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Left: Antonio Caraffini, Roman Michalowski, Wolfgang Janowitsch, Margot Acquaderni Caraffini, Reinhard Schramme, Arnd Hovestadt, and Andrea Abt (L to R) comprised the team of *Flying with the Champions in Bitterwasser*. (Photo by Bo Michalowski.)

Fast Track

Learn from the best in Namibia

By Andrea Abt

When October starts with grey and ever shorter days, have you found yourself brooding over the OLC and looking at the numerous 1,000 km flights in the Southern Hemisphere? And wondered how on earth anyone can manage 7 or more of those 8 hr long-distance flights from 10 am to sunset at 7 pm or later, day after day? Well, welcome to Namibia, the land of the fabulous homogeneous thermal conditions – but also the land of thunderstorms and showers if things turn the other way. If you want to fly there, you'd better be prepared. You can do this by trial and error on your own – or by joining the club of those who know. Flying with the Champions (FwtC) is an easy way to do the latter, albeit not the most inexpensive one.

Day one of FwtC and it seems like business as usual, at least for me: The good days are over, says TopMeteo, for the coming days are getting colder. Colder in Namibia means blue thermals and comparatively low ceilings,

leading to shorter distances and really, really hot conditions in the cockpit. So



Bitterwasser provides for accommodation in bungalows, but also rooms in the farmhouse or rondavels. (Photo by Andrea Abt.)

be it, I think with a certain degree of pragmatism, we will get much more out of our champions if the conditions are not so good.

Our Champions here in Bitterwasser are: Arndt Hovestadt, Wolfgang Janowitsch, and Reinhard Schramme. Arndt, former Club Class World Champion, spends his second two week stay here. The Austrian Wolfgang Janowitsch is the current two-seater World and European Champion and a well-known successful 15 and 18 m competitor. Reinhard Schramme, former European Champion, is a Bitterwasser veteran with more than 2,000 hrs in the area and more 1,000 km flights than even he himself remembers. The gliders we are using: two Arcus Ms and one ASG 32. Finally, the trainees are: Roman Michalowski from the U.S., Antonio Caraffini and his wife Margherita (Margot) Acquaderni from Italy, and myself. Two



pilots with mountains of experience in national and international competitions, and Roman and myself with considerably less experience, especially when it comes to flying in teams.

Bitterwasser is still very quiet at this time of the year. Namibia's largest and most renowned flying center can host up to 70 pilots at a time, but at the moment we are no more than 10. After all, Flying with the Champions takes place before the real high season of flying in Namibia begins. Everyone wants to be there in the last week of November and the first week of December, statistically the best two weeks of the year. However, this does not mean that there are no other good periods, nor does it mean that those two weeks always offer exceptional weather conditions.

Flying with the Champions starts in the first week of November; Rent-a-Glider, the FBO, guarantees 6 flying days, and this year they offered two one-week courses both in Kiripotib and in Bitterwasser. After three years in Kiripotib, Bitterwasser was added as a location last year.

The two weeks in Bitterwasser had three trainees each (Margherita and Antonio shared the week), while in Kiripotib there were five each.

Every day at Bitterwasser starts with a weather briefing, which – for our group – is followed by a short “lessons learned” exercise; we talk about experiences, how to overcome difficulties, what we learned from each other, and – what we will fly today.

Expectations of the participants vary according to the relevant experience levels, but we still plan the same tasks. For Namibia, the first two days are very weak – many other pilots do not even bother to take off. The large pan with its theoretical 360 degrees of take-off and landing directions seems deserted when we take our three gliders there – but for those flying with the champions, lolling at the pool is not an option.

Our distances do not go beyond 320 km as blue thermals and alti-



Above: Bitterwasser Lodge from the air: Every pilot who flies his or her first declared 1,000 km can plant a palm. (Photo by Andrea Abt.) Below: The Bitterwasser Pan provides for 360 possibilities to take off and land. (Photo by Bo Michalowski.)



tudes rarely go beyond 1,500 km above ground – fairly uncomfortable in an area where you can only land on roads and on some of the pans (that unfortunately are not everywhere). However, it is a great learning experience; most of us fly out of our comfort zones. I have definitely not flown even 300 km in these conditions, and I benefited from Reinhard's knowledge of the little farm here or the water tank there that, surprisingly enough, is fairly reliable in providing us with the lift we so desperately need. Even

Margherita, with 4,000 hrs experience and 7 female world championships on her back, admits to flying well beyond her comfort zone, which – for her – is a very valuable experience in itself.

After two days of flying in the lower regions, under the relentless Namibian sun with no shade whatsoever, we are rewarded with some cloud at last. Far away in the east, but still very well reachable, we fly over 800 km with an average speed of 121 kph, slowed down by a final glide that started at 144 km, well below our required glide path. ●

We finally made it with a last thermal at Blumfelde Pan, leading us back to Bitterwasser over an almost dark surface as sunset was nearing.

While the first two days were about survival under the sun, the third was about adapting speeds and flight mode to the changing weather conditions. We began and finished in fairly weak blue thermals; in between we had fabulous clouds with thermals of up to 4 m/s, then quickly deteriorating conditions in the east where the clouds looked more promising than they were prepared to deliver. How to adapt quickly, and almost by instinct, from slow to racing to moderate to slow mode again – this is something you learn only with experience. You can speed the process up by trying to do the same – but at the end of the day, there are no shortcuts when it comes to perfection.

Our Champions are perfectionists in different ways, the introvert and sensualist, who seems to need no instrument at all, versus the more reflective, intellectual, best practice sharing individualist, to a combination of the two. All have in common, however, that they do not easily tolerate mistakes. And you can almost feel the pain they are suffering when you do something that they consider totally inadequate. “And why don’t you just do what I told you?” may be the question the next day. And sometimes the answer is as easy as that: “Because ... I might just not be good enough.”

Fourth day – TopMeteo gives us a potential flight distance of 1,000 km and yes, we will try to fly it. A late and slow start – we take off at 11:12 am – a little too late really for a 1,000 km flight at this time of year when landing time is at 7:23 pm (that is sunset plus 15 minutes) as by then, it is pitch dark. We head northeast, as every day, first; then to the south and then back to Bitterwasser, flying beyond the airfield to gain our four digit distance. It is the night when the moon is closer to the earth than any time in the past 70 years, when the sun sets at 7:08 pm



Above: Good days in Namibia are often combined with local showers. (Photo by Andrea Abt.)

Below: Following the best cloud streets is most easily determined by looking at the shadows. (Photo by Andrea Abt.)



and the moon rises at 7:10 pm – we celebrate this memorable event with a spectacular pass-over and land safely just after sunset. The best thermal of the day had been 6 m/s integrated from bottom to top at 5,000 m – a fabulous day.

Evenings and nights are short if you fly every day for 7 or 8 hrs, and even in a two-seater this can be very tiring.

It becomes more tiring as you are constantly calibrating your own flying with somebody else whose job it is – in a way – to help you improve. Is your thermaling as effective as possible? Do you find the best speed between thermals – which can be MacCready but can also be constant speed? Do you select the right path and have the best lift under that particular cloud



street? No minute is wasted with conversation – everything centers around improving and finding the best and fastest path.

In the middle of the week we switch Champions and some of us also fly different gliders. Rent-a-Glider wants us to experience different styles – as you would imagine, everyone focuses on different areas.

I move from Reinhard and Janusz Centka's Arcus – which was more of a working horse – to the brand-new Arcus and Arndt, to a little less perfectionism and a little more individualism.

Off we go to the northeast where a cloud street was forming. We venture to fly beyond our turnpoint as two clouds looked really promising there. Alas – there is nothing, and we find ourselves at 600 m AGL over a fairly uninviting terrain. Contrary to our colleagues whom we lost when we struggled to keep aloft, we turn back in the direction of Bitterwasser, into a blue sky with still very good thermals. 670 km with 122 kph is not such a bad result after all – but we miss the convergence line that makes our colleagues' eyes shine in the evening and well into the morning.

For the last two days, we decide to



practice team flying, staying together during the whole flight.

This proved a good decision as on day 6, we had great clouds – which started only in the northeast past Gobabis, almost 200 km away from Bitterwasser. After more than 2 hrs of flying in the blue, the reward came with a fabulous cloud street far into Botswana, reaching to over 5,000 km. I had seen clouds there many times but had never made it there.

The last day is again a blue day with

Sunsets in Bitterwasser can be spectacular. (Photo by Andrea Abt.)

low bases, with perhaps some clouds in the west for a change. We decided to go for a fast 300 km that proved quite a challenging endeavor, given the weak blue thermals not reaching above 1,200 m AGL. Together, at the end, we made it and had a great experience.

Apart from having a lot of fun together, everyone took home ways to improve his or her flying, taken from the experience of some of the best pilots flying today, flown in an area with superb flying conditions.

Flying with the Champions will be offered both in Kiripotib and Bitterwasser next year – provided enough pilots can be found early in the year (until April) to justify the additional organizational efforts required to offer two sites.

About the Author: Andrea Abt has flown gliders since 1986 and logged 1,900 hrs. Still with her ASW-24, she completed her Gold with three diamonds in 1995. Today, she mainly flies with her ADW-26E in the South of Germany, France and, since 2012, also Bitterwasser. She lives in Munich and in the Allgäu region with her husband. Together, they fly single-engine aircraft. ✈



Roman Michalowski, Wolfgang Janowitzsch, and Antonio Caraffini discuss the ASG 32 before Roman's first flight in it. (Photo by Bo Michalowski.)