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National Geographic: Flight Over Africa

By Unknown

There are still a few places left
that you can't
get to from here.
Places without phones
or faxes or even roads.
There are still a few corners
of the globe so remote
they remain aloof from
what we call the modern world.
This is the realm
of the bush pilot.
Tom Clayton is leaving
behind his family
and friends for a two-year
adventure around the world.
The 28-year-old Radnor
resident checks out
his single engine plane
for the last time
before taking a solo flight
from wings Airport in Norristown.
The purpose is to try
and go to seven continents
in different parts
of the world and live
and work with
bush pilots.
As a bush pilot
Claytor will fly daredevil
routes while delivering
vital supplies to remote areas.
So before taking to the skies
Claytor got his
hugs and kisses
while cameras recorded
all the action.
And there was even
a special goodbye.
Then as the crowd
looked on
the pilot closed the cockpit door
and took off.
The day he left,
he made the local TV news.

If he makes it back,
he'll make history.
Tom Claytor hopes to be
the first to fly around the world
Stopping on all seven continents
before returning home
I had this tremendous desire
inside to look at other places
to look in places like
Greenland and the Sahara Desert.
Things that I'd only seen
on the map in high school.
So I think it's a desire
to look at different parts of the world
and to live with people
on other parts of the world
but maybe also it's
a little challenge
or test for myself as well.
Claytor is 31 years old.
When he was 12
he set foot in an airplane
for the first time.
It was to be the start of
an obsession
When he was just 18
he earned a pilot's license.
By his early 20s
he had begun working
as a bush pilot in Africa.
Today, Claytor owns his own airplane
named "Timmissartok"
after one of Lindbergh's planes.
Outrigged with
a special reserve tank
the Cessna 180 Taildragger
can fly about 14 hours
without refueling.
The struggle to keep
his gas tank
full has shaped
Claytor's journey from the very start.
I left home
with \$20,000.

And when I
got to Greenland
it cost me \$1,000 to fill up
my gas tank once.
So it became very obvious
that I was going to have to
find ways of getting money.
And my idea which was
only an idea when I left
was that I'd work the plane on the way.
And when I got to Niger
I found a job doing
a survey of a park
which paid me \$8,000.
So I've been able to find jobs
for the plane on the way.
Besides working the
plane as he goes,
Claytor's writing a book
about his experience
in the far corners
of the world.
So far, he's logged
three continents
and 28 countries.
On December 2, 1990
he left Pennsylvania
heading north through
Canada to Greenland
and then Iceland.
In the summer of '91,
he arrived in Europe.
And early in '92
he began traveling
through Africa.
The longest leg of
Claytor's journey
so far has been
on the Africa continent.
His video journal
is testimony to a rare
and spontaneous adventure.
We're now in... market
which is the largest

market in West Africa
We're now in...
and Mr... has with
him scorpions
And now he's going
to show me that he can use his
so that the scorpions
don't bite you
we just did this once before
I hope it's successful again.
Okay...
It's starting to rain now.
Now in southwest Africa
Claytor has spent the
last few weeks
exploring the country
of Namibia.
Today, he plans to visit
an area rich in African history
a group of abandoned towns
near the Namibian coast.
There's a town southwest
of the Namib Desert
called Kolmanskop and
this town was founded
because a railway worker
working on the rail line
found a very pretty stone.
And this lead to a diamond
rush which caused
this town to spring
out of the desert
and then as quickly as
it started it disappeared.
Kolmanskop was followed
by other boomtowns
a sudden cluster
of Diamond settlements
that sprang up
in the lifeless desert.
At the turn
of the century,
Diamonds were
so plentiful here,

they say you could collect
a jarful a night
by just picking up
whatever glistened
in the moonlight.
In the saloons
you could buy your whiskey
and your woman with raw diamonds.
May 10th.
It's a ghost town,
almost like
the American west.
Casinos.
Hotels. Houses.
There's something haunting
and magical about this place.
I keep looking
in the sand half expecting
to find a diamond.
But there are none.
When the sand was
picked clean,
the people disappeared.
What they left behind
is an eerie memento.
An empty museum.
A movie set.
I can almost imagine
the sounds of music
and laughter here.
Claytor's itinerary is
deliberately unpredictable.
If he has enough money for gas
he can simply scout around
off the beaten path
for material for his book.
What I'm trying to do is
visit remote parts of the world
places like this desert
jungles ice caps
and places which are basically
the frontiers of civilization.
And the venue by which I do
that is I look for bush pilots

because bush pilots work
in these areas and very often
they're not just pilots
but they're scientists
they're businessman,
they're researches
they're missionaries
and conservationists.
These pilots also teach me
the particulars of
these various areas and
how to go through them safely.
Recently, another bush
pilot told Claytor
about an isolated shipwreck
on the Namibian Beach.
One of the many
skeletons along
Africa's infamous
Skeleton Coast.
Claytor is looking for a
South African
freighter called the Otavi
which sank in 1945.
A mere footnote
in history,
the wreck is said to be
extremely well preserved
thanks to the tiny cove
where it went aground.
Just beyond this swept
area and that beach,
there's a rock peninsula
and one beyond it.
You'll see in between
the two is the shipwreck.
Right here the ocean is
just moving back off the Otavi.
There are seals just piled up
around that wreck.
You can see the wreck
jetting up out of the sand.
And part of it's
been split off.

And those are seals
they're just packed all around it.
May 15th.

I am on the edge
of one of the oldest
deserts in the world.
The skeleton coast
where countless
shipwrecked sailors
lost their lives.
It feels like a place
I was never meant to be.
Like a ghost, the Otavi
looms before me
rising three decks
above the sand,
something almost
lost and forgotten.
I try to imagine the men
who wrecked here
half a century ago.
How did it feel to be
marooned in such a place?
The wreck of the Otavi
is so inaccessible that
Clayton is probably the
lonely vessel's
first visitor in decades.
His book promises to be
a guided tour
of the middle of nowhere.

May 16th

Today is the 894th day
since I left home.
Sometimes I worry
that I will become
too comfortable
being alone. Already,
I can't imagine
what it would be like to be
in a room full of people.
I miss the most unbelievably
trivial things.
A bookstore.

A movie.
A long hot shower.
A pillow.
The only sound I hear
is a hyena in the distance.
I wonder where it is.
But I relish the quite...
the solitude.
May 17th. I wake up
at dawn and it's freezing.
I brush my teeth and
break down camp.
And then, almost as though
it were a part of myself
I see to the plane.
What I'm doing.
But of course
I think about it.
I check everything
and then I check it again.
Three pilots I met
in the Faroe Islands
were recently killed
when their helicopter crashed.
That makes 15 pilots...
since I started flying.
There's so much of flying
that's completely
out of your control.
So I try to concentrate
on what I can control.
Despite the dangers
and perhaps also
because of them
Clayton loves to fly
The whole world
goes upside down.
And yet everything inside
the airplane stays the same. Kinda fun.
If you do it wrong
you can really get
into a lot of trouble.
You can really really scare
yourself if you do it too fast

or too slow
or you stall the tail
hour heart drops...
so that's when I do it
by myself to practice it.
Because you don't want
to do it wrong
when you're trying
to show someone.
But the life of a bush pilot
is not all barrel rolls
and stunt flying.
With funds running low
Claytor needs to start looking for
his next paying job.
He decides to
leave Namibia
flying northeast
to Botswana.
Here, he'll visit an old friend
and fellow bush pilot...
Perhaps, with a little luck
he'll also get a line on some work.
Bush pilots everywhere
seem to have an
informal network
for news and information.
In Africa, many are
involved in wildlife
management and conservation,
like Lloyd Wilmot.
Just keep a nook out
for breeding herds
and any sign of
vultures and hyenas.
Wilmot runs a safari camp
in Chobe National Park.
In addition
he uses his plane to help
combat poaching
in the immense refuge
where he is an
honorary game warden.
Today, Claytor has become

along with Wilmot
to track a herd of elephants
just outside the park.
You've a huge herd
underneath you right now.
Roger.
I'm turning to the right.
I want to have another
look at that herd.
Okay,
I'm in on your left.
Now that they've spotted
the elephants from the air
they'll continue the
search on foot tomorrow.
Lloyd Wilmot is one
of the few wildlife experts
who routinely approaches
elephant without the protection
of a vehicle.
He and Clayton will wait
at a watering hole
for a close up view
of the animals.
What do you do if you're
surprised by an elephant?
Is there a trick to
not getting eaten?
There's no
real trick.
The thing is to try and
keep the wind in your favor.
If you
if you can see him
before he sees you
you can figure out
which way the wind's going
and then go down wind
of him and keep clear of him
but in the
ultimate analysis
if you are
confronted
you get to something

like a big tree, like that.
If you can't climb it
you just get behind it
and you have a clot of earth
like a lump over there
or a piece of wood,
and throwing that at them
often turns them and distracts them.
In their sort of terms
of reference
nothing has ever thrown
anything at them
so they get a bit
disconnected
when you actually
throw something at them.
Wow! There is
Notice how they skim
the top of the water
because that's where
it's cleanest and clearest.
The sediment sinks down
and you have about half
half an inch to an inch
of clean water on top.
So they suck
just on the top,
much like you see
them doing now...
you have to look carefully,
the ears are cocked.
Claytor approaches
a bull shoot some video of him
but the large make
has no interest
in posing for the camera.
What did you just do there?
It's a bluff charge.
It's to get you to go.
Just call his bluff.
Stay put.
May 22nd.
I have just been charged
by a wild elephant.

Lloyd laughs lightly,
like he's seen it
a thousand times.
Neither one of
us says much.
There's really not much
to say after an elephant charge.
After a while
a large group emerges from the bush.
Its an extraordinary thing
to be so close to
these magnificent creatures.
It's so easy to feel small
in the face of such splendid power.
Thanks to bush
pilot grapevine,
Claytor has secured a job
in an international park
in Zimbabwe.
the two pilots part company
in the Botswana sky
Claytor's headed for
Hwange National Park
in Western Zimbabwe,
but first he'll make
a slight detour to one
of Africa's most
spectacular natural wonders:
Victoria Falls.
I'm now flying low
over the Zambezi River
approaching Victoria Falls
and as you look ahead at the trees
you just see this mist
this towering mist rising
our of the trees
that are above the water.
And the Africans call it
"Mosi-oa-Tunya."
Which means the
smoke that thunders.
The Zambezi River
drops up to a million
gallons of water a second

over the 350-foot falls.
Even before it
comes into sight,
the roar of the plummeting
water is deafening.
The rainbow everywhere.
You see the mist
sailing the screen.
Look at that chasm,
and there's a rainbow
coming across it.
Wow, look at that
right below the falls
you can see there're gorges
that just zig back
and forth about five times.
And in these gorges
it also drops down
to this boiling
black water below.
It's spectacular.
May 26th. I can't resist
flying down into the gorge
even though it's risky.
Not only could I be killed
I could probably get arrested.
As I corner
the water explodes into
a torrent of frothing white waves.
Sometimes flying is
just a fast way to travel.
And sometimes
it's the greatest thing in the world.
Leaving the falls behind
Claytor reaches
Hwange National Park.
Before he can land
in a remote area
Claytor has to
clear the runway.
Collisions with animals are
one of the greatest
dangers bush pilots
face in Africa.

Okay, are you feeling
strong this morning.
On the ground,
Claytor gets some help
refueling and prepares
for his next
assignment in the air.
Conservationist and
researcher Janet Rachlow
has hired Claytor to
help track an injured
rhinoceros in the park.
Rachlow is part of
a controversial program
designed to protect
severely endangered rhinos.
Park officials in Zimbabwe
have been removing
the horns from dozens of
rhinos in a desperate
attempt to deter poachers.
Claytor was there during one
of the dehorning
operations and videotaped it.
The first time
I saw rhinos
getting their horns cut
off it was in the southeast
section of Zimbabwe.
This huge rhino was lying
there sedated
and this man pulled the
started ripping the horn off its face.
And you start to
ask yourself,
"why made clear tome
was that there's nothing
else that can do here.
The rhino Claytor and Rachlow
are searching
for is an adult
female named Zola.
Even though she
was dehorned,

she was shot and badly
wounded by poachers.
In the vast 5000
square mile park,
the only way to locate
individual animals
is from the air.
Even then,
it's no easy matter.
We're starting to
get a signal.
Okay
Once we get
a little bit closer,
we can listen
out of both wings...
and we wanna balance
the volume that comes
in on the two wings
and that'll keep us
going right towards it... Okey
Geez, it's hard to see
through this bush, isn't it?
Okay, straight... Real close
real close
directly under us.
Nothing under
us on the left.
It's quite possible that
her collar has come off.
It's come off several
of the other animals.
So what we'll need to
do is just come in on foot
and find the collar
or find the animal. But,
you know,
now we know the area.
With the help
of expert trackers,
the search for Zola
continues on foot.
Dr. Michael Kock
is the veterinarian

for Zimbabwe's national park.
Once they find
the rhino,
Dr. Kock will shoot her
with a tranquilizer dart
so he can treat
her gunshot wounds.
I need...
The hole is swollen here.
That's from a
gunshot there?
What I need is,
I need an eye cover
My shirt?
She looks good.
You can see she's done
some wearing here around the edges.
If Zola had died,
the poachers would
probably have cut off
what was left of her
horn to sell. Still,
dehorning does appear
to reduce poaching overall.
It's easy to want to take
an emotional stance
to conserving these animals.
And if you take that stance,
dehorning is hard to justify.
But I think we have
to be realistic,
and we have to look
at what's happening.
And, I mean, I'd be
really sad to tell my
children or my
grandchildren that,
sorry,
there used to be something
as magnificent as
a dinosaur,
but we killed them all
Strafed with machine
gun fire

the huge creature's legs
are swollen with infection.
Once her wounds
are treated
Zola will be given an antidote
to the tranquilizer and freed.
May 27th.
The immense animal awakes
and rises to her feet
but does not move.
Then, slowly she lowers
her massive head
to the ground and uses
her chin as a crutch
to limp off into
the bush.
The doctor sounds optimistic
but I am not.
She might survive
these wounds
but to a poacher,
her life is worth far less
than the sad stump at
the end of her nose.
Four days later,
Claytor receives a wire
from Janet Rachlow.
Despite all their efforts
Zola has died.
Back on his way,
Claytor returns to the
explorer's life.
He has decided to pay a visit
to an orphanage
for chimpanzees in Burundi.
Claytor heads north
toward Burundi.
But first he'll
cross Zambia,
and an area called
the Kafue Flats.
I'm now somewhere
over the Kafue swamps,
and as far as you can

see in every direction,
it's absolutely flat.
And it's this green patina
over dark blue water.
If you didn't see the
sun reflecting, you know
that it's just a green patina
of growth on top of
this vast swamp.
I think if you lost
your engine here
I'm not sure
how deep it is
but you'd probably just
mush into this green gunk
and just sit on top of the
wing and then try
to call someone.
You just can't crash here.
If he did crash here,
Claytor's tiny plane would be
almost impossible
to spot from the air.
The orange stripes on the tail
and wings are a safety measure.
If he goes down, the right
color might make it
easier to find him
in the empty terrain he frequents
Claytor hopes
he'll never have to
find out if it works.
And crashing isn't the
only thing a pilot
has to worry about.
I've had a couple
of close calls.
When I got to Algeria,
it was right after the
military took over.
And they thought that
a bush pilot
was a pilot for George Bush.
And right after

the gulf war,
George Bush was not a
very popular person.
I tried to quickly explain
that a bush pilot
had nothing at all
to do with George Bush.
Claytor decides to make
a brief stop in Zambia
to refuel and chart his course to Burundi.
Bueno Bungee.
How's everything here?
I am from Ndola,
but I needed to refuel.
Hello.
How are you?
Nice to meet you.
I'm Claytor...
We are just from
around here.
The lanky American is
an unusual sight
wherever he lands
and his grasp of African
languages is often
a crowd pleaser.
This is my first time
ever to come here.
It's nice to meet you.
Oh, it's very nice
to meet you.
When landing,
you're suppose to pay
something - a landing fee.
I can pay it.
How much should
I pay you?
I want to pay...
How much?
How many kilograms?
It's one ton.
U.S. dollars is that?
It's about
one U.S. dollar.

I understand that
Can I pay you
two U.S. dollars?
So is that okay?
This is more than okay.
Okay
no but please
the change is for you guys
You can have it.
Because landing
fees here are very reasonable...
so it's one cent.
These are for you to do
as you wish to improve your airport.
I think that's the
cheapest airport
I've ever landed
at in my whole life.
When you fly in the day
it's very bumpy,
because the sun heats
the surface
of the African earth
and it just gets these currents
of air straight up.
At night,
it's completely different.
The air is calm and still.
You can see the stars.
You can see fires
on the ground.
You can see the moonlight
reflecting off of lakes.
And it's very calm and
peaceful and kind of reflective time.
You're suspended in space
over this large black think
that you can't see.
It's mysterious.
The chimpanzee orphanage
in northern Burundi
was founded by the
Jane Goodall Institute in 1989.
Chimps confiscated

from smugglers
are brought here
to be cared for by
conservationists and volunteers.
Dean Anderson
is the director of the refuge.
At the moment,
it is home to 17 chimpanzees,
and one baby gorilla.
How old is she?
She's about three
She was confiscated
at the airport.
She was taken from her forest
home as all the other chimps here...
In Zaire... eastern Zaire,
because she's
an eastern lowland gorilla,
by poachers
and then she was brought to...;
she was in transport...
now what they were
going to do with her there
I don't know.
Probably a zoo or...
Is that where they were
mostly going to zoos at one point?
Zoos probably.
A gorilla would
probably go to a zoo.
'Cuz a private
person would just...
No...
Not be so
interested, right,
because they get
too big and too violent?
Yes, well too big.
I mean, how do you keep
a 300-pound gorilla
or something.
June 4th.
There are baby
chimpanzees everywhere.

They are affectionate
and smart.
Each one has
a distinct personality.
One has mastered the
art of threading a shoelace.
If they were returned
to the forest,
they would be killed
by wild chimps.
They can never go home.
My mind drifts
back to a day
I spent in Equatorial Guinea
and that little chimp I found.
We just had something to eat
at a restaurant and I came out.
And sitting here tied to
this chair is this
little baby chimpanzee.
I don't know
how old it is.
He seems very cold.
He was hugging himself
when I found him.
And it's,
I'm shocked by it.
I don't know what
to think.
He's just sitting here.
Oh my god.
I've got to go.
Most of the chimps
in the orphanage
were captured by poachers
to be sold as pets.
Though they are extremely
appealing as babies,
growing chimpanzees
are too smart
and too destructive
to make good pets.
Once the chimps
become powerful adults,

they must be
confined in cages,
a lonely place for
these social primates,
who quickly become bored
and desperate for attention.
Soon,
Dean hopes the orphanage
may be able to give
some chimps
a little more freedom.
This is a
temporary situation.
We're hoping to
get money together to out
them into the sanctuary
that we're talking about.
And there they'll be,
they'll all be together.
They won't have cages,
they won't have ropes.
They'll be on an open space
where they can have a
semi-natural social life.
Which is so important
for chimpanzees.
Wildlife in Africa seems
to be in direct conflict
with people here because
they need space
and the animals need space
and the animals end up losing...
I was impressed that
someone was trying
to take these chimps that
had already basically list so much,
they were trying to
in a way give them back
to themselves and nature.
May be its not perfect.
Nut it was something.
Soon Claytor must leave Africa,
and make the rest of
his way around the globe.

But first, he wants
to make one more stop.
For some time,
he has wanted to visit Zaire.
But so far, he hasn't been
granted clearance to land there.
Okay, this is Mike Oscar
in southern Zaire.
Over.
Mike Oscar...
is there any way for me
to confirm a clearance from Ndola?
Over
That's very difficult
because of the fact that
there's no telephone
communication between
the two places. Over
Okay, roger.
If I arrive with my copy
of my AFTN request,
how easy is it to negotiate
once on the ground?
Over.
How much money
do you have? Over
I've got a fair amount.
How much do you
think it would cost? Over.
At least \$250 each. Over
Roger, I understand.
The turbulent political
situation in Zaire
makes it extremely difficult
to get permission
to enter the country.
Claytor decides
to go in any way,
without an official
clearance.
He'll touch down at
a small airstrip
where he can refuel
form his own supply.

If he's lucky, no one will
ask him for his papers.
In Africa there's a rule
an unwritten rule,
and that is that it's easier to
get pardoned than
to get permission.
Because of communications
and how difficult
it is to get clearance
and things,
its sometimes easier
just tot do them and afterwards,
of course,
you get in trouble.
But the Africans
are very forgiving.
Good people,
and very often
they'll forgive you.
For Claytor,
everyday is part of
a grand-if
solitary-adventure.
He's been away form home
for nearly three years
and it could be
three more before he returns.
From Africa,
he will head east to the
four remaining continents
between him a home.
Claytor has grown accustomed
to being a stranger
everywhere he goes
but he is also changed
by every place he visits
and every person
he meets.
I think there's a part of me
that's become a little bit African,
because the Africans have
a saying
which is when you

ask them
when they'll come back or
what time something will be ready
they'll smile and look at you
and say anytime from now.
So when people ask me
when I'm going to get home
sometimes I just can
only say anytime from now.