

Gero's Bush Diary #1

With Doctors without Borders in Southern Sudan

4:00 Get up, Morning Devotion, Walking Bono, Breakfast. Off to the MAF hangar, 6:00 Check-In.

The ground crew is still busy loading the airplane; so I have time to supply all our airplanes with our new security stickers which I had prepared last week; to secure doors when staying overnight in the bush.

Just after 7:00, we are being towed to the Terminal; passengers are waiting already.

7:25 Startup-Clearance, Lining up on the runway, Takeoff (my colleague is flying, I am passenger).

10:05 Arrival in Lokichoggio, where I shall takeover „MAF2“, one of our four Cessna Caravans in Kenya; the plane is refueled and loaded, needs only a pre-flight check.

Today I am busy for MSF (Doctors without Borders) deep in Southern Sudan, incl. 1 overnight in Pieri.

Besides fuel for 5 h, I could take almost 1000 kg of freight, incl. passengers. Luckily, we have a fuel storage in Pieri; otherwise I could not take more than 2/3 of that loading. in order to come all the way back to Lokichoggio.

„Loki“ till Leer is 2:20 h; due to thunderstorms I land with 20 minutes delay. Almost all passengers and freight is unloaded here.

My manifest states one more passenger from Leer to Pieri, which will be our next stop, but I find 7 (!) who want a ride. This time, it was our office's fault. Luckily, I have enough seats, and the runway is long enough for the extra weight.

14:41 Airborne again; this flight is “only“ 50 minutes.

Up in cruising altitude, I write tickets for my 6 “extra“ passengers. The autopilot had quit just before Leer, but despite a squall line of thunderstorms south of track, it works fine.

Overflying Pieri, I check the airstrip from the air: Cows are grazing on it. But the overflight should alarm the owners to drive them off. Turning final, the cows have left, but just before touchdown 2 sheep race across (luckily fast enough).

Pieri is one of four MSF bases in Southern Sudan. 3 passengers disembark.

I could still make it to Akobo, our next stop for the remainder 4 passengers, before sunset, but there is no overnight facility for me; so we'll continue tomorrow.

After refueling from drums, I prepare my plane for the night, incl. using our new security stickers.

A shower in the MSF camp, made of plastic sheets, and Jochen, a young German Doctor, shows me their “clinic“. Fascinating, what they accomplish out here with very limited options. An oxygen machine is actually one of their few high-end equipment; so simple, still able to save lives.

Most of the MSF staff are no Christians, but all of them experience supernatural “support“, simply due to the very limited resources out here. Jochen could tell one story after the other ...

Next morning 5:15, a beautifully singing bird awakens me. One hour later, I finally get up, do my standard morning ceremony, and, as the breakfast is not yet ready, pre-flight check the airplane for a faster start later.

I don't mind the 3-4 annoying flies anymore, who sit always somewhere on me, as soon as I realize that every child here carries at least 50 flies on its back!

Breakfast is fried toast and hot “chai“, a sweet milky tea, VERY tasty!

Then I can call our MAF office in Loki via HF radio: weather in Akobo is good, runway is dry. Most of the airstrips in Sudan are Black Cotton Soil, hard as concrete when dry, but wet, an unusable muddy pit!

One coworker of MSF asks me to take some empty drums back to Loki for refueling; 5 of these 200-l beasts fit behind the passengers. I tie them down properly. From now on, during climb and descent, they make funny noises ...

Just before 9:00, arrival in Akobo with my 4 victims of a tribal fight, who had spent 5 months in MSF care now. I unload their luggage and prepare for takeoff back home to Loki.

Suddenly, I hear my colleague on HF: he is too heavy for one of his stops at a short airstrip, Lokutok, thus he asks if I could do a 30 minutes detour to pick up his 2 passengers and bring them to Loki for him to continue. Quick calculation: my fuel reserve would shrink to only 1 h, but the weather is good, and I know that strip, so I agree.

Before Landing, I overfly the mission station, less than a mile from the airstrip, to inform the people about my unexpected early arrival. It worked: one of the passengers rushes so fast with his bicycle to the airstrip that he falls into a ditch :-)

We wait for the tractor with luggage and the other passenger, while I do my takeoff calculations: the strip is only cut half, but I will be 600 kg lighter than last time, so no problem.

40 Minutes after takeoff, we land in Lokichoggio.

Now I deserve an ice cold Bitter Lemon. But it is not that ice cold, as the power of the shop's fridge went off a few minutes ago. One more “soda“ for my 3 ground crew, and we wait for our colleague who shall bring my last 2 passengers to Nairobi.

2 h after landing, I finally manage to leave the airport, too late for the lunch buffet at AFEX (Africa EXpeditions camp). No problem, in this climate I am rather thirsty than hungry. Therefore, I buy a crate of Bitter Lemon, for the coming days (actually, did you know that you can use Bitter Lemon as Malaria prophylaxis? but then you would have to drink 15 liters a day ...).

A shower in the pilots' house (all MAF pilots, coming to Loki, stay here), and then I can check my emails of the last 3 days: we have a satellite internet connection here!

For dinner, I finally get my buffet at AFEX and meet some pilot friends, flying for other companies.

After a small talk, I grab my packed lunch for next (flying) day and note:

2 days in the bush are worth one whole month!

