

BEHIND THE SCENES OF MICHAEL POLIZA'S *EYES OVER AFRICA*

The idea arose by a campfire under Africa's vast, starry skies, as Stefan Breuer pondered into the night. The Frankfurt businessman had sold his interest in a large firm, had no day-to-day deadlines any longer and now had time to dream. What would it be like, he wondered, to fly with his helicopter from Europe to South Africa? To survey from the air his farm on the edge of the Kruger National Park, to see Africa with the eyes of an eagle? To experience the land from the sky—as close as possible—and only as high as necessary? To take pictures of baboons on the mango trees below, to peer over a giraffe's shoulder?

These are the kind of thoughts children might have, just before they fall asleep. Perhaps their father sings to them of the mightiest bird in the sky, whose rustling wings strike terror in the hearts of smaller birds. Then everything is fine, and these longings are forgotten. However, Breuer has the means to fulfill such dreams. Ever since his parents took him on safari at the age of twelve, Africa has been a source of fascination for him.

"I've got just the right helicopter," he thought. A fire-red Agusta A109 Power. Perhaps he'd have to remove the back seat to make room for luggage, and probably organize an extra fuel tank. Breuer relishes shaping and executing a multitude of plans, both at work and in his free time. By the next morning his African adventure was already eclipsed by other ideas.

As fate would have it, he came across Hamburg photographer Michael Poliza, another man who lives on the edge and shatters boundaries, someone who thinks big and doesn't shirk adventures. Poliza sold his first computer firm at the age of 27, and yet another at 38, investing the profits in a motor yacht. Then for three years he crossed the seas with friends and naturalists. Journalists from Germany's prestigious illustrated photo weekly, *stern*, gave regular updates while onboard. Poliza wanted to explore the Earth's remaining wildernesses at the speed of the old-time explorers—never more than nine knots an hour. He became a collector of worlds, and to date has visited 140 countries.

Africa from a chopper, that was something Poliza still hadn't done. So, he accepted when Breuer broached his idea. Fill up, buckle up, and off we go. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Skimming over hills, swooping from the sky, Poliza hoped for unforgettable pictures of mountains and savanna, deep valleys and deserts; timeless photographs of landscapes that had evolved over millennia. This stunning scenery had been shaken by volcanoes, bleached by the sun, and rumbled by the wind.

This was an opportunity to seek totally different types of pictures, from 100, 1,000, 2,000 feet above. Some geometrical structures are only discernable from the air. From below, one can't tell how trees, grasses and bushes form images. In his first illustrated book on Africa, Poliza had explored the interplay of near and far. With telephoto lenses, he had looked lions in the mouth and leopards in the eye. Intimate close-ups were interspersed with grandiose landscapes. "It might change the way you think about photography," wrote *The New York Times* about Poliza's unique vision.

Now he was looking at things from a new perspective: most of the pictures in this book are taken from directly above—photographed from a full-on 90-degree angle. Poliza's art consisted of sorting through Africa's sheer inexhaustible diversity. Depending on how he

framed the image, landscapes acquired different personalities. He literally brought the viewers with him on the journey, and gave them enough scope to form their own impressions. Over eight weeks, he created a whole series of fantastic images.

Poliza has used this chance to change our perspective on Africa. He showcases a continent that revels in its own abundance, rich in colors, extravagant in its beauty, limitless in its variety. You cannot gaze at these pictures without experiencing an intense longing.

Yet what pictures of Africa do we normally see in our mind's eye? Those of poverty, violence, hunger, need, misery, and corruption. The poorhouse of the world, a hopeless beggar. Stefan Breuer and Michael Poliza saw something quite different. They let themselves be astonished. No continent is more surprising, more breathtaking, or indeed older: this is where Man began his journey. The more Breuer and Poliza spoke, the more they realized they wanted to create a monument to the cradle of mankind—a crazy and mammoth task ... Breuer was used to undertaking projects at great speed. “Maybe we can do it in a month?” Poliza had a three-month journey in mind. They compromised on eight weeks.

That was 2003. Three years went by before the explorers could set off, due to logistical problems and scheduling difficulties. Poliza was on the go in the nature reserves of southern Africa. Breuer had many other projects on his agenda. Then came the search for the best travel time. When are the sand storms in Egypt? The massive thunderstorms in Ethiopia? Can one anticipate cyclones? What about flight permits? Breuer wanted to bring Roberto Poroli, an experienced Swiss rescue pilot. Poroli knew the Alps backwards but had never been over the savanna.

Additional pilots had to be found. There was an abundance of bush pilots, but finding one who could commit for two months? Breuer chartered a Cessna Caravan in Namibia as a transport plane for luggage and additional gasoline. He even hired Franco Zanini from the Swiss mountain patrol. It was Zanini who invented an ingeniously simple system which enabled the helicopter to be re-fueled in a matter of minutes. At the controls of the Cessna sat Namibian pilot Pieter Ferreira along with Andrea Guerra from Milan. The Italian had been flying over Africa from north to south for years, was a specialist on the Cairo–Cape Town route and his clientele included several American Nobel Prize winners.

The men finally met at Breuer's place and unfurled maps in a large garage: the planned flight path of 17,000 miles was reduced to 40 feet. 17 countries were chosen: Germany, Austria, Italy, Croatia, Greece, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa. By summer 2006 the adventure was taking shape.

Still there were problems with the flight permits for Egypt. They'd all been excited at the thought of seeing the pyramids at close range. Now the helicopter had to fly at 10,000 feet. So far everything had been smooth sailing. The accommodations were booked, and visas organized. Now, the pre-trip nerves began in earnest. What's happening in Sudan? Isn't war raging there? Breuer was worried. Perhaps they'd been overly optimistic in the first rush of excitement? What if they were shot at by rebels? How should they evaluate terror warnings? Four men in a helicopter, a few hours a day—would that get too close for comfort? Ten days before the set-off date the long-planned trip hung in the balance. It all came down to a 90-minute long conference call. Poliza telephoned from the savanna; he was already on his way

through the Serengeti. Cessna Pilot Andrea Guerra joined the call from Australia, Breuer from Switzerland. At last, they all agreed, they were going to go for it!

Then, finally, on a windy September day they took off from Hamburg. Doing a few rounds of the harbor, testing over the Lüneburg Heath to ensure the doors opened and closed correctly. Michael Poliza was used to photographing with an open door. Stefan Breuer was used to making tracks at 150 knots, or about 175 miles an hour. Pilot Roberto Poroli became skilled in the art of keeping his cool with a constant stream of directions on his headphones: “Slower! Bring the chopper down.” That almost always meant decelerating rapidly from 150 knots right down to 75—all this with an overloaded craft. Breuer and Poliza had even bought a life raft, just in case the turbines gave out over the Mediterranean. It was an uneasy feeling to be out on the open sea, keeping an eye out for container ships—in case you had to make an emergency landing!

In Cairo they met up with Andrea Guerra and Pieter Ferreira, who brought the customized Cessna Caravan from Namibia, together with 150 gallon back up tank, a generator, laptops, satellite antennas, and over 200 pounds of heavy camera equipment.

Every evening Poliza pored over his photographs, synchronized data, uploaded images, reduced them to e-mailable size, and put them on the Internet. As with his STARSHIP expedition, he invited people from all over the world to join in via the Web (http://www.poliza.de/heli_africa/). The South African Cape Times printed the most beautiful images every week. Poliza posted his diary on the stern website, and after his arrival in Cape Town, the Hamburg magazine printed one of the longest (35 pages) photo essays in its history—a selection made from 25,000 images.

The first and only major aggravation the adventurers encountered was before they had even reached Egypt. There were unexpected difficulties when, west of Corfu, they made a loop over the Aegean Sea. Greek authorities radioed to ask what was happening. The group was forced to land, and Poliza’s camera was almost confiscated. This was the kind of misadventure they had expected in Africa, but the rest of the trip shattered their preconceptions. No problems at immigration, no restrictions on flight permits, friendly dealings with military and officials ... and fascinated glances. At one stopover in Ethiopia, thousands jostled the helicopter for a closer look.

This was a trip all about beauty and the mysteries of life. The sun would hardly peek over the horizon when they would already be in flight. It was a constant hunt for the best angles, colors, patterns, formations. To catch the best light, they were up with the first rays and came down again with the last. Elephants marching in single file, giraffes in slow motion, hippos basking in the mud. Brief encounters, then off again. Canyons running into each other, beaches like birds’ feathers, landscapes like canvases etched by the wind.

“The light’s not good. More to the right. Can you go a bit lower, to about 600 ... 800 feet?”

It’s no easy undertaking to twist and turn a helicopter to get a certain camera angle. Poliza would be leaning out the door, the target just out of shot, while grabbing tele- and wide-angle lenses. All the while, a GPS system was documenting the position of every image to the exact longitude and latitude.

Nature offered up images that seconds later were no longer to be seen. Catching the right moment, that's the secret. The camera clicked and captured unique facets of this world. Baobab trees, storks, huts, children waving. Inhale, take it all in, then a snap-second judgment. With clear visibility for 30 miles in either direction, weather can be seen coming—storms, clouds. Circling over great rifts that were created 17 million years ago, when the Earth's crust shifted 3,000 feet and split open, all the way from the valley of Jordan to East Africa.

This is a truly ancient land with skeletal remains dating back eons. Mankind's oldest footprints (similar to those of a hunched-over chimpanzee), a few steps taken by a family—probably father, mother, child, on a cooling layer of lava—were found south of the Olduvai gorge, in present-day Tanzania. Archeologists have long been finding older traces and having to correct assumptions about our ancestors. In colonial times a German butterfly collector by the name of Kattwinkel stumbled on a bone, and set off the search for our origins, but the white men in Berlin didn't want to believe that black men were around before them. However, from the 1930s on this was proved definitively by the British husband-and-wife anthropology team, Louis and Mary Leakey. In 1959, after a quarter century of self-sacrificing digging, Mary Leakey found the two-million-year-old “Nutcracker Man,” with a small skull and massive overbite.

The explorers followed the evolution of the world. Over three million years ago, the East African tribes emerged with the development of stone tools, and learned to walk upright on paths trod by buffalos, through the golden bush, and silver shiny thorn. Even today, the landscape is criss-crossed by fine veins—almost straight paths that lead to the few watering places—trails of survival. From above, everything seems to have its order, everyone its place: plants, animals, people. This is a place where one grasps that the world truly is one. Those days in the 'copter just sped by ...

In this world, you have your fill of red dust. No asphalt anywhere; no power lines, houses or fences either. Then—in the distance—powerful volcanoes and the snow-covered slopes of Kilimanjaro. Through white clouds, glimpses of what seemed like brown circular paint pots, made from mud, dung and wooden stakes—the villages of the Maasai. Fortifications against predators, animal rustlers ... and tourists.

The impressions came fast and furiously, one amazing experience after another: mornings in the red-hot desert by Lake Logipi, evenings approaching the fresh snows on Mount Kenya. The very next day on the trail of Uganda's mountain gorillas, later that same day back at the lake. In the evenings sitting at long tables eavesdropping on modern-day Hemingways who hunt lions with bushmen and climb trees out of reach of charging buffalos. Snatches of information exchanged. Learning that the massive baobab trees, whose furrowed bark is reminiscent of an elephant's skin, grow very quickly for the first 270 years, and then just fractions of an inch. How Oryx antelopes get by for six months without a drop of water because their noses contain a type of compressor than can extract moisture from the fog. After dinner, Poliza cracks open his laptop and surveys his bounty, little snatches of life. He says he would have dearly loved to have experienced Africa 150 years ago, when the huge herds still swarmed across the savanna; elephants, buffalos, zebras, as far as the eye could see.

Their epic journey is a dream shared by many. “That’s a fucking decadent trip. Thank you for making me f...ing jealous!” said a gamekeeper acquaintance in Botswana, when the photographer popped into the office of Wilderness Safaris while on stopover. Poliza had just come from the Okavango Delta. A flurry of small talk about leopards ensued. “Leopards? We first saw one at night in the Serengeti,” said Poliza. “Look on the Internet, you can follow our trip on the site.” And so on it goes. The world is big, and life is short.

Poliza is constantly pushing himself to the edge. “Behind the camera,” he confides, “is where I relax.” Meanwhile the multi-ton aircraft moves through the air like an eagle stalking its prey. It is pilot Roberto Poroli who has the unenviable task of rapidly decelerating. And, it’s always he who cautions: “People, the tank is nearly empty. Afraid, we can’t go round anymore.”

The biggest worry of the high-tech adventure was fuel. Sometimes the Cessna flew on ahead to organize supplies of gasoline. Hours would be spent on the radio until a barrel was found somewhere. Perhaps near a Maasai village, where nobody spoke any English, or hidden in a shed behind a lodge. Then the pilots would meet up once more in no-man’s land to siphon off 40 gallons of gasoline through a ventilation hole.

Overall, everything went well. The helicopter had to be repaired twice, towards the end of the journey in Mozambique and Namibia. Stefan Breuer was able to sit contentedly by his campfire every evening, his face sunburned, his khaki shirt rolled up over his elbows. Happily puffing on a cigarillo, and drinking his favorite cocktail (available at nearly every lodge), a Negroni: Campari, Gin and Martini Rosso on ice—with an orange peel of course! Like an overgrown kid, proud as punch of his fire-red flying machine that brought him across Africa without grumbling.

The crew’s conversations included raves about the southern light. Breuer found Uganda so pleasing that he might build a wilderness lodge there. Guerra, one of the pilots, considered whether he should fly across Africa from west to east, instead of always from north to south. Shooting stars twinkled in the dark night. Hyenas howled and jackals yowled. Somewhere out there, creatures were killing and being killed. The fliers hunched down under their mosquito nets and tried to process these powerful impressions.

What was the most beautiful? What was most impressive? Was it the encounter with the Himba woman in the desert, sitting in the short shadows in front of her hut, a small child in her arms? The massive swarm of lake flies on Lake Victoria, flying in such dense clouds they could suffocate people and stop aircraft in their tracks? The sunrise flight over the largest salt flats in the world, a blindingly white terrain in the Botswana bush, as the people from Jack’s Camp set tables and placed metal cots under the open skies?

“Actually every flight was a highlight,” said Poliza. But there was one moment they all thought exceptional: when they found themselves in the Danakil Depression in Ethiopia, a bubbling sea of lava. From the rear came the instruction, “Let’s land there.” At first Poroli bristled, but then slowly descended, carefully testing, until the fragile, stiffening lava was ready to hold three tons of adventure. There they were, perched on the edge of a crater, with the molten lava 120 feet below, scalding like a bowl of soup and bubbling orange in the night. The fliers rolled out their sleeping bags and tried to grasp yet another adventure. Michael Poliza—we’re privileged to reveal—is already planning his next quest. This time it’s a four-month Antarctic journey ...

Uli Hauser

Uli Hauser has written for stern since 1992. Africa has fascinated him since childhood. He spent a year as a tour guide in Senegal and has accompanied Michael Poliza on several journeys, including surveying the mountain gorillas of Gabon, and to Madagascar.