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## The flying French men



Over the Namib desert

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HOEDSPRUIT - Two Frenchmen, Philippe and his son Mathieu Berjaud undertook a flight from France to Zandspruit during November and December 2013. The flight took 82 hours to complete and spanned several countries along the West coast of Africa.

Philippe was a captain flying Boeing 747's for Air France, but retired three years ago. His son, Mathieu flies the Airbus 320 for the same company. The plane they flew to Zandspruit is a tad smaller than what they are used to. The Murphy Elite, an evolution of the Murphy Rebel, took Philippe four years to build and was completed in 2008. The plane comes in a kit from the Canadian company Murphy Aircraft. The plane Philippe built is classified as experimental as it has a diesel engine, making it one of only about 100 diesel planes around the world. The decision to install a diesel engine rather than one running on aviation fuel (avgas) was based purely on logistics. Even though avgas is freely available in South Africa, the rest of Africa proves to be a bit trickier and when avgas is available, one can expect to pay anything from R40-70 per litre. The Elite's average fuel consumption is between 16 and 20 litres per hour, not at all heavy when compared to other aircraft that can burn 50 to 60 litres per hour.

When asked why he decided to settle in South Africa, Philippe said his intention was to purchase property in West Africa where he lived a long time ago or in East Africa. But he had traveled a lot and likes South Africa. After discovering Zandspruit Bush and Aero Estate, buying a stand and thereafter building a house, he realized that the only thing missing was his plane and so decided to fly it here. The flight took around 82 hours to complete, but was broken up into shorter legs to accommodate the plane's endurance and their own comfort. One also cannot fly across Africa like you would across Europe or America because of the different countries and the instability in some of these. Luckily obtaining all the right permits was done through an agency in Burkina Faso. These permits are crucial as even flying over certain countries without permission can be dangerous. If you don't have permission to land in countries like Equatorial Guinea, the authorities could intercept you, forcing you to land and imposing a hefty fine. When asking Philippe how much the fine would be, he just shrugged and said 'maybe hundreds of thousands of Euros. I am just glad I don't know.'

While some legs of the trip will be remembered for the sheer beauty of the surrounding landscapes, others will be remembered for the overnight stays. Philippe and Mathieu stayed in the Hôtel de la Poste in St Louis, Senegal. They stayed in the exact same room as Jean Mermoz, a French aviator in the 1920s and 1930s who flew from France to Dakar along the coast; the only room with two windows, one with the view of the town and the other with a view of the river.

The route taken was from France, over Spain into Morocco, thereafter into West Africa over Western Sahara, Senegal, where they spent a few days, thereafter followed Mali and Burkina Faso. They then flew across Bénin, Nigeria and although they experienced no problems in that country, they did not land there as Philippe had had a bad experience there 40 years ago. They landed in Douala, Cameroon then flew over Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. They did not land in Gabon as the landing fees are somewhere between \$400-500, a bit on the expensive side. They flew from Douala to Pointe Noir in the Republic of the Congo. They spent a few days in Pointe Noire and flew to Cabinda, only half an hour away and from there to Benguela, which is in the south of Angola. 'I did not know what would happen because I had the landing permissions but I heard many things about Angola, especially here in South Africa, that it might be a little tricky and very expensive. Actually it was all right. People were very friendly and, well, it was a little more expensive than everywhere else, but it was all right.' They chose not to land at Luanda as it has the reputation of being the most expensive city in the world. From Angola they departed to Namibia, the last stop before flying into South Africa. When arriving in a country, one's first landing must be at an airport which has customs and immigrations. This is normally the reason for often having to make two stops in a country instead of flying directly to the overnight destination.

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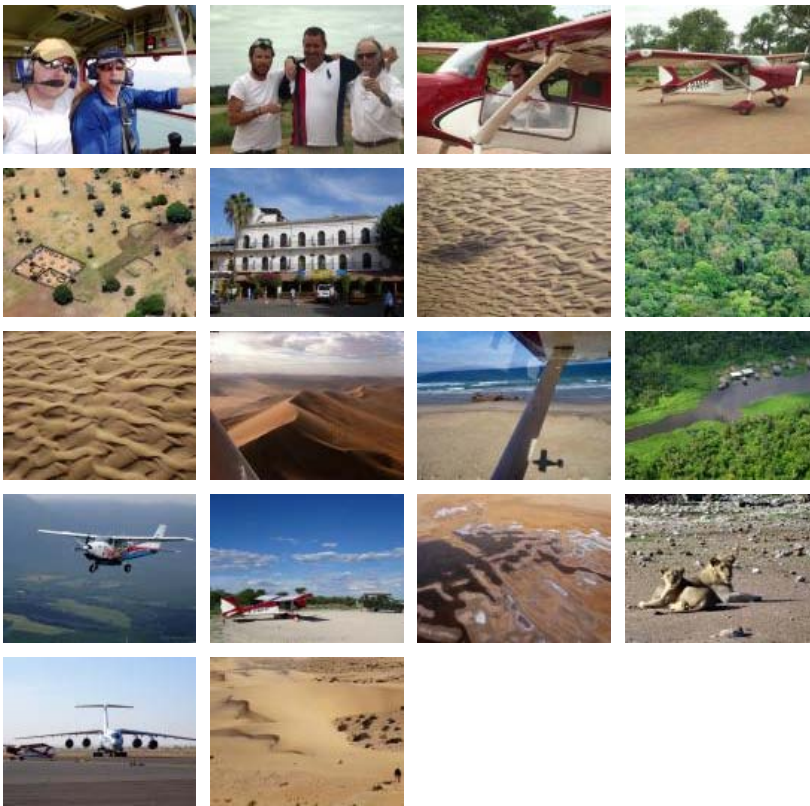
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Philippe is a very experienced pilot with about 16800 flying hours. His son, Mathieu, has about 3500 hours. They are both passionate about flying and spoke freely of the Elite's design.

The aircraft was over the maximum all up weight capacity of 816kg almost all of the time due to extra fuel and spare engine parts. Takeoff speed is around 90km/hour with a cruising speed of between 170 and 180km/hour. It is not very fast, but it was designed as a bush plane. It did have extended range tanks, but these were never filled to capacity as this would make the plane even heavier. Although the plane has a maximum cruising altitude of around eleven and a half thousand feet, the Berjauds flew mostly between 5000 and 7500 feet, sometimes descending as low as 500 feet if weather, temperature and terrain allowed this. Philippe and Mathieu are both Instrument Flight Reference (IFR) qualified, but as the aircraft is a non-certified type aircraft, Visual Flight Reference (VFR) must be maintained at all times. One also has to be a tail-dragger qualified pilot in order to fly this plane. Most planes have a front wheel but this aircraft has a tail wheel which makes takeoffs and landing a bit trickier, 'but it's all a question of habit' according to Philippe.

The Elite diesel engine chosen by Philippe only pushes out 120HP, the lower limit in the 120-180HP range suggested for the model. 'It's all right. It flew from France to South Africa, but if I had 30 or 40 horsepower more, it would have been better,' said Philippe.

Mathieu returned to France shortly after arriving in South Africa and Philippe returned to France on December 26. He plans on spending half of his time in France and the other half here in South Africa and flying just for the pleasure of it. Zandspruit Bush and Aero Estate provides the perfect home.



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