

December 2019 - January 2020
International Free Flying Magazine

Cross Country 206





DESTINATION WILDERNESS

Wilderness in South Africa is a popular destination for lots of European pilots looking for winter sunshine and easy flying. Having lived and worked there for 20 years, we asked Cloudbase Paragliding's Khobi-Jane Bowden what life is like living in a flying paradise.

When's the best time to come to Wilderness?
Anywhere between end of October and 1 April, for the Garden Route area, but then of course if you go to the Barberton area that's good in May and June, they have really good cross country flying there. It's stunning, we have our nationals there in June – it's short flying because it's winter, so it's a short day. We only do on average 40 or 50km, but they are always nice tasks and you get good flying, up to 3,000m.

When did you come to Wilderness?
I came here in 2001 to do my licence. My partner Jan [Minnaar] had been here five

years before that. He's been here about 28 years now. I learnt to fly here in South Africa.

Did you fall in love with it straight away?
I did. Actually, the year before my father had taken me to Venezuela, and I'd done three days' flying in Venezuela. I tried to learn to fly in the UK and it didn't happen, so I then came here and I got my licence and that was it. A year later to the day I moved to South Africa.

What were you doing before?
I was working for Coutts as a private investment banker in London.

How easy was it to make the transition?
Very easy! Well it was easy to move, but it took a little bit of getting used to not having a monthly salary, I have to say! The quality of life here is amazing, it's not for everybody, but if you are not a city person

▲ OCEAN WILD

The town of Wilderness is on South Africa's popular Garden Route. Flying is best October to April
Photo: Khobi-Jane Bowden

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Khobi-Jane Bowden at home in Wilderness
Photo: Ed Ewing

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and you love nature, then the quality of life is stunning.

Are you open all year round?

No, we shut the school down on 1 May, because the weather is not predictable enough. But in the season we are pretty full.

Where do people come from to stay with you?

A lot of Europeans, English, former students who come back every year. Germans, a lot of guys from Dubai and the Emirates, they all come here to learn. And we get South Africans as well, of course

Where do you train?

We start on the sand dunes, which are 30-40m high. That's our first day, 8-10 flights. Then we move to the site of Map of Africa, which is 153m high and a nice big grassy launch. It's our site, we own it. It has a huge long beach to land on.

The first flight can be a straight flight to the beach, then we add a few turns in. Normally by the end of their second day the guys are soaring for half an hour.

If it gets too windy we go back and soar on the dunes. Our thermic site is in Sedgfield, which is 135m high. It's slightly in from the coast, so if the guys are top-landing they can do eight or 10 flights a day easily.

How many pilots do you train in a season?
About 40. They all complete their courses. We very rarely get people who don't complete. It takes 10-12 days normally.

What about the off season?
We often run tours in Europe, taking pilots from here to the Alps.

What's your favourite site here?
Sedgfield. If you take off early enough, before the sea breeze comes in, you can get up high and go over the back to the big mountains and fly along them. It's not all just coastal soaring. In some ways the non-local pilots push the boundaries here more, they come and do things and fly routes we would never think of.

What about tandems?
Yes it's very busy here in December and January. The guys can do up to 25, 30 tandems in a day. We can top-land then just turn around. We have five pilots and myself, it's quite a big team.

What are your plans for the future?
Can it be non-flying? Jan and I bought six hectares of forest here, and we are busy building a sustainable, off-grid house. Steel-frame, double-glazed windows. There is plenty of space! [EE cloudbase.co.za](http://EEcloudbase.co.za)

