



## YOU'LL BELIEVE A MAN CAN FLY

YOU THOUGHT LEARNING TO FLY WAS STRICTLY FOR PILOTS, PLAYBOYS AND MEMBERS OF BLUR. NOT SO: IF YOU'VE GOT A MONTH, THREE GRAND AND THE BOTTLE, YOU CAN EARN YOUR WINGS OVER THE COAST OF SOUTH AFRICA

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I'M FLYING A SINGLE-ENGINE CESSNA at 4,000ft over the coast of South Africa with the voice of my instructor coming through loud and clear on my headphones. "OK, this is it," says Kenneth calmly. He's beside me in the co-pilot's seat and I catch him sneaking a sideways glance to measure the level of fear on my face. Having gone through the emergency manoeuvre twice already with Kenneth at the controls, I'd imagine that it's off the scale. "Stay cool; no panic; just relax," he continues. "Let's do the stall and spin."

I steel my nerves and close off the throttle. As the plane slows rapidly and is about to stall, I pull the control stick back to maintain altitude, then apply full left rudder with my pedal.

The effect is enormous. The Cessna tips over, its nose falls and the plane begins to spin, fully through 360°, straight down, suicidally down, rotating on its nose axis, dropping like a swirling stone straight towards the ground. The experience is like being pushed off a cliff sideways, your arms flailing as you plummet towards the earth.

Over the top of the instrument panel, the ground looms, spinning chaotically. It's like being inside a giant kaleidoscope or on a bad acid trip. The houses, for fuck's sake, are getting bigger, and the fields are rising up to meet me. Weird images flash into my mind of gyroscopic paintings, Battle of Britain skirmishes and old suspense movies in which newspaper headlines whirl into view.

But mostly it's all just way more than I can comprehend. *Nosedive, nosedive, nosedive!* I'm in a plane that is heading for oblivion. *Wipe out! All*







**"IT'S WAY MORE THAN I CAN COMPREHEND: NOSEDIVE, NOSEDIVE, NOSEDIVE! I'M IN A PLANE THAT IS HEADING FOR OBLIVION. WIPE OUT! ALL SOULS LOST!"**

**Now with wings** Top, Esquire and flying instructor Kenneth Symons make pre-flight checks to one of Algoa's Cessnas. Above, Port Elizabeth from the air after take-off: "like driving a racing car, on ice, in three dimensions"

*souls lost!* It is, without doubt, the scariest and most exhilarating thing I've ever done.

Yet, miraculously, what happens in these severe circumstances – and anyone who's ever been in imminent danger or a major emergency will know this – is that the mind finds an inner core of calmness that helps you cope with the shock of what you're experiencing. Somehow, you source a part of you that's almost hazily serene – the mind and body slow and, as you fall 1,000ft in just three seconds, you actually seem to have enough time to save yourself.

Although it's easy for me to write this now, back on the ground in Britain, there is not actually that much to remember (and, as Kenneth says later, the plane wants to correct itself anyway). I kick the opposite right rudder and, once the spin has slowed, push forward a few inches on the stick. Then I centralise the rudder, pull back gently out of the dive and, as the nose cuts back to the horizon, smoothly reapply the power.

Thirty seconds later, as we climb back to our previous altitude, we spot a pilot in a microlight. His voice comes through on our radio frequency: "I got a full view of that," he says, the catch in his breath almost audible, "and it scared the shit out of me!"

**THE "STALL AND SPIN"** procedure may not be very typical of the challenges you'll face when you enrol on a flying course at the Algoa Flight Centre in Port Elizabeth, but it does give some indication of the many spills and thrills that will come your way. During my week there I learned how to race along the main runway of an international airport at 65mph, gently ease back on the stick and (*woaaahhh*) take off; how to fly steep, climbing turns, banking way over at 45°; even how to make a simulated forced landing from 3,000ft, gliding down gently to land at a nearby disused airstrip.

Most of all, there was the extraordinary, unbridled high of actually flying, of being up there at several thousand feet and in control of a light aircraft. It's hard to describe the enormous sense of freedom you get, cruising at 120mph, the plane finely balanced yet acutely sensitive to small adjustments at the controls, especially if, as is often the case on this southern coast, the wind is up. It's like driving a racing car, on ice, in three dimensions.

It's kicks such as these that have always fuelled the allure of learning to fly, but until recently they were out of the financial reach of most budding Red Barons. The weak South African rand has changed all that. Flying



## HEAVY METAL THUNDER

As well as the thrill of learning to fly at Algoa, South Africa has one other major attraction for fans of aerodynamic kicks: Thunder City. Based at Cape Town International Airport, the company claims to be the world's only privately-owned fast jet operation, with a fleet of heavy metal fighters that would be the pride of most national defence forces.

There are sleek and versatile Hawker Hunters; speedy, low-level attacking Buccaneers; even two supersonic English Electric Lightnings, jets that are capable of Mach 2.2 [1,500mph] and of climbing an awesome 50,000ft per minute.

The classic jets are used mainly to train elite flyers to become test pilots, yet for £2,250 upwards, civilian Top Gunners can also bag the ride of a lifetime (though the Lightning experience will set you back almost £6,000). For this, you will be decked out in a full flight suit and helmet, given pre-flight briefings, and undergo emergency and ejector-seat training. You may also have to cope with turns, rolls and spirals during which you will experience G-forces of four or more. "We will exceed your expectations and blow your mind," says the brochure. There's little doubt about that.

Thunder City, Site 10, Tower Road, Cape Town International Airport [00 27 21 934 8007; [www.thundercity.com](http://www.thundercity.com)]





## “SUDDENLY I STARTED BANGING MY HANDS ON TOP OF THE INSTRUMENT PANEL AND SHOUTING, ‘I CAN FLY! I CAN FLY!’ MONEY CAN’T BUY THAT KIND OF FEELING”

**I believe I can** Clockwise from top: Esquire flies a Cessna at around 3,000ft over Port Elizabeth; ties cut off and pinned to the Algoa Flight Centre club wall in celebration of students' first solo flights; Algoa Chairman Chris Booysen with the club photographs

courses were always much cheaper down South than in the UK – where the average price of a lesson is around £120 – but the much-devalued South African currency has now made them, like everything else in the country, an absolute bargain. Flying lessons at Algoa cost less than £40 a throw. It makes Florida, the other favourite overseas destination for learner pilots (of all persuasions – Twin Towers terrorists Mohammed Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi trained there), seem exorbitantly expensive.

Algoa has recently introduced an intensive course, on which, assuming you have a little aptitude and good weather prevails, you can complete the minimum 40 hours of flying (15 of them solo) required to obtain a full private pilot's licence in just four weeks. In the UK, because of time and money constraints, most people take a year or more to obtain one. It means you can have an extended holiday – or two, if you can't find time for the month-long stretch – in sunny South Africa, and return home fully qualified to fly in Britain.

The course requires a little dedication, a certain level of hand-to-eye co-ordination and that thing men are always told they don't possess: an ability to multi-task (at times, for instance, you have to fly *and* talk to the radio control tower simultaneously). You're required to

pass a medical examination and will need to assimilate a lot of new information. You'll do classroom work on such topics as navigation, meteorology and aircraft engines. You'll study textbooks and take written exams. You need basic maths. Algoa is a professional flying school, and you have to be prepared to learn. And learning to fly is *much* harder than learning to drive.

**IT ALSO, OF COURSE,** requires a little bottle. After 10-25 hours of tuition, depending on ability, Algoa's chief flying instructor, Dave Perelson, a man with 5,000 flying hours and more than 20 years' teaching experience behind him, will clear you for your first solo flight. I wasn't at Algoa long enough to reach this milestone, but it's a rite of passage that every airman remembers, whether he goes on to fly Cessnas or Jumbos.

"The feeling of actually being up there, controlling that plane, on my own, was one of the most exciting and rewarding things I've ever done," says Mike Liddell, one of my fellow students. "But put it this way: my bottom was making buttons."

"There's a lot of pressure on you to get it right and go out on your own," agrees Mark Laverty, who went solo during the week I was there. "But halfway through my

## WAY TO GO

Four-week flying courses at the Algoa Flight Centre start at £3,635, including all lessons, flights with British Airways and B&B accommodation through Steppes Africa (01285 650 011; [www.steppesafrica.co.uk](http://www.steppesafrica.co.uk)).

For further information on Algoa, go to [www.algoafc.co.za](http://www.algoafc.co.za) or call 00 27 41 581 3274. To try a "test lesson" in the UK before you go, contact your local flying club through [www.flyguide.co.uk](http://www.flyguide.co.uk)

## WHERE TO GO

You'll be busy at Algoa: if flying conditions are favourable, you should average a couple of one-and-a-half-hour lessons a day, and at other times you'll be in the classroom, studying, or hanging out in the clubhouse. But that still leaves the occasional evening off, as well as weekends. So what to do? Port Elizabeth is a fairly faceless port city on the Eastern Cape, but the airport is near several beaches, all of them great for watersports, and there's plenty to do if you hire a car (make sure your vehicle has air-conditioning; the best place in PE is CABS, 00 27 41 581 7184, which charges only the equivalent of £22 extra for the one-way drop-off in Cape Town). Places worth checking out are:

**The Crazy Zebra** A restaurant and buzzing bar near the Flight Centre, serving such carnivorous delights as ostrich, antelope, kudu, springbok and, of course, zebra.

**Addo Elephant Park** A National Park 70km north of PE which was set up in 1931 to preserve the Cape elephants, then down to a population of just 11. There's plenty of other wildlife, too.

**Shamwari** A private game reserve a little further east of Addo where you are almost guaranteed to see the Big Five (lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo and rhino).

**The Garden Route** One of the world's great drives, along the coast to Cape Town. It's almost 500 miles long, and on the way you'll pass an unforgettable and expansive landscape of jagged mountain ranges, stunning coastlines and big skies. With vivid green irrigated fields, golden farmlands studded with longhorn cattle and grazing ostrich, pale blue hills and forests of soaring eucalyptus, the landscape is as varied as the modern South Africa you'll pass through, from country polo clubs to suburban shanty towns. Stay at The Plettenberg (00 27 44 533 2030; [www.plettenberg.com](http://www.plettenberg.com); doubles from R1,750, about £125), a cool, white hotel that's built on a rocky headland overlooking beautiful Plettenberg Bay. Stop off at bohemian and laidback Knysna for huge, strongly flavoured oysters – best at the Knysna Oyster Company (00 27 44 382 6941).





## MEET THE PANEL

- 01 AIRSPEED INDICATOR** Tells you how fast you are flying (the maximum in this baby, a Cessna 172, is about 125 knots, or 145mph)
- 02 ATTITUDE INDICATOR** (aka artificial horizon) Tells you if the nose is pointing up or down and whether or not your wings are level
- 03 ALTIMETER** Tells you your altitude
- 04 TURN CO-ORDINATOR** Tells you how far you have turned horizontally and whether your nose is pointing straight ahead or sideways
- 05 DIRECTIONAL INDICATOR** Like a compass

- 06 VERTICAL SPEED INDICATOR** Tells you if you're climbing or descending and how quickly (if you're falling 1,000 feet every 10 seconds, something's very wrong)
- 07 RADIO** So you can talk to, and obey, those nice people in the control tower
- 08 CONTROL STICK** Self-explanatory: pull it back and the houses get smaller; push it forward and they get bigger
- 09 THROTTLE** Makes the plane go forward
- 10 MIXTURE CONTROL** Adjusts fuel/air mixture to feed engine with optimum fuel
- 11 COMPASS** Does the same job as the Directional Indicator [but, trust us, you can't have too many ways of telling which way you're heading]

first solo flight it hit me: it was like, 'Fucking hell, I'm really flying this thing!' It was a beautiful, clear, sunny day and suddenly I started banging my hands on top of the instrument panel and shouting, 'I can fly! I can fly!' Money can't buy that kind of feeling."

**THE ALGOA FLIGHT CENTRE** is located at Port Elizabeth Airport, a major regional airfield that sees 50 or more domestic and international flights come and go every day. This means it's conceivable that you'll have to handle the strain of landing your four-cylinder, 110 horsepower Cessna 152 with a booming Boeing 737 bearing down behind you. Landing is not only by far the hardest part of learning to fly – you have to get the angle of descent just right so as to land "low and slow" on your rear wheels with your nose up (it feels like landing flat on your arse) – but it's also prone, if you get it very wrong, to the most calamitous consequences. As one of the maxims on the "Rules of the Air" poster in the clubhouse helpfully states, "Flying isn't dangerous. Crashing is what's dangerous."

Still, for all the application and the seriousness

of the tasks you are asked to perform, the spirit at Algoa is relaxed and friendly. The club was founded in the Thirties by a couple of doughty old aviators with the intention of promoting flying on a voluntary basis – today the club is still a non-profit organisation (hence the low prices) – and to make Algoa a meeting place for real high-flyers rather than wannabe wingsmiths.

The club has always had a strong social side to it, which continues today in the Gremlin's Grotto (named after the club's mascot, a friendly, winged gremlin with a halo), especially after 5pm or so. There is a hospitable Afrikaner vibe to the place and, while members religiously observe the motto "Leave 12 hours between bottle and throttle" (a challenge if your next lesson is at 6.30am), there's always plenty of banter and badinage.

While I was at Algoa there was a great bunch of guys from the UK, ranging from 23-year-old Andy McMinn, who'd just finished a postgraduate degree, to Mike, a 53-year-old Scotsman who'd recently retired from an undisclosed position within the British security service. "Learning to fly has been a childhood dream that has persisted as a

gentle, nagging fascination ever since," says Justin Carter, a 29-year-old hospital doctor who created time for the course between jobs. "Realising that dream has been quite something."

In the end, the deciding factor on whether or not you make the investment of time and money to learn to fly will probably depend on some connection with the romance and heroism of flying, be it an interest in such intrepid solo pilots as Charles Lindbergh and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, or their gung-ho Hollywood counterparts, *Top Gun*'s Pete "Maverick" Mitchell and Tom "Iceman" Kazanski. My dad had been in the RAF and I spent a probably rather unhealthy number of hours as a kid making model aeroplanes, so it's probably only natural that I want Kenneth to recognise the putative pilot within me.

"I'm impressed – you're very comfortable up there and I could tell straight away that you have a talent for flying," he says after my final lesson. "Yes, we could make a pilot out of you." Kenneth is either a master salesman or an arch bullshitter, but at that moment it didn't matter. My feet were hardly touching the ground. ☺