

WITH SOLOMON IN GHANA

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Arriving back from a trip to north Wales with a German hiking group, I was surprised by Phil (my hubby) saying 'we are going to Ghana!'. Where? My general world geography isn't bad but I must admit that Africa still is a bit of a blind spot.

Only after going online and researching about hotels and transport did I discover that I had mixed up The Gambia with Ghana and that Ghana wasn't the popular holiday destination that was offered by Thomsons on a direct service from Bristol, but was one of those smaller West African coastal countries squeezed in between the Ivory Coast to the west, Togo to the east and Niger and Burkina Faso to the north.

The plan was to take 'Soloman' our 'split' hopper (see report in 'Aerostat' 2010) who had already been taken on a similar African adventure tour to South Africa, Swaziland and Lesotho.

With a free partner ticket flying business class on BA we were allowed 3x 32 kg of luggage each, just about enough to take all our hopper pieces and squeeze the knickers and a few t-shirts in between the burners, fan and seat! BA was great and check in no trouble even with our purged Worthington tank and the fan. The flight only takes about 6 hours down in a straight line across France, Spain, a short bit of the Med and then over Algeria's vast stretches of the Sahara desert. As the Greenwich meridian crosses just a few km to the east of Accra the capital there is only 1 hour time difference with BST and we arrived

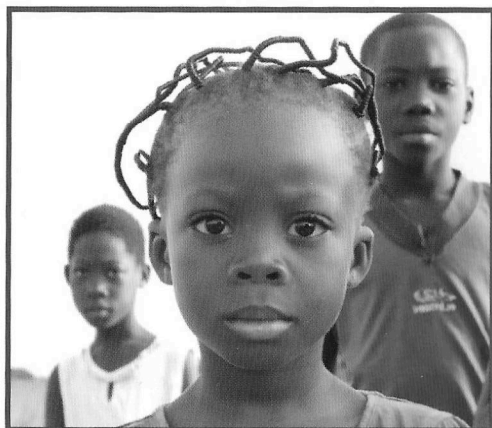
in good time at 7.30 pm. Tension rose as we had to pass tight Customs security checks and each arriving passenger was called to a stand with a uniformed Customs inspector. As we were asked the ominous question "What is in there?" Phil swiftly and convincingly answered "sky-sailing equipment" - "sporting" I added. That left the man so stunned (as he probably had no clue what sky-sailing was - I am surprised you don't know!) that he waved us past without even asking to open one of our bags!

Typical chaos us but after some waiting we were greeted by our hotel staff Lebrecht who drove us criss-cross the roads of Accra to his hotel in the back streets of this sprawling 5million population city. The hotel was empty except for us - something that we would find in many other places around the country. Where are all the tourists? It was supposed to be one of the best times of the year to come - just after the rainy season....

Next day: hunting for gas, finding a LPG station and, unexpectedly, no trouble to refill using our old-style European autogas adapter though we had had visions of hours with spanners and connectors. Filling up the fan with petrol and checking the oil, assembling 'Soloman's' two parts into one piece, buying a canister of water as fire-extinguisher - and we were ready to go! Mind you, a burner test indicated we would be dealing with pressure less than 50psi.

The next day we drive out towards the east to recce suitable flying areas. What we first see isn't great: there is extensive steppe but with high grass and no tracks. That all wouldn't be so bad if only one of us was to fly, but here we were BOTH wanting to get a flight in at the same time, so we had to do some careful planning to do an intermediate swap. In the end we drove all the way out towards the White Volta River delta near Ada Foah - nearly to the border of Togo! Gosh,





thinking it was only another 50km from here to another new country I was already set on hoping we could arrange to jump across to Togo and do a flight there as well. Getting a visa and even taking our hired vehicle across to Lome, the capital, would have been reasonably easy, but the killer of that idea in the end was the fact that we only had single-entry Ghanaian visas and could get stuck in Togo without being able to return to Ghana. Leaving dreams behind we set to concentrating on getting this first flight in Ghana and searched around the delta area for spaces to fly. We found a lovely hotel right by the wide river Volta and spent a romantic evening watching the full moon rise over the river banks with its derelict ferries and little fishing boats.



Sam the next morning. We are ready to roll but where is our driver Godwin? No sign of him and time is so critical as we knew that we only had a short window between 6am-7am. Winds howling at our hotel, hearts sinking in disappointment and still no car. Godwin finally arrives with the usual grin on his face but I guess my phone call must have just woken him up from a late night with the local girls in town. We rattle along the pot-holed dirt track to our 'launch site' and swiftly rig Solo-man. The wind has only dropped a little to around 7kt but it's down enough to inflate the hopper. At 6am on the dot Phil takes to the skies of Ghana to get country no. 111 in his logbook! Being the kind gentleman that he is, he only flies for a short time and lands within the same field handing over the controls to his wife who then has to burn like hell to climb over power lines and trees to cross the main road - not easy with that low pressure! As it is still quite windy and I knew that I would be in that wide Volta river before too long I also decide to land after only 10 minutes in some fields not too far from the road. Managing a good landing at quite some speed just before a green pepper field, I

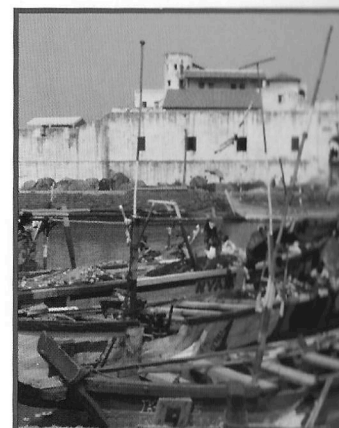


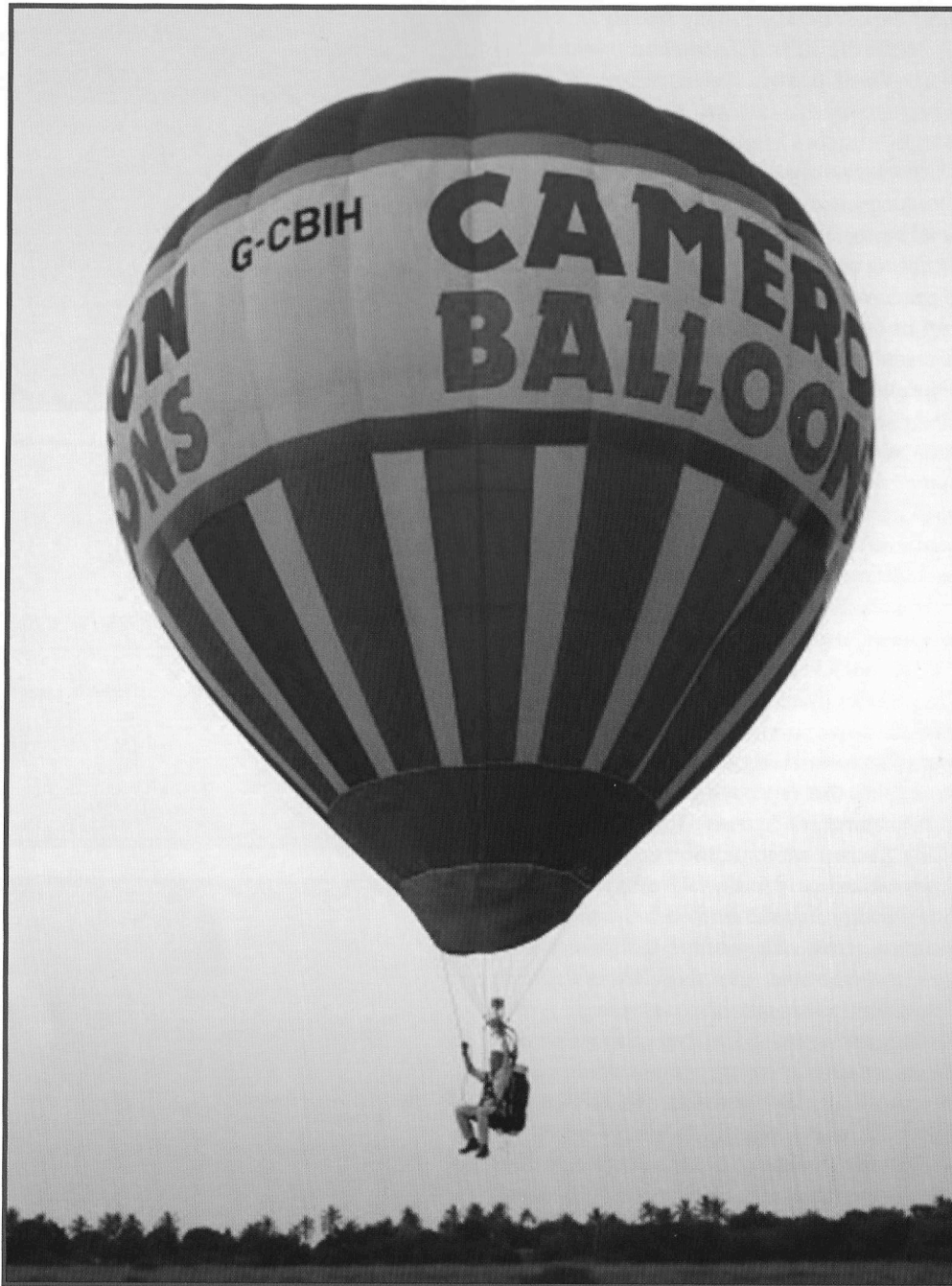
touch down on the soil of my country no 67!

With the help of many enthusiastic local children and farmers Phil and Godwin finally manage to drive in our SUV to the field and the balloon is packed in no time. Back to the hotel for a celebratory breakfast and a wonderful refreshing swim in the river for me! No alligators here I hasten to add (but c/f crocodiles later!)

Being all keen now on doing more we drive to the coastal town of Prampram near the major port of Tema. The hotel - once again - is empty. We are the only tourists. But maybe no wonder: Ghana isn't a cheap holiday destination and hotel charges are comparable with Thailand and other destinations; quite a lot for not too much and you cannot risk swimming in the sea as the coast has very strong undercurrents and high waves (and is sadly often filthy with plastic rubbish). Winds are howling. Will they calm down again in the morning sufficient for another flight here so close to the sea?

Next day: winds not calm but probably just about OK to fly, so we head 3 km inland to our take-off site which is in flat countryside. Just as we wanted to spread the envelope out, a big herd of cows claims that very bit of grass but the cowherd is really friendly and greets us with a broad smile saying "you are welcome"! So I carry on with the windy inflation and finally take off on my second flight heading in what seemed to be the perfect direction across vast savannah land where I can see plenty of tracks. After those tracks suddenly disappear and change into metre high grass I decide it's time to land as I was also aware that the car wasn't following me anymore and an 'intermediate' wasn't possible. The retrieve this time takes even longer as Phil and Godwin get stuck in very uneven terrain and have to turn back. Finding the right track is a nightmare and even after we had finally managed to locate each other after nearly an hour's search, we could





hardly find the way back out!

Time for a break and we head up to the cooler hills of Aburi - an old British hill station where we wander around the sadly desolate and neglected Botanical gardens. Not much to see there in terms of botany but I spot a rare Sikorsky S55 helicopter from the 1950s that must have crashed here in the middle of the huge sequoia trees possibly carrying some official for a visit. We indulge in a bit of luxury and stay at the best hotel in town called the Hillburi with a lovely view to the forested hills and down to Accra. That night Phil has to suffer watching the World Cup finals as Germany finally scores victory and I have to raise (another) glass of good wine to the team!

Time to head out the most famous part of Ghana: the Gold Coast! This stretch of western Ghana is dotted with heavily fortified castles, all built either in the early 15th century by the Portuguese or later in the 18/19 centuries by the Brits. They all contain a sad and horrible part of history as they were not only used as defences against invaders but also to incarcerate thousands of Slaves that were eventually sent across the rough Atlantic to the Americas.

The drive takes around 3 hours and I start looking out for those amazing Christian shop names that are so typical of Ghana where 97% of the population belongs to one of the hundreds of free-evangelical churches. I spot hilarious names like: 'God First Cosmetics', 'Jesus Reigns Plastics', 'Trust in the Lord Metal Works', 'God's time Railways', 'Divine guidance Aluminium Works'. We finally reach the coastal town of Elmina. Sitting by the buzzing harbour we watch African life pass by and enjoy a cold Club beer. It is amazing what you can carry on your head and I love the colourful fishing boats with their fascinating selection of international flags ranging from Germany to Japan.

As our time for return nears, we want to try

one last flight here near the town of Cape Coast. Staying at the Coconut Grove resort v adjacent to a small golf course and having a school football playing field the plan is h Just need the weather - oh and our driver again rather stays in bed then getting up at Time is pressing, the school gets busy. We turn up with our kit and start rigging the in front of the school. Pretending that t the most normal thing on earth to do w on with our preparations anticipating so coming up to talk to us; but nobody do wind changes and it gets breezy... finally lifting off and 'hurray' drifts right towards golf course. Godwin and I follow in the ca the next challenge: how to explain to the golf-course security staff that we have to u pick up a balloon? But smiling and pointing deflating balloon, I guess they finally unde Phil has landed only 2 metres from the cr denwhich contains - yes true! - 16 live all The green-keepers crowd around us and - we separate the envelope - Phil tells the s the wise biblical judge Soloman who thre two quarrelling parties of parents with their baby into two halves if they wouldn't the dispute. The Ghanaians, who understa parable well, watch in awe...