

John's Story

I first came to Kenya when I was just 22 years old. I had come from Aden which is now a part of the Yemen but then it was a British Protectorate. I had gained a flying scholarship at school and when I was 18 I got a commercial pilots license. I got my first job as a pilot with Aden Airways that year and for the next six years flew DC3s into desert strips all over South Arabia.

Aden Airways was a part of BOAC, which later became British Airways. Its job was provide air transportation between the many different Sheikdoms all over the Protectorate. I am sorry that I did not realise at the time how honoured I was to witness those sights that would soon disappear forever. I watched camel caravans, five-miles long, carrying great blocks of salt from the salt-pans in Little Aden to Mecca. Frequently we would carry a family-member of the local Sheik on our aircraft and after landing at a sand strip, a mounted honour guard of the Sheik's soldiers on camels would surround the airplane and fire their rifles into the air to welcome the Sheik's son or brother. There would always be a member of the British Foreign Office nearby on these occasions, who would come over to speak to us briefly.



It was not to last. In 1967 the bugle played the Last Post over Aden for the last time and the Union Flag came down. It was the end of an era and the end of an Empire. The Empire had had its ups and downs with most of the ups in the beginning and the downs at the end. I had only seen the last few moments of it and was very pleased that I did. In the end, I guess, it had become rather self-indulgent but overall the Empire gave more than it took and was not too bad if you compare it with - say - all the rest.

Now, fifty years later Britain has moved on. The Empire has been relegated to history and a new urgent energy is fuelling Britain's affairs and achieving remarkable results. Today Britain is one of the world's major economies and she again has a significant role in the affairs of the world. Ask any young Brit today about 'the empire' and he or she will probably think you are asking about the Romans or more probably Star Wars! It has been quite a turn around.



It was while I was in Aden that I visited Kenya for the first time. I was just 22 years old and had only seen the Essex village I grew up in and volcanic sun-baked rocks of Aden. I was therefore completely unprepared for the astonishing vegetation and animals that met my eye when I landed in Nairobi. I had flown one of our DC3s from Aden to Wilson for its annual maintenance overhaul and the Mr. Savage, the Managing Director of Wilken Aero Services who were to carry out the work, was going through the papers with me. As it was lunch-time he asked me if I would like to join him for lunch at his home which was in close by. His house was next to the Nairobi Game Park and as I was driven up his long drive I was amazed by the beauty of the place. A cold lunch was laid on the patio and as I sat there looking over the broad sweep of his lawn toward the Nairobi Game Park I saw, to my astonishment, two giraffes walking by. I knew then that Kenya was going to feature much in my life in future.

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After the closure of Aden Airways I returned to England briefly before joining East African Airways with whom I was to fly for the next twelve years. Initially I flew only the internal routes which spanned Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The route-structure was - even by today's standards - was impressive. For the first several years I flew only these routes, cruising along slowly in my DC3 watching Africa pass below. The DC3 carries 30 passengers and is un-pressurised so we flew fairly low and you can open the windows. It was also noisy and hot and I needed a cold beer at the end of a long day. But it was enormous fun I got to meet many different people all over East Africa and saw great multitude of different landscapes from the Ruwenzori Mountains in Northern Uganda to the Udzungwa Mountains in southern Tanzania and from the Indian Ocean to the Great Lakes this was Africa at its most spectacular. I enjoyed a unique view of this from my ancient pre-WW2 aircraft, flying along day after day at 120 knots at low level with the windows open.

But like everything it couldn't last. As the years passed and I worked my way up the seniority list more modern aircraft and then jets. By the time East African Airways became Kenya Airways I was flying a Boeing 707 - a great four-engined jet - from Nairobi to London. At the time I thought it was the best job in the whole airline world. It was a beautiful route in near empty skies that crossed the Mediterranean,



the Alps, the great Sahara Desert and had my two favourite cities - London and Nairobi - at each end having a very small time-zone difference in between.



But it too, was too good to last. My two boys were growing up and needing to go to school in England and new, energetic airlines were appearing in Europe. In far-off London a small charter airline run by Sir Freddie Laker - the maverick airline magnate from WW2 - took advantage of the de-regulated skies of Ronald Regan

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and Maggie Thatcher, and bought half a dozen DC10s and started his famous 'Sky Train' which provided a £50 walk-on transatlantic air-service. The Sky Train changed civil aviation. I left Kenya Airways and joined Fred just as this was starting. Before long our fleet had grown from six DC10s to 20 and Laker Airways had joined the big-time.

Maybe we grew too big too fast or maybe we had started to blow serious smoke at British Airways just about the time that the British Government wanted to sell the national airline on the stock market. Anyway, everything went quickly wrong, route licences were mysteriously cancelled, 'slots' were withdrawn and our bank called in their loan. Lakers went from a busy airline whose aircraft averaged 22 flying hours a day with every seat filled to bankruptcy in two weeks and I was looking for a job.



I did a couple of part-time jobs flying oil-workers to the

Shetland Islands and pilgrims from Nigeria to Mecca before deciding to try another career. I started a small IT shop in Hastings which grew quickly. It was the time of the exciting growth in the IT industry and by 2002 we had moved to Brighton took the company public. When I retired from the FDM Group in 2003 we were operating in Germany and America as well as our home base in Brighton. I bought La Graciosa - a beautiful carbon-fibre sailing yacht made in France - which Lynn and I, over the next ten years sailed around the world visiting the Mediterranean, America, Canada and Alaska before crossing the Pacific to Australia. It was a wonderful time for us.

We sold La Graciosa in Brisbane and came to Africa. Lynn's sister had died and left her Pumzika, a fantastic house perched atop a 1200' high ridge in the Shimba Hills. We came here and started a new business selling adventure tourism. Then - last year - just at the time when Pumzika was starting to look like a serious business, my beloved wife and life-long companion unexpectedly died, an event that I am still coming to terms with. As I look forward to the future in this young and vibrant continent which contains so many surprises and opportunities I wonder what the future may bring.

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La Graciosa somewhere in the Pacific, Lynn and I are watching the photographer as he bobs around on the rib. From the ensign we can see that the wind is around 15 knots and typical of the Pacific. From the wake we can see that La Graciosa is making around 8 knots. Again typical with the wind on the quarter.