

EXPERIENCE

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ON THE GRAND PRIX CIRCUIT WITH NIKI LAUDA

AND THE GLOBAL 6000 AIRCRAFT



JONATHAN OPPENHEIMER CHANGES COURSE + MEET THE NEW CHALLENGER 650
CHILEAN WINE COUNTRY + FOGO ISLAND DESIGN + ABLE FLIGHT TRAINING

WINGED MIGRATION

Three years after De Beers, Jonathan Oppenheimer's business interests are still a global affair – a lifestyle that has led his illustrious family into South Africa's private-aviation industry. It's all part of the goal of building a powerhouse economy on the African continent.

BY STEPHANIE DRAX

PILOT PROJECT
Jonathan Oppenheimer
at Johannesburg's
Fireblade Aviation
Services FBO.

The final 50 paces to Jonathan Oppenheimer's London office say much of the man you are about to meet. It begins on Charterhouse Street, as you pass the discreet door to De Beers' UK headquarters and continue half a block up to the corner entrance of E. Oppenheimer & Son Ltd. Inside, before taking the glass elevator up, you'll spot a painting by British shock artist Damien Hirst. In the second-floor meeting room, the mural landscape shifts from British contemporary to paintings depicting the burnt hues of the majestic *bushveld*. By the time you shake hands with Oppenheimer, who sports a trim copper beard and a South African lilt, you already understand that this is a man of two worlds.

Though Jonathan's father, Nicky, sold the family's interest in South African diamond conglomerate De Beers to Anglo American in 2012 (the family retains a stake of just under two percent), the Oppenheims have not broken stride. Besides E. Oppenheimer & Son, the Africa-focused investment holding firm of which Jonathan is director, the family runs the Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve and the Brenthurst Foundation, a platform established in 2004 for the world's leading thinkers to consider ways to enhance the economic development of Africa.

Their most recent venture, which launched in September 2014, is a much-needed addition to the South African

corporate aviation industry. Fireblade Aviation, the first and only fixed-base operator at Johannesburg's O.R. Tambo International Airport, was a natural next step for a family that has long held a passion for flying, both as passengers and pilots.

Ace of Diamonds

Historically, there was logic behind the Oppenheims using their own aircraft: Moving diamonds was safer by air than by road. Jonathan Oppenheimer's great-grandfather Sir Ernest founded mining company Anglo American in 1917 and, beginning in 1929, was the first of three successive generations of the family to chair De Beers.

The Oppenheims needed to crisscross the African continent and access Europe with ease, without having to rely on restrictive scheduled routes. Their solution was to establish the Anglo American corporate flight department at Johannesburg airport in 1936, which lives on as the oldest continuously operational flight department in the world.

Even then, the seed of an Oppenheimer-led FBO had been sown. "We always saw Anglo American's aviation position in Jo'burg as an interesting business in its own right," says Oppenheimer, as he scrolls through images of Fireblade on his iPad. Nicky and Jonathan's personal investment of US\$15 million in Fireblade fulfilled an ambition to own a best-in-class, privately managed flight department.

Fireblade's 140,000-square-foot hangar (large enough to house three double-deck commercial airliners) is already 70 percent occupied by tenant aircraft; the stylish terminal features a lounge with day bedrooms, bistro dining, a gym and a spa. Showcased within the facility are contemporary artworks, all for sale, supplied by one of the country's top galleries, Everard Read.

The family's Global 6000 and Learjet 45XR aircraft – both with distinctive livery inspired by Bushman rock >





Up in the Air

1. Where do you fly most often?

Johannesburg to London.

2. What is your preferred airport?

Tswalu, as that's my safe haven.

Farnborough is great as a business gateway, and Fireblade is home.

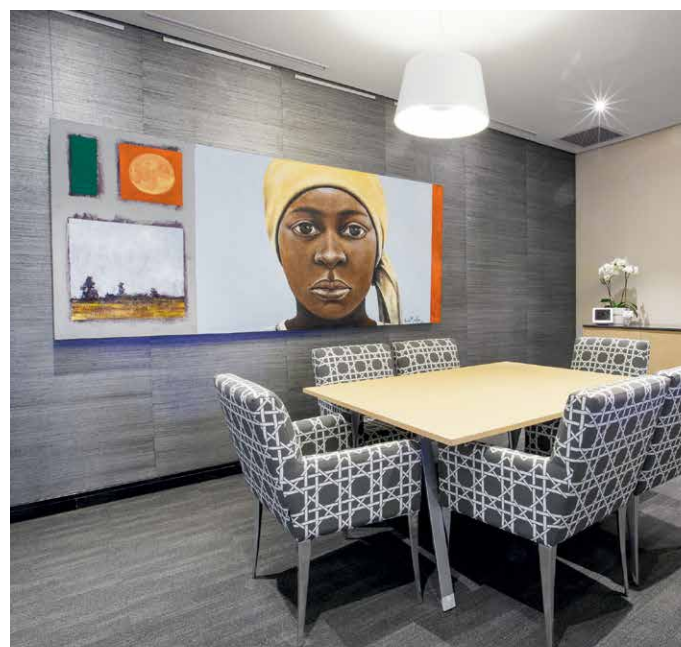
3. What is your favorite vacation destination? Each

is so unique, it's impossible to judge one against the other. Most recently, I went to Whistler [Canada] for the first time.

4. Where are you flying next? Mauritius, for a board meeting.

5. What do you love about flying? Everything.

6. What one thing is always in your travel bag? My passport and my business papers.



SCENES FROM FIREBLADE

Spacious, naturally lit interiors characterize the FBO, where local artwork in the lounges (including this piece by Velaphi Mzimba, pictured left) is available for purchase. The hangar, meanwhile, offers 140,000 square-feet of space.



art – form part of the private fleet for charter, either for business or for the pleasure of visiting safari lodges such as Tswalu. Oppenheimer is confident their enterprise will pay off: “I have an ambition that Fireblade will be ranked as the number-one FBO in Africa and among the best in the world for the service, amenities and facilities we provide.”

For the family, South Africa needs to be within immediate reach, and Oppenheimer's Global 6000 jet – he has just taken delivery of the latest model – makes that easily possible. “In the early 2000s myself and my CEO visited all our major production sites inside a week,” explains Oppenheimer, who at the time was fulfilling several senior roles at De Beers. “If we'd used scheduled flights, the fastest we could have done it would have been 14 days. You want your workforce to hear the same message.”

In the last six months he has flown frequently between his homes in London and Johannesburg, but also to meetings in Lagos, Nairobi, Blantyre, Casablanca, Libreville and Cape Town: “We average about 600 hours on the jet per year, two thirds of which is business. We're heavy users as a company.”

Those hours are not spent in the tranquil sanctuary of the Global 6000 stateroom, however. Nor is he to be found in the cabin, “particularly if I'm carrying half of the family, and the airplane is full at the back!” he laughs. Instead, Oppenheimer's seat for the majority of the journey is in the state-of-the-art cockpit, where he clocks 400 to 500 hours per year as pilot.

Having flown airplanes since 1994 – at the time the Oxford graduate was 24, newly married to his American wife Jennifer and looking for an efficient commute across South Africa – Oppenheimer cherishes those hours spent at the controls of his jet. “Flying for me is incredibly meditational – a truly extraordinary time,” he admits. “You have to be 100 percent present – you can't be thinking about business. I find it very centering.”

Triple Bottom Line

Today Oppenheimer's professional life is dedicated to an uplift of another kind: namely, the economy of the entire African continent. In 2011, he launched Tana Africa Capital, a joint venture between E. Oppenheimer & Son and Asian investment house Temasek. The company provides capital and expertise to businesses in Africa, currently to the tune of US\$300 million.

Investments are in the infrastructure and

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— JONATHAN OPPENHEIMER

consumer sectors – specifically those dealing in pasta, frozen meat and milk – but opportunities in education and health are on the horizon. “There's already a market in Africa which is almost half the size of Europe,” Oppenheimer says, ruminating with confidence on the continent's future. “It will be the employment powerhouse of the world for the next 40 years.”

The caveat the Oppenheimer family applies to their own success is sustainability: “We don't look to invest and sell, but to help businesses grow. In 1954 my great-grandfather said, ‘We're here to make a profit but in such a way as to benefit the communities in which we operate.’ I've never heard a better expression of the triple bottom line,” he explains.

That philosophy encouraged Jonathan and Nicky to create the Brenthurst Foundation, the motto of which is “Strengthening Africa's Economic Performance.” Contributors from influential spheres such as the military, politics, finance and the U.N. are invited to take part in an annual forum, “The Tswalu Dialogue,” hosted by Oppenheimer and his wife at Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve.

Tswalu, the family home in the Kalahari Desert, is an inspiring environment for the event: It's South Africa's largest private reserve and one of Oppenheimer's most treasured bolt-holes (another being their cattle ranch in Zimbabwe). Tswalu also accepts guests – who can arrive by charter flight or corporate jet on its private tarmac airstrip – and promises an exceptional five-star safari adventure.

Even the family's most recent venture, Fireblade Aviation Services, is a contribution to the economic growth of the continent. All employees are stakeholders in the business. Oppenheimer is resolute on the topic: “There's an opportunity for us to make an extraordinary difference to the well-being of Africa. We are committed to building a legacy and are extremely patient as a family; we're not about performance year on year, but generation to generation.” ■

At the Yoke

As a pilot who clocks several hundred hours per year, Jonathan Oppenheimer is often at the helm of his Global 6000 jet. For Oppenheimer, who splits his time between South Africa and the United Kingdom, the test for both pilot and plane is the takeoff from Johannesburg, a city 6,000 feet above sea level. “It's high and hot and the aircraft is heavy. The aircraft has lift devices on the front of the wings to achieve the angle of climb after we rush down the runway. The Global 6000 can do it, and a lot of airplanes can't.” Once in the air, comfort and security comes in the form of the Global 6000 jet's sophisticated avionics suite. “It's designed to be elegant, efficient and effective. You take off, you engage the autopilot, and you manage the Rockwell Collins system, which provides very good situational awareness. You might fly for 10 to 12 hours, but in reality you have manned the controls for five minutes.”