

1677 km and 2120 km straight ahead - pilot report of three world records

STORY OF KLAUS' KÜTTNER FLIGHT – 23 November 2003 – Klaus Ohlmann

To fly our 2200 km one way from El Calafate, we left San Martin de los Andes on the 20th, heading north. We spent one night in Malargüe, and flew the next day all the 1677 km down to Calafate, adding 170 km to my previous record of strait distance. This was a difficult flight, especially from Esquel where the cloud cover was very dense. We had to fly more east as usual. Arriving to Calafate, I could have flown a little bit further but I preferred to land in Calafate in order to take advantage of the exceptional weather conditions that seemed to prepare.

I had been waiting for all the conditions of this flight for 4 years and this year, I know I'm not the only one flying for this prize. So we had one rest day in Calafate, which we used to make a tourist tour to the famous glacier Perito Moreno, and to prepare the flight (fill up the oxygen bottles, looking at the weather forecast...).

And, on the 23rd, we took off at 5:25 am. Calafate is S50°20' and the sun rise nearly 1 hour before it does in San Martin. It is very cold. The beginning of the flight is tremendous, as well as for the landscape, as for the weather conditions! The sky is rather cloudy but we can see, just below, the glaciers slipping down to the blue lakes. The wave is well marked and the southwest wind pushes us strongly. It is the first time I fly with the wind such blowing from south, but it is wonderful! With west wind conditions, the numerous lakes are like holes in the Cordillera and represent each time a difficult pass. On the contrary, with southwest wind, the mountains laying side by the lakes are well perpendicular to the wind and generate good wave. There is no long wave as usual but as it is well marked, we are able to jump easily from one wave to another, without losing altitude. The flight tactic consists in flying rather slowly (120 km/h) in order to fly strait. We have more than 15 hours to fly the 2120 km I have declared to San Juan. It is not worth taking too much risk... And with this low indicated speed, we have a ground speed up to 200, even 300 km/h. Around Lago Fontana (km 600) we'll even reach 400 km/h. The climbing rates are between 2 and 7 m/s. Our altitude, after a low level point above Viedma Glacier, stabilise between 4000 and 7000m. But at Corcovado, at 5000m, we were not high enough to see the foehn gaps and to look for our ideal path. It was necessary to stop a while in order to climb.

Approaching Esquel the nice and long rotor lines are back. The wind seems to have turned a little bit more westerly. We over fly Bariloche; the air traffic controllers are cooperative here because they are used to our glider flying. I arrive in the San Martin de los Andes region with the good feeling of flying at home. The Chapelco wave, showing us that the wind is still blowing from southwest, lifting us to 5400m with +4. We fly over the Lanin volcano, but today, it doesn't give anything. A little bit further, we meet our friends who took off this morning from Chapelco towards Chos Malal. We'll soon be there too. In the valley of Loncopue, there are only little rotors to mark the waves, but the lift is still around 3 or 4m/s. The Cordillera del Viento, at Chos Malal, always gives the best. And we climb rapidly till 6700m. It is now 13h30 and we are only 500km away from Mendoza. We feel confident. The chance to succeed is now quite high. Before Malargüe, where we slept 2 days ago, the big lenticles are back. Here as well, the air traffic controllers are friends. No traffic reported. Call back leaving my area. So, we could fly until FL 245, here as well, according to a NOTAM from Fuerza Aeria that allow us to fly in the upper airspace. But when we changed frequency to Mendoza's, every thing changed! "Mendoza D-KAHG bu en dia, para transitar en su zona al nivel de vuelo 200 ? ». Do you have a squawk HG? -Negatif -So, report 2000ft overhead the airfield. Euh... Silence on the frequency. And then, using my most supplicant voice, I asked this charming woman: "Please, I am flying a world record. Can I fly via the west of the area, via Laguna Diamante?" Great relief: she accepted, but not higher than FL 195 (6000m) even if we are reaching the high Cordillère with its summits up to 7000m ...

We reached the Laguna Blanca (that was my northeast turning point when I flew my 3000 km last year), thinking about Henri Guillaumet, this French pilot who had to perform an emergency landing here in the 30ies, when flying Aéropostale lines. He became a hero surviving the 4 days walking across the Andes, back to the civilisation. Then, we enter the long and deep valleys; Air breaks out to maintain FL195. Tupungato peak, and then Aconcagua to our left hand. I know these valleys for having trekked into them 6 years ago, up to Aconcagua. But they are very impressing. Stones everywhere... No place to land, my map shows an airfield but I never saw it. We pass across San Juan; now it's done, this flight is mine! But I still can see some nice lentis to the north and we go on flying northbound. I am discovering this deserted region, sculpted by rivers that run down from the high peaks of the Cordillere... dry. And then, flooded by grey evening light, added to the tiredness of the flight, this landscape appeared to me as really inhuman. I decided to stop here my progression to the north, and heading 160, I turned to San Juan. We land there at 8:00 PM after a 14h35 flight, welcomed by the pilots of the local aero club. I feel like after a dream, and I am also satisfied to have offered to Joachim the best soaring I could offer him.

Klaus Ohlmann