with 45 litres of fuel in the tank.

The volcanoes, animals, flamingos, craters and stunning



Orographic clouds on the rim of Ngorogoro Crater



The best flying I have ever done – just awesome, remote scenery. This was only surpassed by the exit. Goma made me file a flight plan to Entebbe in accordance with the ‘wrong’ permit. So I filed for Entebbe, put Mwanza as my alternate (I had all the permits for Rwanda overflight and Tanzania...and there is no love lost between these folks). Then I was able to lift from Goma in the direction of Entebbe and fly over to Rumangabo (where they wouldn’t let me take DIGA in to Virunga

National Park!). I soon lost contact with the tower (big hills to 4000m do that) and so was on my own to do as I wished. I flew to Rumangabo, circled it, waved goodbye to the folks I had stayed with then set off east into Rwanda, climbing to 9,200 feet at 24C and 1024hpa to skim the dense forest col at about 100 feet between the huge Mikeno volcano (4400m) on the right and a couple of big ones on the left. It was satisfying flying. I descended to about 7,500 feet for the crossing of Rwanda to the north

of Kigali back to Mwanza.

Rwanda is the most beautiful country in Africa from the air, with its vertical agriculture, beautifully green, with ordered roadways winding up the hills connecting the many villages. I refuel at Mwanza and fly on to Nairobi Wilson, then on to Nanyuki on the equator at 6,000 feet. I stop in Sirikoi and Il Ngwezi and enjoy stunning company and nature.

Kenya offered up game galore, wonderful lodges, a Maasai wedding and BBQ and the great African Rift

Plantation Lodge staff with DIGA in the Ngorogoro Crater





DIGA at Nairobi Wilson with Kenyan police Mi-17

Valley with its volcanoes, craters, lava-lakes, Lake Turkana (stunningly beautiful and once again, remote – so dry out here that there are camels), and the stimulating discussion with the scientists at the birthplace of

mankind – once again landing in the middle of nowhere.

The Turkana Basin Institute-Turkwel was right on the GPS button and I swung round to land away from the housing. It was dusty, so a quick landing and

flattening of the blades. I was lucky enough to meet briefly with scientists from Cambridge University.

In researching for this project, one of the facts I discovered was that Africa has the most cultures





and languages (over 2,000, 25% endemic) of any continent... I now know why. Life began in Africa. And for sure the migration out of Africa (which started 200,000 to 70,000 years ago) has led to the successful and diverse population mix we have today worldwide. But from 400,000 to 70,000 years ago, there were also hunter-gatherers migrations inside Africa. The many different groups that would have splintered off in different directions would have led to the plethora of different tribes we know about today. Fossils tell this amazing story, and Dr. Marta Lahr and her team are 'discovering it' and telling the scientific world.

Day 60: I am now waiting in

Lokichoggio having flown here from TBI. On reflection southern and eastern Africa has been dustier than even the sandy Sahara and Angola and Namibia. The fine dust of Malawi, Dodoma, Arusha, Mwanza and now Goma gets everywhere. However, DIGA continues to serve well. The sun visor I have designed keeps me shaded travelling north, and I have another design for a cover for the iPad to implement. Direct sunlight is brutal on the electronics.

Another African country's CAA

Below: Aswan in Egypt – worth a visit as a tourist
Right: Helpful refuellers at Damazin in Sudan



Rotor Torque Summer 2017



again frustrates me, this time Ethiopia – just unhelpful, obstructive and slow. GASE don't know why they are delaying the permission. It wastes two days, and in the end means I fly straight north to Sudan, technical stopping in Damazin and missing Addis Ababa – shame.

Crossing into Ethiopia the ground rises, the greenery commences, the rural dwellers abound. To my right is the really high ground towards Addis. I am at the same latitude as Calabar, Nigeria, but here at 7000 feet, and once again mixing it with the microclimate of the forest below. Then crossing back to (north) Sudan I get flat, green, large-scale cultivated countryside. Conurbations are organised concentrations, and not spread out like South Africa. It is often wet and flooded, including the towns.

After Damazin, Khartoum is a modern city – seems incongruous – with World Food Aid and UN assets at the airport. The desert has some of the haze of Algeria, but nowhere near as bad. It is spectacular flying up the Nile in really quite good conditions for a change. I make a technical stop at Dongola and then fly to Aswan.

Aswan is a spectacular city on the



Peter swaps his R66 for a camel at the Pyramids

Nile and definitely worth a tourist visit in the future. Cairo is simply enormous, 20m-plus population. The smog is horrible, visible with 60 miles to run even through the dusty haze of the desert. Eddie's hospitality and the pyramids, camel ride, Citadel and Suq were memorable tourist things to do while we also found time to plan the next trip – round the world: 41 countries; 29,000nm; 130 days.

The Nile delta is awesome to fly over with its vast conurbations and intense cultivation stretching as far as Alexandria, where I land for the last time in Africa at Borg El Arab. I have one more big water hop to come, from Alexandria to Crete. I will soon be back in Europe with its weather, airspace and radio work to contend with through Greece, Italy and France.

On Day 73 it's a lovely sunny day. I file my last flight plan; Le Touquet to Booker – here I come. "Wycombe Tower this is

Right: Peter arrives back at Booker after 73 days 'on the road'

G-DIGA." I'm finding it harder than I expected to get my words out. A flypast is granted before landing to be greeted by my wife, and staff and students from Helicopter Services.

I dismount from the Three Journeys Round configuration for the last time on the Africa 2016 Journey and climb out of DIGA. Physical mission accomplished! There are hugs and handshakes. I return Thingy to Leon's safe keeping.

I feel like I have achieved

something important, I am actually so knackered that it takes a couple of weeks of sleep before my family tell me that they have me back! Now I have only five weeks and two months to be ready for my second journey round the world! I try hard to get my fitness back and also to get back into an office routine. Sharing and telling people what I have done and preparing for TJR-RTW becomes a seven-day-a-week job once again. I have so many people to thank and so much to do. □

