

Don's a Ninja

It's easy to get addicted to flying

Jacques Clifford

Flying: Private pilots are a special breed of adrenalin junkies who get their fix thousands of feet above the ground.

Wits Flying Club offers a home base to many of these 'sky jockeys', two of whom *MMT* met at the club's headquarters at Lanseria Airport. Don Lucas of Blairgowrie has been a pilot for eight years, while Grant Ward has been flying since 2005.

"Over 90 percent of pilots don't own their own planes, so don't let that hold you back," begins Don. "I had zero experience when I joined the club.

"I got hooked on flying while on holiday in Plettenberg Bay. I visited the airfield there and went for a flip in a light aircraft. The rest is history."

Don insists that discipline is the most important aspect of flying an airplane.

"We have to follow strict rules and regulations. The biggest reason for

accidents is pilots who think they can negotiate bad weather. You need the mindset of 'if the weather permits' and the discipline to stay on the ground if need be.

"Besides that, aspirant pilots are required to complete 40 hours of practical training and several book exams before obtaining their Private Pilot Licence (PPL)," he adds.

Don owns his own plane and has flown all over the country, as well as destinations such as the Okavango, Victoria Falls and Mozambique. "I love the challenge and the freedom and the absence of white lines, traffic lights and taxis. Flying is a lifestyle. I think about it every day and get that same amazing feeling each time I take off."

In the meantime Grant has completed the necessary preflight checks on JIM, the club's 40-year-old Cessna 172. With Don's aircraft in for a service, Grant will take us for a flip over Hartbeespoort Dam.

After clearing for takeoff with Air Traffic Control, he explains, "All pilots are required to have a Flight Radio Operators Licence (FROL). Communication is vital, especially before takeoff and landing."

We're in the air in no time. Grant climbs to 8 000 feet, flies over Harties and heads for the nearby airspace where the club conducts its flying lessons.

"Because it is affiliated to Wits and is a non-profit organisation, the club offers training at extremely cheap rates," says Don from the back of the four-seater plane.

One can fly the little Cessna from both the pilot and co-pilot seats, and Grant leaves the machine in my control. It's a magical experience.

Navigation is three dimensional. You not only have to steer the aircraft by pumping the pedals at your feet, but also keep it straight and level by pushing and pulling at the yoke.

Grant takes over again and cuts

the engine. "Learning to land in case of engine failure forms part of your training," he says.

"These little planes glide extremely well; all you need is a cool head and about 200m of open ground."

We float around for a few minutes before heading back to Lanseria. As the airport comes into view, Air Traffic Control orders Grant to circle while a Kutula flight comes in from Cape Town. Touchdown is as effortless as takeoff.

Back at the club Don and Grant enjoy a cup of coffee. The smiles all round say it all.

■ Wits Flying Club offers flight training and is a social club where aviation enthusiasts gather. Its regular activities include safety talks, fly-aways, and club socials. Note that you must be over 17 to fly solo but your dual flight training can begin before this.

● Details: André Kluyis 082-320-3976, www.witsflyingclub.co.za



Wits Flying Club member Don Lucas.