

Skyclass Vintage Air Travel

Skyclass brings back the era of classic post-war aviation with its fleet of restored Douglas DC-3 and DC-4 aircraft. The fleet is available for charter locally, and regionally. African Pilot was invited to take a ride on SAA Historic Flight's immaculate DC-4 ZS AUB around Gauteng on Sunday morning 11 March. Together with several others from the media we took off from Rand Airport and headed in a northerly direction. The nostalgic half hour flight was serious fun with cabin crew and pilots dressed in the attire of the 1950s.

Text & Photography By Athol Franz



The aircraft have been meticulously restored to their former glory when they ruled the skies of the 1940s and 1950s, now very much a bygone era. These aircraft originally saw service with the national carrier immediately after World War Two until the late 1960s, when they were transferred to the SAAF. The DC-3s and DC-4s returned to SAA in the early 1990s and were refurbished to fly in their original passenger form. Skyclass takes passengers back in time to when air travel was exciting and unhurried and when passengers dressed up for the occasion. With views of the unfolding countryside below that were breathtaking and accommodation at stopovers along the way was first-class.

“Thank you for flying with us. If there is anything we can do to make your flight more comfortable please do not hesitate to call one of the cabin crew. Sit back, relax and enjoy your classic flight experience with Skyclass.”

Flying at low altitudes and slow speeds, characteristic of the propeller airliner era, passengers were treated to spectacular and unforgettable views of the scenery below. Passengers are encouraged to relax in comfortable business class style seating and enjoy the lavishness of the crew's hospitality as they are pampered with superb service. Experience delicious “air fare” like never before served on fine bone china and crystal ware. The pilots are highly experienced and passengers are welcome to meet them in the cockpit where they are happy to explain the mechanics of propeller driven vintage airliners. The only really modern piece of equipment to be found in the cockpit is a Garmin GPS.

History of Douglas DC-4-1009 Skymaster ZS-AUB, #42984

The DC-4 1009 was produced at the Douglas Aircraft Company plant at Santa Monica, California. The aircraft was delivered to South African Airways on 10 May 1946, registered ZS-AUB and named “Outeniqua” in May 1946. An American crew delivered the aircraft that arrived at Palmietfontein Airport on 16 May 1946. The aircraft has eight fuel tanks and was often used to ferry engines and mechanics to SAA aircraft that had suffered engine failures. This aircraft was the last SAA DC-4 to be sold by SAA going to the SAAF to be operated by 44 Squadron on 29 September 1967 and allocated the tail number 6905.

South African Airways bought this aircraft back in December 1995 and it is currently operating with the Historic Flight registered as ZS-AUB. The DC-4 was wet-leased to Swissair during 1997 and was briefly registered as HB-ILI and later ZU-ILI to be used to celebrate Swissair's 50th Anniversary of crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

She was then returned to the Historic Flight fleet and was re-registered ZS-AUB. SAA Historic Flight was transferred from Johannesburg International to Swartkop Air Force base in 1998 on request from the then SAA chief Coleman Andrews. Ownership of the aircraft was transferred to the TransNet Heritage Foundation on 25 January 2001. On 18 of September 2006 the airliner moved to Rand Airport where the entire SA Historic Flight operation was relocated.

History of Douglas DC-4-1009 'Skymaster' ZS-AUA, #42934

ZS-AUA was delivered to South African Airways on 25 March 1946, arriving in South Africa at Palmietfontein airport on 30 March 1946. It was registered ZS-AUA in April 1946. The aircraft was named 'Tafelberg' and was one of three DC-4s ordered by SAA in 1945. The aircraft operated as the first scheduled DC-4 service from Johannesburg to Cape Town on 1 May 1946. The flying time was 3 hours 45 minutes. From 13 April 1949 to 6 May 1949 the aircraft was used to convey Prime Minister Malan and Cabinet Ministers on their three week trip to Europe.

At 11h37 on 17 April 1951, SAA Skymaster ZS-AUA made the first semi-official landing at the yet incomplete Jan Smuts Airport. Onboard were the Minister of Transport P.O. Sauer, the Chief Airways Manager C.J. Venter and other dignitaries. It was fitting that DC-4 ZS-AUA undertook the first scheduled SAA flight and also the last flight. ZS-AUA flew flight SA 605 from Windhoek, Upington, Kimberley, Bloemfontein, and Johannesburg. The commander was Captain 'Topper' van der Spuy with Gus Ferguson as co-pilot. The venerable Douglas DC-4 Skymaster operated its last scheduled flight for SAA on 30 September 1965.

The aircraft was sold to the SAAF on 17 January 1966. On 24 January 1966, four Douglas DC-4 Skymasters were officially handed over to the SAAF; they were ZS-AUA, ZS-BMF, ZS-BMG and ZS-BMH. ZS-AUA was allocated number 6901 and was operated by 44 Squadron. She was nicknamed "Spook" while with the SAAF.

She was purchased by Aero Air in August 1995 and registered as ZS-NUR on 17 August. This registration was used on the delivery flight to Antwerp, Holland. Sold to the Dutch Dakota Association in January 1996 and registered PH-DDS. The lengthy ferry flight to the Netherlands took place in 1996 and ZS AUA arrived at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on 5 May 1996. The Dutch Dakota Association experienced many problems in keeping the aircraft up to the rigid standards of the Dutch Aviation authorities and as a result was forced to stop using the aircraft. It was removed from the Dutch register on 14 March 2002. The aircraft was leased to Flippie Vermeulen who owns Springbok Classic Air and the original ZS-AUA registration was reapplied for on 1 November 2002 and she returned to South Africa in 2003. ZS-AUA did very little work for Springbok Flying Safaris and was subsequently leased to Rovos Air. In December 2006, she was leased to Skyclass and moved to her new base at Rand Airport from Lanseria International Airport.

Douglas DC-4 ZS-BMH "Lebombo" #43157 built: 4 August 1947

The last of the Skymasters were utilised on the Springbok Service from Johannesburg to London, to supplement the joint SAA-BOAC Avro York flights. The Skymaster flight on the route Johannesburg-Nairobi-Khartoum-Tripoli-Hurne (near Bournemouth in England) took about 36 hours. When in-flight entertainment was introduced to the Springbok Service it took the form of film shows on certain DC-4s, which was later extended to all Skymasters on the route.

The delivery of four Lockheed L749A Constellation aircraft in 1950 signalled the end of an era for the Skymasters on the Springbok Service and they were re-scheduled to handle all major domestic and regional services. The DC-4s were retired from SAA service during the mid 1960s, and several were sold to the South African Air Force. During 1991 the SAAF began phasing out the DC-4 and in 1992; SAA bought a DC-4 back from the Air Force. It was "Lebombo". She re-entered service with SAA on 8 April 1993, exactly 46 years after it rolled off the Douglas assembly line in 1947. ZS-BMH was the last DC-4 ever built.

In July 1994 Lebombo flew to the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Fly-in at Oshkosh, Wisconsin in the United States with Flippie Vermeulen at the controls. The journey to Oshkosh was more than 15 000 kilometres and a new world record was set for the longest, time and distance, prop liner flight in one direction, with an unchanged passenger group. Lebombo did SAA proud by winning the award for best transport aircraft at the largest aviation gathering in the world.

In service with SAA, the Skymasters flew no less than 209 017 hours, covering more than 41 million miles. Powered by four Pratt & Whitney R2000 radial piston engines, the two DC-4s are the only two passenger-licensed Douglas DC-4 Skymasters operating in the world today and are great favourites in the tourism industry, venturing as far as North America and Europe. The aircraft seats 50 passengers, in a Business Class configuration. The DC-4s range of over 3 000 km puts it in easy reach destinations such as Central and East Africa as well as many of the spectacular tropical islands in the Indian Ocean.

Douglas DC-3/C-47 ZS-BXF 'Klapperkop'

Complementing SAA Historic Flight's two Skymasters, is another member of the Douglas Aircraft family; a Dakota named 'Klapperkop'. On 17 December 1903, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the 1903 Wright Flyer became the first powered, heavier-than-air machine to achieve controlled, sustained flight with a pilot aboard. With Orville Wright at the controls, the aeroplane took off from a launching rail and flew for 12 seconds and a distance of 37 meters (120 feet).

Thirty-two years later, to the day, on 17 December 1935, at Santa Monica, California, an aircraft, designed by Arthur Raymond, took to the skies. That aircraft was model number three of the Douglas Commercial Transports. The venerable DC-3 has enjoyed an illustrious career with numerous South African operators. The South African Air Force was one of the World's largest operators of the C-47 the military version of the DC-3 with more than 80 planes. The first delivery to the SAAF took place in June 1943. The SAAF 'Gooney Birds' took part in the Second World War ferrying troops and supplies and much later did duty in the Angolan war and the Namibian border campaign.

The Douglas DC-3 was one of the first aeroplanes to be placed into service with many of the major airlines after World War Two, including South African Airways. At the end of hostilities in the Far East, a number of SAAF C-47 'Dakota' aircraft were transferred to SAA to augment the Lockheed Lodestars with which SAA had started post-war services. The Dakotas were soundproofed and fitted out with 21 seats for airline service. The Dakota served with SAA for nearly a quarter of a century, providing reliable service on all the internal and regional sectors. When retired from SAA service the 'Daks' were sold to the SAAF.

After her second spell with the SAAF, ZS-BXF was again purchased by South African Airways and added to the Historic Flight fleet. She was restored to pristine condition and her first post-restoration public outing was the Vereeniging airshow in October 1993. Klapperkop as she is named is painted to represent the DC-3s that began service with South African Airways during the 1940s. Her main task nowadays is a leisurely one, taking passengers on low-level nostalgic trips, specifically safaris throughout southern Africa to exotic places such as Victoria Falls. Her Sunday flips are extremely popular giving passengers a low-level view of Johannesburg and the vicinity.

Klapperkop was ferried from O.R. Tambo International Airport to Rand Airport on Friday 10 November 2006. She had been at O.R. Tambo Airport for repairs to damage sustained during a forced landing in a grass field shortly after takeoff from Lanseria Airport on 21 November 2003. As a very warm and comfortable aeroplane, the DC-3 has always been at the forefront of passenger comfort and this is evident when one steps on board 'Klapperkop'. Durable, reliable, responsive, dependable – these are the character traits that make the DC-3 one of the most respected and loved aircraft the world has ever known.