

BALLOONS IN MAURITIUS

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The Fine Line between Sensible Risk and Risky Risk.



Life is dangerous, full of hidden threats and obstacles. But life would be boring if it weren't for those challenges. One of the things that make us human is the controlled power to decide whether we want to take a risk, or avoid it. Animals mostly follow their instinct – which could override any controlled 'thought' but often protects it from doing something harmful. We human beings have the choice: take it or leave it! In aviation we are often faced with difficult weather choices. To fly or not to fly? A recent holiday trip to Mauritius made me think again of how difficult it is for us to make the right choices in the right moments and circumstances.

As many of you know, Phil and I are keen travellers and would hardly go anywhere without either taking our own balloon or trying to fly with someone else in a new country. Mauritius has been on Phil's list since he and the DANTE balloon team were tethering the BA balloon at the harbour front of Port Louis, the island's capital. Despite his requests for a free flight, the local authorities wouldn't allow him to do so, because BA was seen as competition to the local airline. According to the country-collector's rule (as laid out by Paul Spellward and Pete Bish) a 'new' country only counts if the balloon has been free-flown for a minimum of 5 minutes. As Phil has ticked off every country in Europe,

it is difficult for him to find new places within reach and affordable.

Newly equipped with a Cameron light-weight envelope (31.5 kg) and our Ultramagic electric fan, we set off for our flight to Mauritius. The BA staff were slightly surprised, having never checked in a hot air balloon, but after we demonstrated that none of the six pieces exceeded the maximum weight limit, all was fine. At Plaisance airport we walked through the green channel, but Customs waved us to the side. "What is in there?" "Sky-sailing equipment". "Ah...you are not selling or leaving things here?" "No, we take everything back home". "OK, fine. Have a good holiday. And by the way, do you have another wife like this for me?" – pointing to me with a grin. Phil shook his head and said "Sadly not". We were in!

We drove up the island to a beautiful apartment, a peaceful and perfect place to spend the next two weeks. It was time to check the Met and to find LPG. A trip to Port Louis and an easy-going petrol station sorted that problem out without hassle, but the internet (and actuals) showed howling 20-30kt winds all through the week. We tried to take things easy and went on several drives around the island. What we saw was depressing: huge sugar-cane fields and more sugar-cane. The only green grass we spotted was on football fields but all of them with high enclosures and heavy locks. Finally we found the only open football pitch on the island but it was within 30 metres of the east coast.

Seeing an advertisement for skydiving, we went to an airstrip in the midst of sugar-cane (what else?) and talked to the airfield manager, hoping he would offer us his strip as a launch site. Sadly he explained that he had waited nearly two years to get permission for his business, even though it attracts foreign tourists and brings money to the island. Knowing how bureaucratic the system here was, we opted for a couple of short hops across our sports field, which was in free airspace in a remote area. On a morning with forecast winds less than twenty knots, we drove to our launch field at 4.30am. The weather was not what the forecast had been telling us! But the winds did settle and the rain stopped.



We inflated the Cameron 31 in no time and it was Phil's turn to do a first flight. But as soon as he took off, we noticed that winds were now heading towards the sea. We had to accept that a longer flight wasn't possible or sensible. After Phil had his go, it was my turn to hop twice across the field. Two Mauritians stood at a fair distance watching us but nobody came up to ask us anything. I guess they knew that 'sky-sailing' is a popular sport on Mauritius!

The following day, we spent some more time trying to recce a more suitable launch site but apart from the airstrip, there really wasn't anywhere. I was very disappointed but sometimes you have to stop whilst you are ahead and we didn't want to upset anybody or cause troubles. Nevertheless, mission accomplished: Country 112 for Phil and 74 for me.

Next morning I went for my usual morning jog along the beach, but was shocked to find it littered with jelly fish. I didn't see the usual crowd of locals swimming. I was seriously disappointed as I loved my morning swims. What has this to do with my topic 'risk'? I first

decided that I didn't want to risk swimming here when I could be with dangerous jelly-fish. But the urge to jump into that crystal clear water was immense. As I was about to let common sense overcome my desire I spotted a guy with his snorkel mask emerging from the water and asked him about the situation. He had swum some distance without encountering any jelly-fish. So I decided to take the risk and go for it. I had the most wonderful swim and didn't see a single jelly-fish!

Was this stupid or what? The word 'risk' comes from a Greek navigation term 'rhizikon, rhiza' which meant 'root, stone, cut of the firm land' and was a metaphor for 'difficulty to avoid in the sea'. How amazing that here I was, having difficulty to avoid (something) in the sea and taking my risk.

A different situation happened when Phil and I heard of a microlight seaplane flying off the coast doing rides. We were keen to go but when we got to the lagoon where the X-Air 3B-WWF was moored, the wind was howling 30kts over the sea. We thought that it would be a rough dangerous ride, but our pilot Ziyaad said "It should be a gentle flight". After thirty minutes, Phil came back beaming with excitement and joy. I decided it was OK for me to fly and indeed, there was hardly a bump whilst flying over the shimmering blue sea and the palm-tree lined coast. We even spotted wild turtles swimming off-shore. What a brilliant experience!

Why was I willing to take this risk? I didn't know the pilot from a hole in the ground; we hadn't seen any maintenance or insurance documents; and it was extremely windy. Yet my risk adversity was less than when going swimming in a jelly-fish infested sea. Why? I actually have to think hard about the 'why'. Why do we take huge risks like getting in our car and driving down a motorway without even thinking about them? The same applies to flying and all sorts of other activities: there is never a guarantee that you have evaluated the risk correctly. But at some point you will have to make a decision either to take a risk or leave it.

In our ballooning scenario I tried to work out how to do a longer flight – but there seemed no solution. With my swimming I decided to take the risk as the negatives were degraded throughout the decision-

making process. The seaplane flight-decision was made the minute we saw the plane and just thought 'We must do this'. It might still have looked different yet again, if commercial and financial pressures had been involved in those scenarios. That's why saying 'no' to a dodgy flight is often the hardest part – but also the most admirable and safe one.

From the 16th century on, the term 'risk' got a benefit meaning, e.g. in middle-high-German, 'Rysigo' became a technical term for 'business', 'to dare, to undertake, enterprise, hope for economic success'. The Chinese added the notion of 'opportunity'. Indeed, the word for risk in Chinese is constructed from two symbols, 'danger' and 'opportunity' which is more in line with our modern understanding of risk assessment: 'Identification and evaluation of dangers that could prevent us reaching our objectives'. So there I was: taking the 'opportunity' but with a certain understanding of 'danger' to 'avoid in the sea! Why am I telling you this? Because it made me think again about how we as pilots and as human beings are constantly forced to make decisions and take some risk in life.

In my view, we shouldn't give up things on first instance. It's good to have goals and targets in life and to pursue them. But it is also wise to assess the negative factors that could harm us or others. The question often is: 'When is the cut-off time?' How long for example do I wait for the fog to clear before I can fly – as by then it might be windy. What if I feel unwell but 16 passengers are waiting for their flight and money would be lost in saying 'no' to it? Or how long do I wait for winds to die down before an evening flight when I then risk flying into night? I guess the lesson is – and this of course is nothing new – that sometimes it's ok to take a bit of risk and sometimes it is better to step back and accept the boundaries of one's endeavours. Just spending a few minutes to THINK what we are prepared to risk and how our evaluation works is a valuable process.

The word 'risk' transferred to the Arabic world as 'rizk' meaning, 'everything given by God for livelihood'. In this meaning, risk cannot be totally controlled by mankind and we can only work, wait and hope for good results.

