

1996: End Of An Era

**An Off-Grid,
Trans-Africa Expedition**



1.some background



Fern, Trish & Chris



Engine Out

This is my story about a trip through Africa which I undertook in 1996, that laid the foundations for the birth of Nomad Adventure Tours and changed me forever. In order to make sense of the madness, I have included a brief background as to how this chaos begun. I hope you enjoy the ride!

I finished my studies, ranging from Economics to Psychology (I had no career in mind) in 1993. By this stage I had decided to travel overseas and have a wee look around and fulfill my dream of travelling through Africa. While I grew up in Africa, I unfortunately had no exposure to her and was desperate to change that.

I worked in a partnership called Maverick Enterprises with my pal Dino, buying and selling items at auctions, to help fund my trip, but that is another story.

Eventually it was time to go and off I set. My first experience was to be grilled extensively at customs. All my savings lasted a grand total of three weeks before I was forced to face the reality of getting work. These were the days before work permits and the only jobs available to South Africans, were sporadic, sometimes dangerous, underpaid and usually unpleasant. I spent a year doing pretty much everything and anything but each time I built up some savings, they would get depleted when I was between jobs. I was getting a little depressed and my dream seemed to be drifting away. I hated the thought of returning to SA with my tail between my legs.

One day, a friend suggested I go to the United States and work for a moving company that he knew. I called them up and, lo and behold, they had a job opening for someone who they could overwork and underpay. I saved up for the ticket and arrived in the US with a massive total of \$50.

I had turned the corner, I had a good job, saved my money carefully and one year later I left with my pockets full of dollars. I got on a plane and went back to the UK to begin my adventure at last.

I found a 1972 Land Rover being sold by a chap called Chris Perry, whom I remain in contact with, to this day. You will shortly see why!

The plan was to travel via Europe to Italy, ship the car over to Egypt and continue down the East Coast to Cape Town. The estimated duration of the trip was around 3 months.

Anyway, the car was prepped for the big trip, a few fellow travelers were gathered, and off we went amidst much fanfare. In those days, a trip through Africa was a big deal. No cell phones, no GPS, paper maps, little or no information. This was before everything could be found on the internet. You get the picture.



Amateur Electrician

As we approached Dover, the engine started making unpleasant noises. By Dover it had seized. Upon establishing this, a long night in the local pub followed. The next morning, we had to face the reality of an African trip in tatters. A second hand engine was located, at massive cost and we were back on track again – with a hugely depleted budget. I rationalised that by cutting certain expenses, like food and water, we could still make it. The car was now called Christine –after the possessed car from a Stephen King novel.

The whirlwind tour of Europe was paused unexpectedly in the snow, in a little town called Chur in Switzerland with a broken gearbox. 10 days were spent waiting for parts sent by my new best friend – Chris, and camping in the snow.

Picture dropping a 13mm spanner in half a metre of snow and trying to find it with frozen hands. Eventually the gearbox was repaired by myself with the aid of the user manual. We pushed on to get to Italy and a ferry that would take us to Africa.

Believe it or not, by Italy, Christine was belching smoke and clearly not fit for an Africa trip. To say I was devastated is an understatement. After carefully considering driving the car into the sea, or setting it on fire, or setting myself on fire, sanity prevailed and we limped back to England.

I was extremely fortunate in that Chris and his family semi-adopted me and allowed me to stay with them while the engine was taken out, stripped and fixed, in the back yard under Chris's guidance. He proved to be a better father to me than my own dad ever was. It was winter yet again. Chris and his family, Trish, Fern and Tim were lifesavers. Fern, his 14-year-old daughter was a lovely young lady. Believe it or not, we were to become a couple in 2015. Life can be strange sometimes.

Finally, the car was ready. I got some odd jobs to earn some more money and advertised for a new set of people to come with and help fund the trip. Fidi, a Namibian and Maz, an Aussie signed up for their sins. While none of us became close friends we formed a tough, versatile and determined crew. We would live in one-another's pockets for 8 months. Not something to undertake lightly.

And so after days, weeks, months and now, even years, it was time. I had ants in my pants to get going and dive headlong into the dark continent, which I hoped was still dark and full of adventure.

2. LONDON to SPAIN

A Hop, Skip and a Jump



Before entering the mad circle

Eventually it was time to go: 9:30pm Sunday January 7th 1996. We said our goodbyes again, and left. I did a victory lap through Earls Court in London and we were off. Two hours later we had a flat tyre. It was to be the first of over 50 but luckily we didn't know that at the time. It was surreal on the ferry as we discussed what lay ahead. I was excited but very apprehensive as well. My budget for the trip was pathetic to say the least. We got on to French soil at 3am.

We camped in Paris, France, not Texas, for 2 days getting the last few visas. It was bitterly cold but luckily we had some port (From Portugal), to ease the pain. While driving around the clutch release bearing started grinding. I was horrified. It would mean taking the Gearbox out again.



Freezing in the Pyrenees

While this was something I knew how to do, thanks to Switzerland, it was not something I wanted to do. Fortunately, for some reason, the noise went away and never returned. We rushed about to get everything done so we could get the hell out of the first world.

We drove from Paris, all the way to Gibraltar in Southern Spain in one long and cold stint. I had decided to drive until I couldn't go on any further and just get off the damn continent. Once in Africa I would deal with whatever. After 26 hours we stopped to rest. It was very beautiful but bitterly cold.



Pretty but ice cold in Spain

It should be noted that Christine, being so old, had no aircon, electric windows and so on. In fact, with the engine assembly done by a total amateur, the hot air manifold had been overlooked so it was literally freezing inside. We made tea up in the mountains. It was the first cup of probably thousands to come. It was weird to see how long the water took to boil. We had beans for dinner. We tried to sleep but it was impossible. I ended up rolled up in a tarpaulin which froze. Obviously, I too, froze. Driving up and down the mountains of the Pyrenees, late at night, with no heater in the raging snow and no tyre chains, is a memory I will never forget.



Cold, Wet, Slippery and Dark

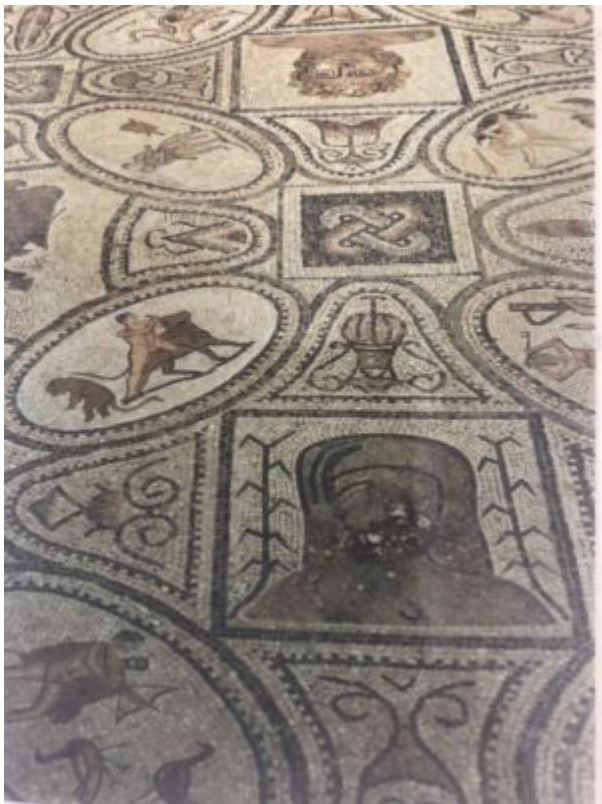
It had been almost 2000km over the Pyrenees in one go. We bush camped for the first of many nights. The next day we crossed over the straits into Africa.

3. MOROCCO

Carpetbaggers & Rebels



Getting Hustled



Beautiful mosaics out in the open

Entering Morocco was a little overwhelming. It was the first of many encounters with African customs officials. Ridiculous and incomprehensive procedures, various sundry fees and absolute chaos. But it was a good day and we were finally on the African continent. There were dozens of police roadblocks from the get go. It was unsettling and not something I was used to –yet!

Unfortunately, I hadn't remembered that North Africa is only a stone's throw from Europe and winter is winter. So days were spent driving through blizzards, in the desert, sometimes in shorts and a t- shirt. Snow in a desert is not nearly as funky as it sounds.



Making friends with some Berbers

We got to Rabat, the capital in the early hours of the morning. We were buggered. We went up a one-way street and guess who was waiting for that. The cops demanded 250FF (French Francs). We begged and pleaded and got away with 50FF. This was not a bribe for those interested. We found a campsite. It had massive walls and guards armed with AK 47's, that walked atop them. God knows what they were expecting. That night we made friends with a couple called Sam and Beth. Some bad behaviour ensued.



Our fortified campsite

We spent 2 days in Rabat attending to formalities. Driving there was a rude introduction to African roads. Absolute chaos with police at every intersection. Millions of mopeds, hooters blaring, and no one giving way. Directions were amusing. “So we must go left”. Yes. “You mean right”. Yes, and so on.



All on our own!

We were in Rabat to get visas for Mauritania and Mali. At the embassy we were informed that we could not get a visa without a flight ticket. We laughingly informed the lady that we were driving through. She said she didn't care and said that we were fools. I could not believe it. We were forced to buy a cheap ticket just to get the visa. More money gone. We awoke the next morning to an enormous rainstorm and bad flooding. The water was about a foot deep everywhere. We finished up the admin and left.

We ended up bush camping in an olive grove as a result of getting stuck. I jammed my hand badly in the trench shovel while trying to free the car. The first of many injuries.

That evening was a little harrowing as we examined our finances and the enormity of what we were about to tackle. I clearly remember sitting with Fidi and Maz consuming our last alcohol supplies feeling very worried. Not about the alcohol, about the situation. Well, both, truth be told.

Morocco was so different and as we entered the hinterland, remote and untouched, we camped wild every night under the stars and made our way south.



Already seeing Africa from under Christine

We passed through Fez and Meknes in the well-known Atlas Mountains. Casablanca was sadly disappointing while Marrakesh was amazing. The only bummer was it was bloody snowing!

We got to try mint tea, awesome, and couscous with some merchants in the market. The cities lived up to their reputations. The markets were colourful, full of sights, sounds and smells. It was very exotic and unlike anything I had ever seen before. What was really good to see was the preservation of the old cities. All of them still lay within the walls of the old cities, which were really old, being old cities and all.



Old city walls

We met some very friendly carpet dealers. Yes, I know! Before I knew it we were ensconced on lovely cushions sipping mint tea and being fed various delights. We should have known.

Soon after the negotiating begun. We were firm. Well, we thought so. They were hectic. We were shown hundreds of beautiful and really cheap carpets. We insisted we could not possibly afford them. They split us up and we were each led away through a warren of rooms to be tackled individually. It actually got a little heated and scary. In the end, we all walked away with a carpet, minus our pride. We had been carpet - bagged, so to speak.



Bush camping - Morocco style

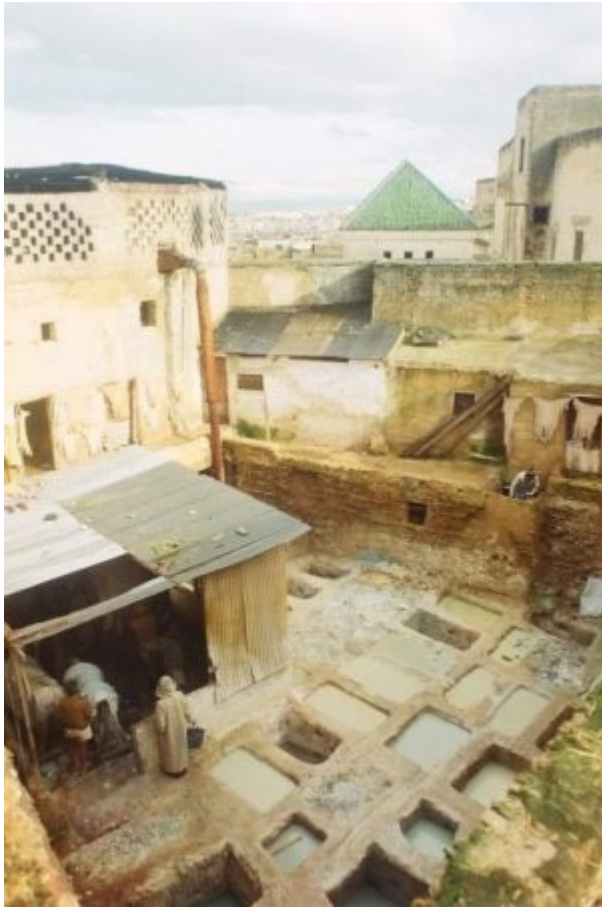
We hugged the coastline heading south. I saw my first camel and it made quite an impact. It represented the whole thing, the dream, the planning and now here we were on the edge of the Sahara.

One of the most fascinating places was a little known site called Volubilis, in the middle of nowhere, with massive and magnificent Roman ruins. It was like something out of the twilight zone. There was a beautiful mosaic floor half submerged under water. It was so strange to walk around something so old and precious just lying there in the open in north Africa.



Roman ruins of Volubilis

We stopped at a well and traded insults with some Berbers wearing blankets. There were lots of kids and they were bugging the hell out of us. “Cadeau, Cadeau” – “Gift, Gift”. We camped in a riverbed. The evenings were rather unpleasant as it was still bitterly cold. The surroundings were incredibly barren which was both awesome and rather intimidating.



Leather curing pits



Todra Gorge



Market alleyways

A most remarkable thing was that we would regularly stop in the most remote places we could find. Far away from any signs of humanity. But like clockwork, either that night or early morning we would be surrounded by kids just staring at us in wonder. It became clear that we were not a common sight.

In one town we got to visit a local tannery. Who knew tanning leather was such a messy and stinky affair. The softening of the leather is done in huge pits and done by young boys who basically stomp the leather with their feet all day long. Its tough work and the stench of rotting meat was indescribable.

We passed El Rachidia and took a remote “piste” (sand or gravel track) and camped in the mountains. We passed several Oases. Suddenly we would crest a rise in the desert wasteland and just see green and Palm trees. All the houses are mud construction and it all feels very desert like – which of course, it is!

We visited the Todra Gorges, an ancient watering hole on the camel salt trails. They were cool and pleasant and we had a quick dip. We had no idea that finding places to swim would be a real challenge on this trip.

As we neared the Sahel, the area bordering the Sahara we began to experience the Harmattan. This was a seasonal “wind” that blew continuously. To say it was rather unpleasant would be an understatement.

We bought the first of many dates (the food, not the local ladies) in Quarzazate. We noticed that people were very hardy here and even made all their own tools. Then it started snowing again. I could not believe it.

We changed money in one dodgy little building but the highlight was that they had a sit down toilet. Hurrah. I hate the squat toilets. The principle makes sense but they generally are filthy horrid places. I never did get the trick of hanging over the damned hole, pants in hand, avoiding the walls that were usually covered in crap.

We passed the night near Agadir and then continued south. The roads were quite dangerous as they were one lane roads with animals all over them. We were slowly leaving what little civilisation we had been surrounded by and venturing deeper into dark Africa. Police continued to try us for bribes but we held out. "No Payee!" (Not Paying). That was an endless ritual till we got to about Kenya.



Typical oasis town



A warmly dressed Berber

The Harmattan continued to blow like crazy. Sand was drifting across the road in major quantities. It was damn hot and felt like we were entering hell. That night we camped near an abandoned fishing village.

Maz did her first, and last, bit of driving. We had an incident. A cop stepped into the middle of the road and waved us to stop. He was a long way off and Maz applied the brakes. We slowed down but it soon became clear that we needed to slow down much faster. Both Fidi and I shouted at her as the vehicle bore down on the cop. Eventually he jumped out of the way and we stopped about 10 metres past him. He was not amused and had a sense of humour failure of note.

We had 2 more flat tyres. We were on number 6 already and fast becoming super experienced at fixing punctures by hand, a slow and laborious process.



Stark but beautiful

The further south we went the clearer it was that we were entering a militarised zone as there were more and more checkpoints and lots of soldiers. Some were friendly, others not so much.

Christine started to run very hot. I was extremely nervous as that could be serious. We started seeing our first sand dunes. It was exciting and intimidating at the same time. Lots of ship wrecks dotted the shores along there. Our visas were due to expire in three days so we were pushing hard to get south. We passed 8 police roadblocks in one day. One loses half an hour at each bloody one as they inspect just about everything, sometimes making us unload the entire car and scratching through all our stuff.



Heading south

In the south we had to join a military convoy to take us into the rebel held Western Sahara. Now that was a palaver. We got to a small town from which the convoy would depart. We had a day to kill so we set up camp on a cliff overlooking the sea and did vehicle checks, repaired more flats and worried about the convoy. We tried to source some booze but there was none. We spoke to a local who said that if anyone was caught drinking alcohol they would get locked up and the key would be thrown away. No comment.

With the whole overheating thing I was getting very jittery about the convoy so I went for a swim. Damn, it was cold but I was filthy so it was good to get clean after like a week of no showers.



Entering Western Sahara

The convoy was a little nerve-wracking and the troops were very unfriendly. We had to register which, as usual, involved checking in with Police, Gendarmerie, Military and Customs. As usual, they were not in the same place so we trudged from place to place getting legal and buying bogus insurance. We just prayed that Christine would behave herself. The thought of being stranded in a desert in rebel held territory was enough to make my blood run cold.



Prepping before the convoy

As we were about to get going the convoy guy advised us that for some reason Maz was not registered. God damn them. We raced back to town, the convoy left, we redid the paperwork, raced back, and begged the control to let us go. After some serious haggling they let us through. The road was in terrible condition and we were racing to catch up, not wanting to be alone in rebel held country. Finally, we joined the tail of the convoy and all was well.

We meandered through the desert between massive dunes. It got late. We were last in the convoy due to the mornings' adventure and I was going a little slow as I was worried about the overheating. We were a bit behind and alone when suddenly, a guy leaped out in our path waving his AK47 at us. I didn't know if he was on our side or not and as I prepared to drive over him we saw the rest of the vehicles parked ahead. It was a makeshift camp in the dunes that was guarded by Rebel troops. Although, post factor is all sounds cool we were very subdued and nervous. These people were scary.

The next day was a long, slow and exciting one. We were in the desert, driving in heavy sand, using the sand ladders. It was at least 40 degrees and although rather unpleasant, this is what I had envisaged. I was learning how to do this whole 4x4 thing. And I liked it. A days driving saw us cover very little ground. Everyone in the convoy was pulling together and helping one another which was really nice to see.



Everything looked and felt a little Mad Max-ish



Joining our fellow convoy travellers

Along the way we saw several piles of engine parts. It made me shiver at the thought of getting stuck out there. There was nothing anywhere and the few people that are, are probably not to be trusted if one was alone.

Finally, our escort pointed east and indicated we should continue on. They left us there. It was a little daunting. We continued on until we saw a barrier. There was nothing except a small tin hut in the dunes. We waited. For 2 hours we sat blistering in the sun awaiting God knows what. Eventually a figure emerged atop a distant dune. As he came closer we realised it was a barefoot, AK carrying, child soldier. He walked past us and entered the shack.

One of the more experienced travellers entered the shack. Several tense minutes later he emerged, sweating. Then it was my turn. I entered the shack, it was unbearably hot. This kid was sitting behind a rickety old table with a stamp. Behind him, nailed to the shack wall, were several passports of people from various countries. I hate to think of what must have occurred to have those passports end up there.

Eventually after looking at my passport for a good 10 minutes he stamped it and waived me out. Relief flooded through me. Eventually we were all through and we continued on. As Morocco had not recognised Western Sahara at that stage it was an official/unofficial border post.

We continued on for a few days until we reached a small border town called Nouadhibou that represented the end of our first chapter on the great African Expedition. Only 30 000km to go! We stocked up and crossed into Mauritania.

4. MAURITANIA

Across the Sahara via Hell



The Harmattan winds obscuring everything

Mauritania is one of the last places on earth where slaves are still kept. The people here are hard and unforgiving and bloody unpleasant.

The next stretch was one I had feared ever since I had decided on the routing of this trip. We had to do a long stretch along the beach from Nouadhibou to Ras Timiris. Sounds great, but there was a catch. The beach was subject to tidal flooding. So there was a tight window in which to cross the stretch. Any problems like breakdowns or getting stuck would mean losing the vehicle. Losing the vehicle could mean any number of things. My thoughts were constantly on my AA Carnet deposit with money borrowed from a kind man called Chris Perry – you remember him.

We passed several vehicles partially submerged in the sea. It was a chilling reminder of the potential disasters lying in wait. One of the vehicles belonged to a friend of a chap called Jos on the convoy. Apparently, he had got stuck the year before. The Mauritians had quoted him USD3000 to tow him to town. He didn't have the money so he gathered his belongings and set fire to the car. Apparently, it was a common trick to charge too much for the towing, get refused, and go and strip the car later. Aaah, the joys of cultural diversity.

It was a little stressful as the tidal plain was steep. The car was cantered over at about 30 degrees and driving continuously like that was quite tricky. Once off the beach we followed sand tracks and prayed we were not lost. I finally realised that this was not going to be a holiday for sure.



Racing the tide



A good group of people

The next step of the journey involved crossing the Sahara proper. We were nervous. There were plenty of horror stories to keep us awake at night. The procedure involved getting to a border town and hiring a local Tuareg guide to navigate the way through. These were the days before GPS. Not that GPS would make much of a difference. The dunes were massive and the way through was unmarked and unknown to all except locals. These unmarked tracks were established by the camel trains of old. Remarkably, they still operate. Many of them still carried salt to the interior. As salt was no longer a precious commodity vehicle costs could not be supported so camels still ruled.

We had heard that many locals presented themselves as guides even if they were not in the hope of earning a few dollars. This could, and did, sometimes end in tragedy. We found a reasonable looking guy and arranged the fee. The next day we stocked up on water and fuel and headed off into the unknown.



Camels still doing their thing

There were many incidents along the way. One of the more memorable ones was rather embarrassing. It was Harmattan season, when sandstorms are a constant threat, the air is filled with dust and sand as the hot winds buffeted everything. We had seen no vegetation, not even a stone for days. Finally, we saw a pathetic little tree. It was so exciting we stopped to take a photograph. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I jumped out. Ran over, took the photo and ran back.

I hopped in the vehicle started her up and my jaw hit the floor and my bowels loosened. I could see no sign of the rest of the vehicles. We were alone, in the blowing sands with no idea of where to go. I jumped out and ran to look for tracks. With the wind blowing the tracks were gone. We debated a direction and left. We drove at speed, in silence for about 10 minutes and then we saw a car in the distance. We had found them again, thank heavens.



The tree that nearly caused a stuff up

Our guide was a remarkable man. He negotiated the huge dunes by God knows what methods. It was eerie. We would be going along at say 40km/h and he would tell us to slow down to 20 km/h. There was nothing ahead. I ignored him and we hit a hole that nearly saw our heads go through the roof. He shat me out.

He would regularly tell us to stop and deflate tyres. Initially I ignored this too. Every time we got stuck. Eventually I did as I was told and came to trust him implicitly.



A salt pan in the Sahara

We moved from well point to well point. How he found them I will never know. It was hundreds of kilometres. Driving in the dunes was fun but a little scary. Too fast and it got dangerous as there were hidden holes, too slow and one got stuck and spent hours getting momentum going. As we were in a group of cars this did not go down well.

At one point we hit salt pans that stretched to the horizon. Salt pans are notoriously dangerous so we were glad to have a guide.

Along the way we saw one of a 4x4 truck that looked exactly like those pictures of those overloaded trucks. Baggage and materials were packed at least as high above the truck as the height of the truck. But to add insult to injury, there were at least 50 people stacked on top of that. It was ridiculous. I felt for the truck.

We also encountered a vehicle that had been on the earlier convoy with us. He was stuck so we stopped to help. Apparently, his guide had got them lost and into deep sand. The engine had overheated and the block had cracked. Grief. He took his bags and abandoned the vehicle.

One night we stopped at a little waypoint. We met a local Tuareg businessman and his wife. He was in a cruiser and regaled us of stories about the desert and the crossings. His wife did a henna tattoo on Maz.

One of the water holes we stopped at to restock, lay alongside the Trans Saharan Railway. We were lucky as a train came along. This train carries coal and is the longest train in the world. We must have stared at it for 15 minutes as it trundled past.



The longest train in the world

Christine was taking strain. We had to stop a few times for overheating and turn into the wind, lift the bonnet and funnel air into the engine compartment. Eventually we ended up on a gravel road that meandered all over the place. The going was slow.

Finally, the day came that we all split up and went our separate ways. It was a little sad. Later we heard about a German vehicle on the next convoy that had been lost to the sea. We had made it! –not everyone does.

We continued south along the coast and could drive along the beach. It was actually fantastic. Christine was behaving, Jimi Hendrix was grooving and we managed to relax for a few hours.



Bustling Nouakchott

Just before the first town we stopped to clean up and get everything in order. It stank to high heaven of rotting flesh. It was almost unbearable. And then they arrived. The flies. They came in a swarm and attacked us. I have never experienced anything close to that. They were desperate for moisture and so they attached our eyes and lips en masse. It got so bad that we scuttled under a tarpaulin in the stinking heat and waited it out till dark.

We crawled out tentatively and found them gone. A pleasant evening by the fireside was had by all. We were up before dawn working on the car's points and distributor, as we were having problems getting started, to get going before the flies came again. Just before hitting the town we passed gigantic mounds of dead sea life all along the beach and finally the mystery was explained. Apparently the dead sea life was as a result of fishing ships dumping their un-useable catch. Beyond disgraceful.

That day I opened up the first aid kit and guess what? It was full, and I do mean full, of dead flies. Pretty grim if you ask me. I poured them out and got what I was looking for.

Finally, we got to Nouakchott. Oh dear. It was nasty. For some bizarre reason there were dead things everywhere on the streets. Dogs, donkeys, cows and goats. It was disgusting. We were stopped by every cop who saw us. They wanted Dollars. We didn't want to give them any. Eventually we hid the car and went on foot.

A few days later we stopped at a fuel station. We saw a white guy who came over. He was French and also seemed amazed to see other white people. We had a few mechanical issues, for a change, so he said we could come to his house and his mechanic would take a look. We were very grateful and followed him. We got to a massive wall with serious security. Once

through we were in an oasis. Beautiful gardens and lawns and dogs. We ended up having lunch and finding out what it was like living out there. He made tons of cash and lived like a king but in a broken town in a broken country. Even his whisky was smuggled in via the diplomatic pouches. This guy had a local wife and kids and a French wife and kids back home. A weird life, for sure.

We did the necessary and left town. We found an abandoned restaurant by the sea and set up camp. I worked on the car a bit doing maintenance. The flies came again. I went for a swim and hid in the sea till sundown. The next day the car wouldn't start. We spent most of the day working on the points and condenser. Well, I was certainly learning a lot about cars. Finally, she started. Phew. It was late so we camped there under the stars. Boy was I relieved about the car. Obviously, as it was my car, I felt an enormous responsibility to Fidi and Maz, so every time we had trouble I felt seriously guilty.

We left and followed a road being over-taken back by the dunes. We drove all day. It was too hot to do anything except push on, drink water and fix punctures. Even Jim Morrison of the Doors only barely helped. The day ended and we pulled off the road and slept out on a dune. That night was heaven.

The next stretch involved crossing the Trans Saharan Highway to Nema. I now hate Michelin Maps. The road had been built 10 years before and we were expecting to make good time, seeing as it was a continental freeway. A big red line on the map. We were already several weeks behind schedule and that raised more than just budgetary concerns. I had been warned severely against crossing the central African jungles during rainy season. From the second we reached the road we knew we were in for a tough time. It was totally destroyed. There were dozens of tracks either side of the tar as the potholes were so bad you couldn't use it. It was extremely hot and Christine did not have AC. We were drinking about 8L of water each a day. And it was warm. The punctures increased.

One morning Christine died yet again. We worked on her for hours but couldn't solve the problem. We checked out our food and water situation as we had not seen a car all day and we were in the middle of nowhere and it was baking hot as usual. We setup camp and debated what to do. Late that afternoon a vehicle came along. We literally forced it to stop and asked for a lift. It was full of locals. To my absolute shock and disgust they were not prepared to help unless we paid them. We haggled and finally settled on a price. I went into the nearest town and found some help. We got going and moved on.



Standard taxi loading



Local kids selling a monkey

We got to Aleg and did the whole customs/police/military/gendarme thing. We gave a soldier a lift which helped at roadblocks. He was friendly enough but had a habit of waving his AK around in the car which was unsettling.

We would go, like, 50 km and then get a puncture. I started to get paranoid that it was my driving. It went on and on and on. We were all getting seriously down. We spent every night fixing punctures which is no way to pass the time. We did get pretty good at it though.

We pushed hard day after day and well into the night. I think we all were just desperate to get out of this depressing country. The car stopped again. We fiddled and stuffed around and eventually it got going. This pattern was extremely frustrating.

One afternoon we stopped at a well that had a leather bucket for fetching water. These remote regions were still doing everything the traditional way.

We were forced to check in with the police at every town along the way. Failure to do so would cause massive complications. One afternoon we took a short cut to the next town called Adel Bagrou. Boy did we regret that. We ended up on a barely visible sand track that wound through the scrubland. More punctures. We passed no villages and just went on and on with no sign that we were OK. Eventually we started using the compass as the minor track we were on just dwindled to nothing. It got later and later and later and finally it got dark. We were almost out of fuel which was very concerning. We decided to continue for another hour

and then set up camp. Driving along in silence praying that we were going to hit the town in the middle of nowhere was harrowing to say the least. Suddenly we saw a small light. We followed it and found a small building. In the building was a small man. We asked if we could camp and he said sure. It turned out they were the Police from the town we were trying to find. Phew. The next morning the car wouldn't start. We had actually run out of fuel. It's the God honest truth when I say that we actually pushed the car into the local petrol station. Once again bribes were asked for and declined. Christine and the three stooges were hard work for customs officials all the way through Africa.

Slowly the miles ticked by and finally we left that god-forsaken country behind. We were happy and relieved. We entered the mysterious country of Mali.

5. MALI

The Best of the West



Very much alone

From the border there was a change. The people were blue black and friendly. Mali was a huge improvement on Mauritania. It actually had something to offer. We met a Mr Chum at the border who, for a small fee, assisted us with black market money changing, sourcing fuel and water.

We set up camp at a really beautiful spot. We were happy. That night I saw a very poisonous scorpion and reconsidered the way we were all sleeping on the ground every night. We

continued sleeping on the ground. We had abandoned the tent the minute the weather had warmed up. The next day was taken to repack vehicle, do minor repairs and chill. We needed it and had a good break.

I finally determined the cause of overheating. The bloody thermostat. A rookie move to not have picked this up earlier. I had checked everything else but not tested this bloody thing. I took it out completely. We needed maximum water flow anyway. But then, the car wouldn't start again. I realise this sentence is getting boring. I changed the coil. It worked. I decided then and there that my next car was going to be a diesel.

Two AK wielding gentlemen pitched up at our camp and hinted they wanted something, anything. We made them welcome and gave them nothing. Eventually they got bored and left.

We pushed on. The road was shockingly bad. We passed several checkpoints. Although they wanted bribes, they were friendly. The mention of "Bafana Bafana", the South African soccer team, got us through a few times. "Afrika Cup Championship! One afternoon we heard a massive explosion. We were stopped for lunch but lost our appetite. We pushed on and camped in a forest. The first forest in forever. It was wonderful to see creatures other than flies. I realised I had missed the bugs, butterflies and insects. On an average day we were covering 50km.

The next day the pathetic little road we were on, that was not on the Michelin map, or anywhere else, fractured into several roads heading in different directions. Out came the compass. We passed a small Tuareg temporary village. They look awesome in their indigo robes. They are quite hostile though and have big swords. Their camels were pulling water buckets up the well. We camped right on the road. Maz cooked, Fidi did tyres and I worked on the car. Fun was had by all.

Our next stretch went from Sokolo to Niono. There was a river. That meant green. We felt like we had forgotten what green even looked like. We were excited. We got to the river and saw the typical African scene of women washing themselves, their babies and clothes. There were lots of rice plantations – a relic of a French programme from several years back. It was quite colonial looking. We found a massive Baobab tree and camped for the night.

It was so damned hot. The heat from the engine and gearbox meant sitting in front was almost unbearable. In 40 degrees celsius heat with that on top was heavy going.

It's amazing what a river does. Life. People washing, cleaning, fishing and so on. Birds. Bugs. It was great. We got to Messina which was a nice town with shady old lanes. I tried a little fishing but had no luck though. Fishing and I just don't gel. While I love fishing, the fish don't love me.

In Mali we also took the first of many local ferries. I have seen a lot of ferries but the ones in Africa defy explanation. As with so many of them, this one was a collection of 200L oil drums, tied together with strong, twine and rope. With planks on top and a small bugged 20HP engine. We gingerly drove Christine onto the ferry which now listed badly, and off we went. Many of them were pulled across on dodgy ropes tied to branches on the other side. Swift currents meant any problem with the ropes meant a big problem for the "ferry" and the car on board.



One of many dodgy river crossings

We went through several villages. They were classic African villages and very neat and tidy. We got to Djenne. We met a white American couple that had gone native and were as scary as hell.

One of the most spectacular sights in Mali are their unique churches. You know the mud ones with the wood poles sticking out of them. Some are huge and the poles serve as scaffolding for the annual reapplication of mud. The bigger ones are several stories high. As Djenne is rather famous for its churches and as an ancient transport hub we saw our first tourists. It made us run for the hills. I think we had forgotten we were tourists as well.

We took another ferry and headed for Mopti. More punctures. Fidi started teaching us a little German.

In Mopti we met a local lad called Belco. He was one of many self-appointed guides. These guys basically handle everything and anything for a fee. Mopti was fantastic. It was vibrant, colourful and friendly. We took a canoe or pirogue trip to an island and did a little village visit.



African women work hard

A hysterical but rather disturbing incident occurred in Mopti. We were wandering the streets and alleyways and we came upon a group of kids playing football. We stopped to watch. Running parallel to the street were massive gutters. They were not just for water. They were for sewerage. And of course they were blocked and filled to the brim. You see where this is going. One kid sprinted after the ball, tripped, and fell headfirst into the gutter. He emerged, laughing, covered in excrement and re-joined the game. We, of course, were speechless. That night we worked till 12pm fixing bloody punctures and went to bed exhausted.

I had always wanted to see the Dogon people. Belco agreed to take us. There were no roads so off we set. We felt like traders as we had taken pots and pans and misc. items for trading purposes. The hike was long and hot and went in and out of ravines and valleys of the Bandiagara Escarpment. Finally, the path opened out and the village appeared. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before or since. The village lay beneath some massive cliffs but worked in and amongst the cliffs were all manner of strange and wonderful dwellings. It was like something straight out of National Geographic.



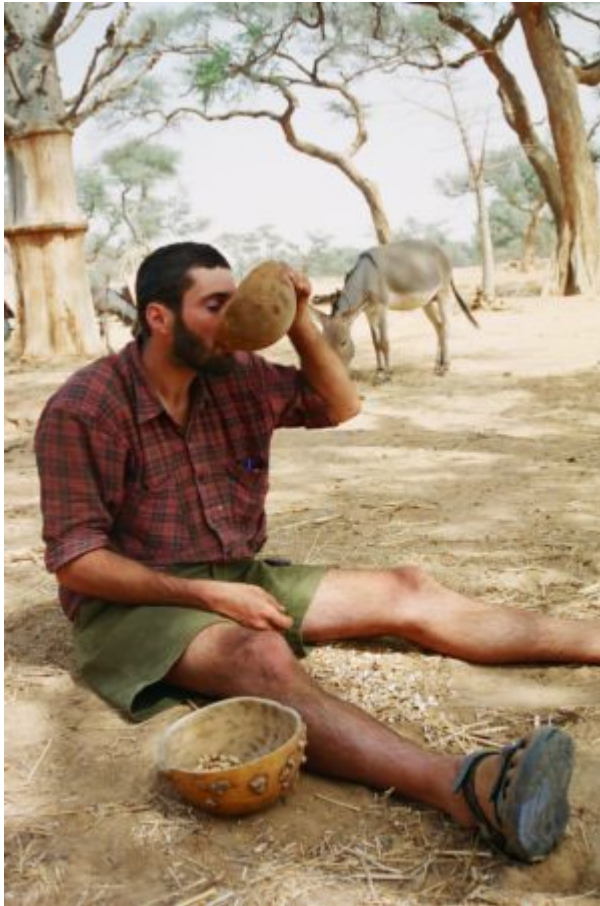
Dogon village

One section of the cliff dwellings had tiny, tiny houses. I was perplexed. I asked around and apparently pygmies used to live here hundreds of years ago until the Bantu tribes arrived and chased them off. Shame.

The Dogon are an interesting and primitive tribe. They use millet instead of money and a man must have 4 granaries of millet before he can marry. As there were a lot of kids I had to assume that Dogon farming was going well.



The old village in the cliffs and the new one below



Fidi getting stuck in

We were extremely fortunate to have arrived on Market day which was very busy and interesting.

We were given vast quantities of honey beer and just spent the afternoon hanging out with the villagers. Suddenly there was the most god awful screaming sound. We nearly shat ourselves but discovered that a goat was being slaughtered around the corner. What a nasty sound. We spent the night there, on a rooftop.

Late in the night the people started traditional dancing. It was great. And even better to know it was not a commercial tourist activity but a genuine night in an African village.

The next day we bargained for some fascinating and “real” African curios. While I have tossed a lot of my African collection, the Dogon stuff remains.



Abandoned old Pygmy village

Due to our limited stocks, no money and lack of anything to buy anyway we had many meals in local eateries. In hindsight this was a highlight of the trip. We met so many people and learned so much by hanging with the locals. The food was usually pretty crap but then our food options were pretty crap too. These eateries were far from hygienic but interestingly enough we very rarely had any tummy bugs.

We passed the turnoff to Timbuktu. I was torn. It was only something like 150km away and was on the original plan as a stop. But our lack of funds, endless mechanical troubles and the fact that we were weeks behind schedule meant we had to pass it up. With all the drama it just seemed too frivolous for a detour of that nature. I do regret that decision.

One day we were struggling along. The vehicle seemed sluggish and was having fuel supply problems. We checked the usual suspects and I decided to open up the carburettor to make sure all was in order. Lone and behold, all was definitely not in order. The carburettor was three quarters full of sand. The poor jets were filtering fuel through sand. A massive clean-up saw old Christine back in top form, which meant a maximum speed of 60km/hr.

There was a section in Mali where we went for around 7 days without seeing anyone or anything. The road meandered along isolated stretches of wasteland. It was very intimidating but also magnificent to be so alone out there. Not seeing any signs of human habitation at all was amazing. Camping out under the stars next to a fire every night was pretty amazing too.

Further along we encountered a desolate gravel road. It was in surprisingly good condition, or so I thought. For the first time in yonks we could go faster than 40km/h. So we went 60km/hr. Suddenly a crater came into view at the last minute. It was enormous. I hit the brakes and we

skidded along and went into the crater. Fortunately, nothing was broken but it was yet another reminder that African roads were not to be trusted.

6. NIGER

The End of West Africa

At the border crossing we were witness to a very nasty situation. I was inside the customs office and a huge local man was having a fight with another guy. The customs official had taken this guy's travel papers and was demanding money. The little guy was indicating he didn't have any. Suddenly the official slapped the little guy off his feet, tore up his papers and proceeded to kick him out of the offices – without any documents to go back or forward. I had to see him next. He did not get any money. And I stole his pen.



Not the abbatoir shed but you get the idea!

One afternoon we decided to spoil ourselves and find some meat. We were directed to a huge shed that was where the meat was at. We were drooling, until we got there that is. It was a charnel house. I cannot even begin to describe the horrors we saw. There were body parts everywhere. It was dark. The floor was flooded in blood. Shirtless guys were dismembering animals with axes and machetes. It stank. Meat was in various stages of decay. Some fresh, some not. The whole place was buzzing with millions of flies. The older meat was entirely covered with the little bastards. There were intestines and various organs in piles. A guy shouted at me, I turned around and saw a huge wheelbarrow filled with goat heads. But damn we were hungry. We made a quick purchase and, as with all meat in Africa there are no cuts.

Forget fillet, rump or chops. There are just bloody hunks of meat with bone splinters in them. We pushed aside our thoughts of the shed from hell and had a braai. It was good.

One day while chugging along I noticed the brakes had failed. You know, these things happen. We fiddled about for a while and a local mechanic pitched up. He decided to get involved. The bonnet was up and he proceeded to literally climb into the engine bay. He figured out the problem. But we needed brake fluid and there was almost none left. So he made a plan –Africa style. He sucked up the brake fluid from the reservoir, kept it in his mouth, and carried on working. In case you didn't know –brake fluid can strip paint. When he was done he just returned the fluid and voila. What a hero.



Always dressed to the nines



Water is life



A ferry has so many different connotations...

Our tyre and puncture problems continued unabated. One day we stopped at a roadside to fix yet another and ask advice about what was wrong. We were now on puncture 27. While a local was taking a look I wandered off to have a look around.

I saw a guy changing a large truck tyre. You may think that's not very interesting and normally you would be right. The thing that made this different was that he was only using an

axe. In order to change a tyre you have to get the tyre off the rim. This is a tricky operation needing several tyre irons. This guy was swinging the axe down on the tyre to knock it off the rim. He did this without damaging the tyre. I was suitably impressed.

We spent a fair amount of time in markets. My French was scary but improving. I was always amazed by the dress of the African women. Always very colourful, and they always looked immaculate. One afternoon we stopped at a market. There was fantastic pottery for sale but what made this memorable was a minibus crammed as usual with people and bags but what extremely entertaining was the goats strapped to the roof.



Goats taking a ride

One rather surprising and disappointing issue concerned water. Any slow flowing or standing water was seething with Bilharzia. It was well known and the signs, both in terms of notices and very sick people, were everywhere. This was before there was a cure for it. There was many a time we were parched and filthy and had to drive past dams and slow rivers. Nowadays you just take some pills to get rid of the parasite. I would happily have caught a curable Bilharzia for a swim or two.

Niamey was a surprisingly vibrant and pleasant town. We had been out of contact for a long time and I finally got to call home. My mom was ecstatic but pissed. She had been onto Interpol because she thought I was dead, kidnapped or missing.

I had planned to send a postcard but had been advised of the most ridiculous scheme ever. Apparently, the post office staff used irons to heat the letters and postcards to remove the stamps and then resell them.



The piroque's of West Africa

Once again were getting punctures. By mid-afternoon we had had 4. As we had only two spares we fixed two and couldn't face fixing the other two. We stopped in at the nearest town and went to the ever present tyre people to have them fix the other two. We spoke at length with a chap and for the first time we heard a plausible explanation. The rims were slightly rusty and this was rubbing through the tubes. It made sense. So we sanded them down. Painted them and lubricated them. With fingers crossed we left the town.

7. NIGERIA

The America of Africa



African inventiveness

We entered Nigeria with trepidation. At the time there were a lot of bad stories. We were warned off going to Lagos entirely and had been told that the notorious police, dressed in black, were a major problem.

What struck me immediately about Nigeria was the population. The entire country was totally covered by people. We had enormous difficulty finding bush camps as there just wasn't any open land. We found the people relatively well educated but their English was incredible. They had learned all the big words but didn't know when to use them, so sentences are full of fancy old-world English words, but made little, or no sense.

The trouble started from the get go. At the border we were harassed badly because I was a South African. At one stage I thought they were going to beat me up. We actually abandoned that border post as there was another one not too far away. Although this one was not pleasant either, I didn't feel like I was about to be strung up.

We had to change money. The rate was ridiculous. We found a seriously dodge guy and I had to follow him into a back alley to do the nasty. We had been warned that if you were caught changing money on the black market you were screwed. Unfortunately, the gap between the official rate and the black market rate was so massive there wasn't really a choice. So, I did the deal and we counted out hundreds and hundreds of notes. There was a moment with the count when we were short changed and I thought it was going to end badly. Those guys had mastered every con. One of them was when counting money. They double folded bills so

they could be counted twice. Luckily we saw it and it all ended up fine and it was declared an “error”.

We pushed hard to get through the country and had many, many roadblocks. We were pressured to pay bribes at every one. Aside from our ethical objections to bribes we honestly couldn't afford them. And so we spent many an hour negotiating and waiting to be let through.

One could see that the police were pretty lawless, which in itself is rather amusing. They wore flashy sunglasses and were very intimidating. One afternoon we were stopped and a senior cop wearing Ray Bans, pulled out a nickel plated Colt 45 and leaned in the window waving it in our faces and asking what we had for him. Often these guys behaved like spoilt children. All this incident cost us was a bic pen – which we had lifted from the previous checkpoint!

I must say though, that the rubber snake I had wound around the gear stick, worked wonders. I knew the locals were terrified of snakes so I bought one in England. Whenever one of them saw it they nearly had a stroke. It was a good ice breaker and got us out of paying many bribes.

I was so broke I couldn't even afford local cigarettes half the time – which is saying a lot as they were cheap and nasty. So it became a game to bum smokes off the police or customs people. They were so taken aback that, not only did I usually succeed, but it often made getting through checkpoints easier. If I was feeling particularly cheeky I would also bum their matches to light the cigarette and pinch them too.

We became masters of border control. At one point we were stopped and it was made clear that we would not continue without payment of some road “tax”. It was a lot of money. And so we decamped, right there and then in the middle of the road. We put up our tent, started brewing some tea and plonked ourselves down in our camp chairs. They watched us with shock and then later respect for about two hours and finally agreed to let us go through.

Another time we were just finishing the endless paperwork and one young punk of a customs officer decided we could not proceed because our vehicle was dirty. I nearly fell over. It was dirty. We were dirty. He was dirty, dammit. Anyway, he made us unpack the entire vehicle, no small task, and wash the vehicle. We had to “disinfect” it so we added some “magical” ingredient to achieve this result. As we worked, filthy rust bucket local taxi matatu's poured past us laughing. I felt like a girl in one of those scenes where all the hottie's were doing the car wash thing. Clearly, it looked a little different.



A local eatery



Thankfully no wind today

One of the most ironic things on the trip was the scarcity of fuel in Nigeria. Considering that they are one of the largest producers in the world, it was truly ridiculous. We spent a fair amount of time in queues waiting for fuel. In some places queues were kilometres long. There was an interesting solution to this. There were a group of people who one could pay to sit in your car all day and keep your place in the queue while you went to work. Insane. Most fuel stations had armed guards to maintain the peace. At one such stop the station manager kindly waived us forward to avoid the queue. We started filling up and pandemonium erupted. The locals went bananas and were verging on attacking us. Fortunately, the armed guards were there. We filled up and left hastily.

We got to Kano and realised this was a huge city. One amusing incident was negotiating the roundabouts. It was chaos. Not only were there at least 6 lanes of cars in 2 lanes of road, but there were dogs, chickens, goats and donkeys. There were bicycles, minibuses, big buses and cars. There were kids. And everything was happening fast. In the midst of this were immaculately turned out policemen waving their arms and signalling to the drivers. No one took any notice.

Kano market was the biggest I have ever seen. There were literally thousands of stalls selling absolutely everything you can imagine. It was called Sabon Gari and covered 16 hectares.

The tyres were still holding. It was so great not to be worrying about them all the time. It felt weird to have the evenings to ourselves and not spend them swearing at the tyres while fixing them by camp light.



Market day

Everywhere we went we saw evidence of traffic accidents. It was certainly sobering.

Our final tally: 59 police checks in Nigeria. None of them easy.

08. CAMEROON

Transitioning

We entered into Cameroon through a small and iffy border post. What awaited us on the other side was rather depressing. It was early morning and there was fog and all we saw was tree stumps for miles and miles and the odd local women scavenging for wood. These people had denuded the earth to a degree I had never seen.

The people there were manic. We were attacked by everyone demanding food, gifts, offering petrol, money changing, prostitutes. They swarmed all over us. Luckily we were used to it or I think we might have cracked.

The villages there were interesting as they look like little fortresses. Very different. The Harmattan was still with us and the sun was a silver globe in the sky. We entered a lunar like landscape and found a camp for the night. The roads were horrendous.

At one point we were in 4x4, with brakes locked, a lake in the distance and skidding with a herd of cattle in front of us. You don't want to kill livestock in Africa. We got to the lake and it was clear it was not safe to swim in. We were parched, hot and bothered. It felt like a crime to drive past that water.

We continued on and watched a bunch of guys hunting field mice with clubs. It was a bit weird. While we couldn't swim in it we did manage to shower as we rubbed off vigorously which was a life saver.



The rains are coming...

I couldn't wait to get to the jungle. It was getting greener and greener by the minute. I was sick of the heat, the dust and the bloody Harmattan.

The monsoon season was coming. It was now pouring every day at around 4pm. It would be sunny, then massive grey thunderclouds would appear, it would come down in buckets and then disappear and it would be sunny again in an hour – but humid. Awesome. It's nice to have the stereotypes confirmed.



Unusual pot plant



Canoeing done badly



Butterflies everywhere



The only form of transport

At Carnot, we got offered a millet beet called Duma made from you guessed it millet and honey. It was good but heavy. We saw a lot of people with quashiokwor. A vitamin deficiency that caused massive growths on their necks.

We got stopped by a very anal retentive guy. He didn't want a bribe but he was worried about our indicator, reverse and stop lights. He seemed genuinely concerned. Luckily all was good so we could just laugh about it. Of all the things to worry about. If only he knew that we had no brakes, broken leaf springs and all the rest of our issues.



An excellent bridge - one a only a few!

Things were going better so a little fun was in order. We stopped for lunch alongside a massive river. There were a few piroques, or canoes, there. Maz and I decided to go for a paddle. We went upstream which was difficult going. Eventually we were buggered so we turned round. Very soon we were speeding along. We had come up through a bridge but going back the current was too fast and we hit the pontoon which instantly submerged us and the canoe under it. Luckily we came out the other side ok but it was a little too exciting for my liking.

While driving through a forest we found massive seed pods. Really massive. Around 45cm. I grabbed a few and threw them at the floor of the car next to my shoes. We motored on. As always it was hot as hell in the foot well with the engine and gearbox heat. That evening when we stopped I grabbed my shoes and lone and behold the pod had contracted and totally constricted my shoes. I had to break it, to free the shoe.

We continued on and the roads got smaller and smaller. I loved it. We swam in the rivers. We drank palm wine (which is foul). We entered a region with millions of butterflies. It was incredible. For once the flies were outnumbered.

We watched some women making manioc. Wow, they work hard. Manioc is the staple food resource. It is a grain but yuck, it's nasty. Basically, once it's crushed it gets cooked into a jelly like version of pap, or porridge. It's yellow/brown and tasteless.

In Cameroon we saw the first legit commercial enterprise. A massive sawmill. While it was cool to see people doing something for a change the massive trees they dragged in every hour made me sad.

On the road towards central Africa we met another vehicle doing a trip. We had seen so few travellers. It was a nice couple from the UK. Their vehicle looked shocking and they explained it was from the roads in Zaire and CAR – where we were headed. In addition, the girl showed us her legs. They looked like she had been shot like 10 times. It was bad. Apparently, she had been attacked by some or other bugs in the water when they were digging the vehicle out and they had some sort of flesh eating enzyme which had gobbled up chunks of her. Not nice. We couldn't wait to get there.



Some survivors from Zaire



Bizarre section - garden like road

A regular sight was guys on bicycles. What they managed to transport on these bikes was incredible. Amongst other things I saw them carrying: Fuel, pigs, chickens, children, wives, goats, wood and coal. But it was the quantities that were remarkable. We regularly saw them transporting 80L of fuel which for the uninitiated is 80kg.

10. CAR (Central African Republic)

Welcome to the Jungle!

The drive in to Bangui, the capital, was tough. The sun was setting and as we neared the town the traffic increased exponentially. Suddenly we were in African rush hour with goats, donkeys, chickens, bicycles, pedestrians and kids running amok. And it was getting dark.

Eventually we found a dodgy little campsite to stay in. I was feeling pretty shitty and very weak so we decided to take a couple of day's rest before heading into Zaire. My condition deteriorated and I had to take a day off and rest. And then, just as suddenly I was feeling a lot better.

So we set up camp, did vehicle maintenance and repairs, restocked and prepped for the hardest part of the journey. With a 25-year-old vehicle things broke constantly and she needed constant TLC. Sometimes I felt like I was seeing Africa from underneath the car.

We went out for a walk and saw a massive pig immersed in sewer overflow and scoffing itself into oblivion. We rarely could afford meat but those pork ribs were good!

We met an old Aussie guy who had just come through Zaire. The stories were terrifying. He drew us a little map which I still have, that looks like it belongs in a movie. He was, as they usually are, hysterical. One comment was: “be careful of those log bridges, they are as slippery as a butcher’s dick” – WTF?

The car was looking good and we felt we were getting ready for the next big challenge. We had some local guy do some work and he totally overcharged. I told him to shove it up his fish hole. Where the hell I got that saying from I don’t know.



Huge snaking rivers of Central Africa

We changed all the oils in the engine, diff and gearbox. What a messy job. Someone should pay those guys at Land Rover more. The design is about as unfriendly as it could be.

We were having horrible trouble with the brakes. In trying to seal the 25-year-old fittings the nipples kept snapping off. It was heart-breaking. Just as we fixed one the next would go when we tried to undo them to bleed the brakes. Eventually, covered in oil and brake fluid we chucked it in and decided to spoil ourselves with a dinner out. Our version of dinner out was at a local eatery. We had Manioc and bread with beef stew and a beer for one pound.

Fantastic. It was in a little shack overlooking the river before a thunderstorm. It was perfect. It stormed for a few minutes. For a change we were out of the rain and could watch from cover. It cleared and sunset arrived.



Plotting a course-deep holes ahead

One night we ventured out into Bangui, the capital. It was a mad house of activity. It was packed and busy. We took a “taxi” which was very cheap and headed to one of the markets. There was a lot of pushing and shoving and craziness. Suddenly, I got hit from behind while someone pick pocketed me. Embarrassingly, the guy had picked me clean and even found my mace which he then proceeded to spray me with. With tears running down my face we gave chase but he lost us easily in the alley ways. Oh the shame! Maced with my own mace. I was red with shame. As compensation we had a fruit smoothie African style –it was called Jui de Frui.

We awoke at dawn to the usual chaos, call to prayer, dogs barking and cars backfiring. I was still horribly unwell but I was being a trooper, or just dumb, not sure which. We were not that keen on CAR people. They stole, looked unpleasant and were threatening.

We set off and quickly the roads got smaller and the bush thicker. The going in the jungle was extremely slow and at one point we were at risk of overturning. We stopped to transfer some weight and suddenly there they were. A small family of very little people were standing and watching the mzungu giants. Pygmies. They were tiny and cute as buttons, as well as being friendly and helpful.



Big night out in Bangui before the mugging



A Pygmy village

That night we decamped and got ready for the evening. Suddenly a massive storm blew in. The wind picked up and suddenly it was pouring with rain as it can only do in the tropics. We hunkered down for the night. And then, in the darkness, we saw a procession coming our way with torches. We got a little jumpy until we realised they were forming up in a field. It was pygmies and some sort of gathering was occurring. We moved a little closer. They began chanting and dancing. It was very strange being there and their singing was totally hypnotic. Standing there, in the rain, swaying to the primitive African chanting, watching this race of ancient people is something I will never forget.

The next day we set off and promptly got stuck about 2 metres from where we left. The kids laughed their asses off and eventually after a sense of humour failure, so did we.

That is until the gearbox jammed again. Memories of Switzerland. I stayed calm and fortunately it was only the gearshift bearing that was being naughty.

Motoring slowly through the dark jungle with the trees reaching for the sky like skyscrapers, and a thin strip of sky for light, we saw movement. We stopped and a tiny band of pygmy hunters tentatively crossed the road in front of us and disappeared from view. Arriving at their crossing point there was no sign that they had ever been there.

That night we pulled over and bush camped, for a change. The forest was black and incredibly noisy. We settled down for the night. Something thumped me awake. For a second I was too nervous to move, and then another thumped onto my lap from above. I jumped out of bed and scrabbled for the torch. It was giant millipedes falling out of the trees for some reason. They were enormous, about 30cm and harmless thank goodness.

One afternoon we were motoring along when I realised there was a black line all along the side of the vehicle. We stopped and I got out. It was the famous army ants on the march. The jungle people are terrified of the ants and their reputation for devouring any living thing, precedes them. Villagers have been known to abandon their homes and relocate until the army has passed.

The abundance was incredible. So often, when we needed something we just stopped, got out and took it. We regularly found pineapples, mangoes, bananas and avocados by the side of the road. It felt like paradise.

Right in the south we visited the Dzanga Sangha reserve. As per normal there were no gates, fences, people or animals. But it was certainly beautiful enough.

One day we were motoring along and we saw a curious looking object by the side of the road. We stopped to have a look. It was huge booze still. I marvelled at the ingenuity of the thing and obviously had to try the brew. As expected it was way too strong and tasted like it might pickle something. We congratulated the master distiller and continued on our merry way.

From time to time we traded with locals. People were poor here like I have never seen. Some guys wore t-shirts that consisted basically of just the neck part. It would have been funny if it

wasn't so sad. One of our first major trades was a kilogram of home-made peanut butter for some empty plastic bottles. I know, tragic.

We crossed endless rivers. The abundance of water was absolutely magnificent. It just didn't end. Hundreds and hundreds of big, lazy green rivers.



Another iffy river crossing

11. ZAIRE

Log Bridges, Mud and Malaria

We got to the exit of CAR and met a really friendly young guy. He helped us through the paperwork and we got onto the rickety ferry and crossed over. We were very nervous as this was going to be the toughest stretch of the trip. Considering what had already happened we were more than a little concerned.

The fun and games started immediately. We encountered a seriously nasty customs guy. Believe it or not it was the same guy that we met on the CAR side. He was checking us out. He was apparently well known as the Bastard from Buta. He was overly aggressive and demanded a ton of USD to enter. As always, it was not an official charge. There was an

“entry fee”, a “camera fee”, an “insurance fee” a “carnet fee” and on it went. The scary thing is that these guys were organised and even had receipt books.

We, as usual, refused politely and begun the slow and painful process of negotiations. They harassed the hell out of us. They made us unpack the entire car. Scratched through all our stuff and made it very clear which items they were fond of. It went on and on. Unlike many of the other posts, these guys would not budge. There was no other way into the country. We spent the entire day there. In the end we got the amount down but we still paid. It was a cost we could not afford. It was the only bribe we ever paid, although we did get a receipt. Damn them. And so we were in, for better or for worse. What a start it had been.

The road was actually a track and we disappeared into the jungle. It was fantastic. That night we pulled off and camped under the giant trees. The forest was filled with life and sounds. The only downside was I discovered that I had jiggers. For the uninitiated that is slang for sand worms. So I got a pin and dug them out of my big toe. It was pretty disgusting seeing fat little white worms wiggling around in there.

I was a little intimidated by the roads. They were tough. There were huge holes, deep ravines and high rises. I remember thinking thank heavens it's not raining or I don't know how we would cope. Little did I know but the rain was already on the way.



Such a good road -had to take a pic

We did a lot of trading. While there was no industry or shops the people were very self-sufficient. We saw small patches of mangoes, bananas, pawpaw's, avocados, pineapples, maize and assorted other crops. We purchased 2kg of coffee which saw us all the way to Cape Town for 1 dollar.

We got to Monga Mission where we had to change dollars to the local currency. The exchange rate was 1 dollar to 25 000 Zaire's. The fun part was there were only 500 notes. So every dollar meant 50 notes. It was totally ridiculous.

The gearbox was grumbling again so I decided to have a look. I opened everything up and a bloody ball bearing from the gear shift fell into the box. Dammit. I spent hours trying to find that ball. I drained the box. I even bribed a kid to fish around with his small hand in the box. It was gone and now the gearshift had a problem too. I found a guy who had a ball bearing that was almost the same and he tried to charge me 20USD, I laughed and gave him a pen. I put everything back together again with relief.

We spoke to the nun at the mission and she cautioned us about the roads ahead and said we better move it because the rains were coming and once they started there was no way through.

Zaire was obviously similar to CAR but the people were even poorer. However, the people were amazing. We met a school teacher that had not been paid in two years. I asked him how he survived. He said he just carried on teaching and the village donated food and things to him for his services. Unbelievable.

Fuel was hard to find. There were no garages, obviously. There were no shops of any kind. Fuel was sold in empty bottles –some with lids, some not. Even that was few and far between. The most reliable source of fuel became churches and missions. Funny that. And the rate was \$1/L. Outrageous. And with the slow going we were burning fuel at an alarming rate. We were getting around 3km/L.

The jungle was incredible. It was so lush, rich and beautiful. I loved it. We drove through bamboo forest, across fields, through dense bush, over hills and across small rivers.

I had been really concerned about the lack of animals. On our trip it became sadly clear that the locals had decimated the animal population for food. This was in evidence throughout the trip.



Christine and Maz getting put through their paces

To illustrate: From time to time one would hear gunfire. It was of course a little unsettling. In the early morning one would see the hunters returning. Basically they shot or caught anything they could. Most of the time it was vervet monkeys. They would tie the tail around the neck of the monkey and sling them like a handbag. You would see a guy with two monkeys over each arm. The few guns these guys had looked at least 100 years old and were held together with rope and wire. They were eating anything that moved.

Zaire had a lawless feel to it. From time to time one would see bored soldiers. They were young, heavily armed and looked wicked. They made us extremely uncomfortable. It was a really strange feeling to realise that one was totally alone and vulnerable. There was no right or wrong, no black or white. Everything was negotiable. One really could just disappear here. No cellphone, satellite phone or landlines anywhere.

It was a crazy place. We travelled around 1500km. It took 3 weeks of 12 hour driving days. We never saw a tarred road and probably only saw about 10 cars the whole way.

Some of the tracks were quite narrow as they were mainly used as footpaths. We were rolling along one day and there was a log sticking out. I moved slightly over to the other side and crashed hard into a bigger log. It was the other half of the tree that had been cut. I was devastated. The fender was destroyed. Luckily, there was no mechanical damage so on we went.



A less good road. Clearing the way



The rains have arrived



Nearly took a tumble



A rare moment of relaxation

We had entered via Buta and passed through Bongo. We were heading towards a town called Bili. The town after that was called Api and the next one Ango. It was a little silly. The road was often overrun with vegetation or fallen trees. We spent a fair amount of time clearing the way. It was tiring but fun and exciting work. At a stop I counted 12 different insects in a one square foot area. The place was teeming.

With all the abundance of wild food we are actually eating better than ever. We had bananas and peanut butter on Ryvita biscuits. Living the good life. Exciting times.

As we had the “map” from the Aussie guy we managed to avoid a few dodgy stop points where they would be asking for money or worse. At Bomo we narrowly avoided a customs stop. Don’t you just love these names. The going was slow, 10-15km/hr.

I was feeling terrible again, like I did in CAR, but worse. I continued to ignore it. Being sick just wasn’t an option. A few days before I had injured my arm and it was festering and just not healing. I was worried. We had stopped at a river and I was washing my hands when I looked up and saw a little child defecate just upstream of me. It made me wonder. It sounds weird, but the infection was quite bad and I was stumped.

A couple of days later we stumbled onto a Catholic Mission. I was really sick and getting delirious, not great for driving. So we decided to take a rest day. A nun found me. The lady took one look at me and said “Son, you’ve got Malaria”. She did a quick blood test and confirmed it. Several doses of quinine and I was back in the driver’s seat.

There were endless rivers. We must have crossed at least 50 of them on very iffy ferries, and many on dilapidated bridges, usually made of logs.

On one of the bigger rivers there was a really scary ferry. It was made of the usual barrels and planks. This river had a rope across it. The ferryman basically pulled the ferry over along the rope by hand. The problem was that there was no way to steer or pole, the river was huge and flowing swiftly. I looked across and saw that the rope was tied to a tiny little tree that looked ready to fall over. Just downriver were rapids and big jagged rocks. It was a 15-minute trip that lasted a lifetime.

Zaire, formerly known as the Congo, was once a Belgian colony. While the roads were unbelievably bad there were also sections that were rather bizarre. They were bricked. This would probably have been done at least 60-100 years ago and obviously they were now ruined and patchy but it is remarkable to think that they had once been bricked highways through the jungle.



Some of the only standing buildings we saw

From time to time we bought or traded for food. One evening we got an offer of Elephant stew. It looked OK. We ate it. It was stringy and sour. We thought that was the Elephants fault not the cook but we were wrong. It was one of the few causes of diarrhoea we ever had. It was a comedy of errors. Drive 20 minutes, stop, leave the engine running, bush toilet, back, drive 20 minutes, repeat. All day.

At some point the differential starting making horrible grinding noises. Our financial position was dire. We could not afford a major problem. We consulted the locals. The solution was ridiculous but solved the problem for the next 15 000 km's or so. We got bananas. We shoved them in the diff and continued. Unbelievably, the sound disappeared and never returned.

One afternoon we had stopped for the day. We were broken and needed some time out. I never had cigarettes and a young boy showed up so I asked him to find me some and that I would give him a pen. He returned several hours later with a few loose ones. I asked him where he got them. It was a small village 6km away. I felt terrible.

The only transport around was bicycles. And boy did they work hard for a living. The only signs of civilisation anywhere were consistently the Missions. For some reason I found it a little disturbing.

Fuel was a constant source of stress. Finding it, paying for it, storing it and the speed at which we were using it. We had the capacity to carry 320L and so we stocked up whenever we

could. Most of the time fuel was sold in bottles. There were no petrol stations anywhere. Often it was sold in 1L coke bottles. One time we bought fuel from a guy who had it in an open tin with leaves and things floating in it. Nothing a little straining through a T-Shirt couldn't fix though. One little trick a lot of these roadside guys did was they thinned the fuel to make it go further and of course to totally stuff up a strangers' car. Often they would mix paraffin into it. So we learned a little trick of splashing some on the tyre to see how it evaporated.

On one log bridge, Fidi walked it first and expressed a deep concern that it was too rotten to cross. We examined our options. There were none. And so across we went. About three quarters across we began to hear a cracking sound and I floored it. We came very close to dropping into the river.

On another, we were almost across when the car began to slip. The rear wheels were clinging to the logs by centimetres. We stopped. Propped the wheels up and limped across. Often these bridges were quite high and the drop could be fatal for the car and possibly the idiot inside. And apparently, slippery as a butchers' dick.

We stopped in at one of the only National Parks. It was a little sad as most of the animals had been poached by the army. The rangers there were friendly and have a thankless job. One guy had recently been shot by poachers. It seemed a hopeless task.

We went to the old camp where tourists used to go. It had an old style manor house. It was deserted and derelict. There were old black and white framed pictures of the former colonial days. It was unbelievably nostalgic – seeing all the hunters dressed up in their finery and the ladies in ball gowns. I met a wonderful girl called Tonio. She was elusive and we got on well. It was a shame we would only ever be passing ships in the night.

From time to time we had to clear the road. As there were no cars, if a tree fell over people would just leave it there. So we chopped and hacked our way through several of those scenarios.



That's a decent bridge



Seeing Africa from under a Landrover



Goats do roam...

One morning we got stuck again. We proceeded to do the usual stuff. Dig, sand ladders and so on. We jacked the car up to the max on the hi-lift jack and climbed underneath. Suddenly the jack moved. We jumped out and discovered it had bent. I was livid. The mud was incredibly viscous. We just sunk deeper and deeper. There seemed to be no bottom to the hole. We started getting anxious. Eventually the vehicle was so deep in the mud, we had to put our heads under water to be able to scoop mud and dig. It was grim. At one point we totally lost one of the sand ladders. Morning turned to afternoon and it went on and on. We had progressed like, 3 metres forward but were still totally submerged. We were running out of steam. A group of villagers had appeared and eventually, with the added manpower we got out. We were destroyed and covered head to toe in gritty mud. We thanked them with some food and headed off again. The kids ran on behind us.



A little help from some friends...

Suddenly I noticed that a kid was actually hanging on the back of the vehicle. I stopped and he jumped off and ran away with something in his hand. I had a look and saw he had taken some bungee cords. We needed them. I marched into the village to report the kid to the chief. Believe it or not the chief found the kid, gave him a smack and returned our stuff. Wonderful.

The last leg of our trip through Zaire was a blur. It was crazy. The rainy season arrived in full force. We drove 16 hours a day to get out. The roads were beyond description. Days were spent powering through massive mud holes, getting stuck, clearing trees from the road and getting more stuck. Much time was spent in mud, getting bitten by scary bugs, digging the vehicle out. We got really slick at this. Towards the end, Fidi would sit on the fender, clutching the sand ladders and hanging on for dear life so that as we hit bad stretches of mud that would get us stuck he would leap off and throw the ladders under the wheels, grab them as I passed and jump back on.

One evening, after we had been stuck all day, we were so tired we didn't eat and just curled up in the mud and fell asleep. Right there. The morning was funny as the mud had dried a bit and we were encased. Some locals arrived and looked at us like we had lost our minds.

In one village we organised to eat with a family. They served us an unknown meat dish. It was extremely soft and almost silky. It was almost like pate. We later found out it was monkey meat. And we were in Ebola country. Great.

With all the mud, we lost our brakes entirely. Anyone who knows driving through mud will know you need a bit of speed. But without brakes, this caused all manner of problems.

One of the most dramatic days of the trip came next. We got onto yet another crappy ferry and half way across the river the captain just stopped. We asked him what the problem was and while discussing the matter, a boat pulled up with a government military official. He jumped on board and started giving us trouble. He wanted a ludicrous sum of money for importing the vehicle into his town. He asked to see my passport and promptly took ownership and wouldn't give it back. Eventually we had a little tussle and I managed to grab it back. He lost it and jumped into his boat screaming at the Captain. We all stood there a little dazed.

I spoke to the Captain and he advised that the official had told him not to let us dock and that he was returning with the military to arrest us. We managed to beg him to get us close to shore but not dock. We ended up just driving Christine off the ferry into the river. Quite dramatic, that was. Anyway we drove, pushed, dragged her out and headed up the road to a T junction. It was getting late. At the junction, we looked right and, no jokes, saw an army truck bouncing down the track towards us. It only took one second to turn left and we raced off in the opposite direction, well as fast as we could go. Soon it was dark and the truck was not that far behind us. We were terrified that they would have radios or similar and would warn the next village or town of our impending arrival. We were also heading in the wrong direction as well. Eventually it was dark, lights were on and we were a beacon of light. I made a quick rash decision to turn the lights of on a corner and just drive off the track straight into the forest and hope for the best. We managed to go about fifty metres and then I just switched everything off. We sat there in petrified silence as they rumbled past. It felt like we were in a movie – a horror movie. For several days thereafter we were expecting to be apprehended at every turn. Luckily for us, nothing ever came of this incident



Fetching a ferry captain. Note the crappy line...



Kids....



A really, really big tree.



Trading for food. Money had no use there

Bumblng along down yet another muddy track, we got stuck. I turned the vehicle off so we could dig ourselves out. When we were ready I found the vehicle would not start. Popping the hood, I found to my horror that the battery had been shaken loose and a piece of steel had penetrated the casing. We couldn't push start because of the mud. So there we were, trapped. No help for hundreds of kilometres and no way of communication. We all had a moment considering our predicament. The conclusion was there was water around, and wild fruits so we would be fine if we had to walk. However, as covered, there were no shops, garages or phones anywhere. So that might be a rather long walk. We decided to take it easy and get an early start the next day.

Several hours later an aid organisation cruiser passed our way. He helped us get roll started. We were extremely lucky. However, now we had no brakes, were driving fast and could not stall or switch off without a battery. No pressure.

As mentioned previously, the engine and gearbox put a huge amount of heat into the cabin. With the rain, and wading through water constantly we had a constant hot mist in the car. It was ridiculous to be sweating and cleaning the inside window all the time.

One afternoon while driving in the haze we were beset by strange wasp like creatures that poured into the car. They started stinging us. We stopped and cleared them out without any clue who they were, what they wanted and why they were attacking us.

The rain was unrelenting and the roads were getting worse and worse. We began to worry about making it through. We got stuck, again. We worked all day to get out. While working in the mud up to our hips we noticed we were getting bitten by something. It was horrid and we were very scared it was the same thing that had destroyed that girl's legs. We had no choice but to continue. Eventually we found one of the critters. It was a scary looking alien little bug. Nasty.



Clearing roads - all in a days work

We got to Bambili. It was a huge river. There was a ferry. We canoed over to see the Captain. Getting him to get off his ass and come fetch us was ridiculous. He was so lethargic. After we negotiated a fee he advised us that he had no fuel. So we had to provide that as well.

I was feeling terrible and starting to get a little worried. I started checking signs for Typhoid, Dysentery and so on. It was 39 degrees and humid as hell. We stayed at the Poko German Mission. I had Malaria again. I felt very Livingstone-ish. Once again, I got treated.

We left early as we knew there was another immigration post. We crossed before they got to work and later we came around a corner and straight into a makeshift barrier across the road. The guy jumped out and we almost ran him over. We motored on and hoped he didn't have a radio.

We got to Isiro and went to buy the only fuel in town from the mission. It was over a \$1.5 a litre. We were horrified.

The log bridges were starting to fray my nerves. I was wondering how many you can cross before the inevitable mistakes occurs. We reckoned the count was closing in on about 50.

The vegetation was slowly changing from dense jungle to open grasslands which are very beautiful. It was nice being able to see more than 100 metres in front of us.

I really felt for these people. There was just no hope for a better life. We met plenty of intelligent capable people who are trapped. In my naivety I spoke to one guy and asked why he didn't buy a bicycle and leave. He said he had no money. So I asked why he didn't walk. He had no passport and passports cost hundreds of dollars. This was long before the worldwide issue of mass illegal emigration.



A tourist victim of Zaire

One day we came across this very sweet little grave site. Weeks later, when we got to Kenya we learnt that it was actually the grave of a tourist that was on an overland truck. The story was quite something and was part of my thinking when I later started Nomad. So, the guide got malaria. He couldn't drive. A client took over the driving, with no licence or experience. They got stuck. The vehicle was jacked up. It rolled back while the client was under it, and he died. They buried him on the side of the road. Rough stuff.

The road deteriorated again. The puddles were not puddles but little dams. They were so deep water was coming in the air vents over 1m from the ground.

One day we met a truck driver who had broken down. What a story. He had been there three weeks. He had built himself a little hut and was just living off the land. His buddy had left to

walk to Uganda to get parts. He couldn't leave as he had cargo. Let's hope his buddy came back!

The tracks left by trucks were almost impossible to drive in as they were so deep and wide. So one went along straddling their tracks but with all the mud you ended up sliding into ruts constantly.

And then we hit the mud fields. Huge open deep mud bogs that stretched for hundreds of metres. Once again we were forced to go faster than was safe to avoid getting bogged down every metre. On one particularly long stretch, we could see where the trucks had gouged a huge hole in the "road". It was at least 3m deep and about 20m long. Animals, people and bicycles had created a narrow road around this. The mud was thick and deep. We gunned it and skidded along until we slid into the tiny verge on the edge of this canyon. A little luck saw us miss going sideways into the hole which would have been a bit of a problem.

Another one of these holes saw Christine canted over to the point that the side of the car was literally leaning against the mud bank. We had to drive along for around 20 metres sliding along against the roof rack. No serious damage was done.

One stretch of this endless mud saw the sand ladder kick up and go right through one of the fuel tanks. Fortunately, we were able to spot this so didn't lose too much juice. The tank was patched up and on we went.

One afternoon we were trundling along and came upon some different looking people in army fatigues. They were quite agitated and waved their guns at us. It turned out they were Sudanese military poachers. Lovely.

Another day we crossed a river via a concrete submerged roadway. It felt very sophisticated indeed. I realised how my definition of sophistication had changed beyond recognition.



A concrete causeway!

We met a couple from Medicines Sans Frontiers or Doctors Without Borders. They were very friendly and a source of endless information. They were doing good work in the middle of nowhere. They were handling an outbreak of bloody diarrhoea, which can be deadly and was wiping out a lot of people in the area.

The machinery we saw was tragic. We often saw beautiful equipment like road graders or bulldozers that were abandoned by the roadside because they had a flat tyre. After talking to some missionaries we learnt the awful truth about aid. Many countries and organisations have no problem in giving money to Africa. What they don't want is ongoing hassles. So sending people, parts and supporting aid assistance is a pain in the ass. What a tragic story that played out throughout the trip.



Abandoned and broken equipment everywhere

One night we saw fireflies. It was beautiful and made up for the day. I felt like I was in a fairy land.

We were push starting the car every day. In mud it's no fun. One day we hit a stretch of mud holes that meant we slowed down to probably 2 or 3 kilometres an hour. It was soul, and back, destroying. We marched on.

Leaving Zaire was the end of "Se Pa Bo" country. I cannot remember what that meant but I know it was used endlessly. It was English going forward. Finally. We were relieved and a little sad to be leaving the wildness of Zaire behind us.

12. UGANDA

Home of the West Nile Front

And so it was we entered Uganda. Even though it was just a line on a map we felt different. Safer. It was a huge relief and the roads were a lot better. Far from good, but better. These feelings were to be short lived though.

We had to continue to push start the car which was damned hard work as it was very heavy. Often, we didn't have a lot of runway and had to drop the clutch metres from walls, cars, people and so on. Dramatic incidents were to be experienced by all.



Our AK wielding hitch-hiker

Heading towards Laybo, we heard a terrible bang. We stopped. The suspension bolts had sheared off. I was not surprised after Zaire. Luckily we had spares and managed to repair the problem. It took 4 hours. But the car was suffering. It was cutting out, the gearbox was making rumbling noises, the rattles and squeaking was deafening. Poor Christine.

The next day we pulled into the northern town of Aru and quickly realised all was not well. The bullet ridden walls were a giveaway.

We went to the local mechanic and were informed of the situation. It was bad. Really bad. The West Nile Front Resistance Movement had taken over the road heading south and had made incursions against the town. We were informed that a landmine had been found on the road that day and a few weeks before an Italian had been killed by another landmine.

We stayed at yet another Catholic Mission. They were unsurprisingly unfriendly but did sell us fuel for an exorbitant price as usual. That night some troops arrived to check us out and intimidate the hell out of us with their AK's.

The previous week a convoy had attempted to leave the town and was ambushed. The mechanics driver had been shot and several tourists in a Land Rover had died in the attack. We were in a Land Rover.

The next week's convoy had been cancelled.

Before we had a chance to take this all in we were informed that two rebels had been captured and were busy being executed in the town square. True story.

So we set up camp amongst various scrap cars and such, and had a chat. We weren't going anywhere for a while. So we took the opportunity to sort the car out. We had to repair cracks to the chassis, fit new leaf springs, fix the brakes and endless other jobs. And, find a battery!

After a couple of days, we were suddenly advised that it was time to go. They had kept the next convoy quiet to prevent the rebels from planning any attack.

So we left and drove in silence. It was deserted along the roads and deeply scary. The drive took two hours and we travelled way faster than was safe on those gravel roads. We still hadn't fixed the brakes so the drive was scary anyway. It was really nerve wracking stuff.

Eventually we arrived at a safe town. We were so happy to just be alive. We sat down to a great supper and checked out the scene. It was like a refugee camp. People were camping out everywhere as there was a massive military presence. Army guys were everywhere.

We met a truck driver called Ali, an amazing chap who transported live chickens in his cab for supper. It was Africa at its best.

It was hot, we were being plagued by kids and mozzies but somehow it was enjoyable to be able to stop, not because we wanted to, but because we had to.

The next day we got a chance to hear the president, Museveni speak as he flew in by chopper to talk to the people. A show of strength. The crowd went bananas. There was chanting, singing, dancing, drum beating and shouting. At one stage I wasn't sure if they were for him or against him, it was so chaotic



The army convoy through northern Uganda

There were soldiers everywhere. As with most African armies, they were dressed in all manner of garb. Many of them were wandering around in gum boots. But boy were they heavily armed. One sight I will never forget, is that of a soldier walking along, an RPG rocket in his back pocket, about to fall out, his AK over his shoulder with a live chicken hanging off the barrel. That chicken had no chance.

The following day we departed on the convoy. It was again quite worrying. We were amongst about 20 vehicles with a massive military escort. But I didn't feel safe at all. Ironically, we crossed the bridge that had a sign saying "Have a safe journey". In front of the sign was an anti-aircraft gun.

The convoy proceeded way too slowly for my liking and we passed the scene of the previous convoy's attack. It was morbid. The burned out Land Rover was on its side. We looked away.

The convoy was slow and dusty and every time we stopped to tighten up the vehicle spacing was extremely stressful as we waited for the sounds of an attack. It got dark and driving in the dark under these conditions only added to the drama.

Eventually we got through and it was over. We stopped at the first place we could, a small little African restaurant called Friends. It was raining so we just camped right there on the pavement.

We continued on towards Kampala and stopped in to see the source of the Nile. It wasn't very impressive I'm afraid.



Old Ugandan colonial mansions

As we entered the surrounding area we got to see all the old colonial houses. They were amazing but totally run down and neglected. It was so sad to see what had become of them. We managed to organise to camp at one of them. The owner was a lovely lady who showed us around. It was a little shocking because she was living in this beautiful house but she may as well have been in a shack. They were making fires without fireplaces, it was filthy, everything was run down and grubby.

Kampala was busy being reconstructed but the signs of Idi Amin's destruction were apparent. However, it was the most developed place we had seen since we reached Africa. We were a little shell shocked at everything. We stayed in a campsite for the first time in ages.

We were invited by Ali, the truck driver to stay over. We were deeply humbled by the experience. We were to spend the next few days in his company. He was fantastic and helped us to get parts and arrange for repairs to Christine. We finally got the brakes working. While we were with him we got to hear first-hand about the reign of Idi Amin and how it was to be living in Uganda during that time. The stories were horrible and it just reinforced my amazement at how much trauma Africans can take and still smile at life.



Ali and his family

We got introduced to a vegetable staple. It was like a banana, exactly, but a little bigger and it was a starch. It was similar to a sweet potato. We also tried what they called spinach. Basically it was a weed that grew wild but was still quite tasty.

Lake Victoria was a little disappointing. It was rumoured to be a Bilharzia mecca and the dumping ground for the whole area. That made me sad. And that was in 1996.

While out shopping one day we heard people going mental. We cautiously peered into a building. It was a Church revival. We snuck in and joined the fun. No one can express their love for the Almighty more than the African women.

We met a crazy old guy who was a magician and who transported Kenyan shillings to the UK as they fitted the coin machines there. He had 50kg's of them.

We also met a couple who had been travelling the world on their motorcycles for 15 years. They were admittedly, a bit strange in the head.

I was very sad to be going through Uganda and not to be seeing the famous Silverback Mountain Gorillas. It was just too expensive. It's something I regretted for nearly two and a half decades.

Heading towards Kenya we were horrified at the amount of road accidents in evidence everywhere. It is the unfortunate trade-off for tarred roads. More speed equals impressive accidents. Coming over one pass we saw skid mark all the way down into a village, and then big holes through several houses and finally the signs of a massive fire/explosion. Apparently the truck's brakes had failed, the truck had smashed through several properties, hit a earth bank and exploded. Nuff said.

13. KENYA

Hakuna Matata MOFO's

We crossed over into Kenya. Again there was quite a dramatic improvement. The Roads, while bad, were better.

Travelling along in the late afternoon we spotted the first real farm we had ever seen on the trip. We pulled in and asked if we could camp. The farm was owned by a local gentleman who was exactly like our farmers in all respects.



Local Kenyan farming family

Simple, generous, tough and salt of the earth. His kids were well educated and we had a proper sit down chat with all of them. It was a wonderful introduction to Kenya.

Christine was still being bad. Cutting out and misfiring. I was so sick of worrying about the bloody car. It was wearing us down.

And then suddenly It felt a little like we might actually have a little bit of a holiday now. We were in safari country and maybe we could immerse ourselves in that for a bit. It would be good as the last few months had been really tough and the team was taking strain. Of course, I was wrong.

We headed to Nakuru and camped at the top of Menegai Crater. The views were fantastic but then it started pouring. We huddled in the tent, cooked dinner and went to sleep. We visited Lake Nakuru NP. It was bloody expensive for us but well worth it. It was such a relief to see animals again. I was beginning to wonder if Africa had any. Unfortunately, the flamingos were not in residence which was a shame.



We found some flamingoes

As we continued towards Nairobi and it was getting late we saw a little lake far from the road and it was covered in pink. Our hopes soared. We took a bumpy little track towards it. We passed a few villages and then there in front of us were the darn flamingos. We were so happy. As it was not a park we got to wander out to see them. The mud/guano was knee deep, but we had a blast. We were able to bush camp alongside this lake. It was perfect.



A lot of flamingoes....

The next morning, we were advised of some hot springs nearby. We went and took a leisurely dip. Fantastic.

We continued on, climbing in and out of the Great Rift Valley, which by the way, was fantastic. Eventually we hit Nairobi and another culture shock. Nairobi felt like a civilisation overload. I felt like a savage emerging from the bush. It was so noisy and fast. We felt shell-shocked.



Hot spring baths



Ari lending a hand



Trying to restore order



A true African bush mechanic

We took up residence in Upper Hill Campsite. A lot of repairs were necessary. We hooked up with a motley bunch who proved to be great guys that helped us out a lot. Days drifted by trying to revive Christine from her East African nightmare. We still had a long way to go. Much love and attention was lavished on her and slowly she started to resemble a car, and even drive like one. Sort of. She needed a lot of welding. Even some of the rims, which was unreal, as they were solid steel.

Zaire was a hard task master. Cracked distributor, broken leaves in rear spring, chassis dented, master brake cylinder bust, brake pipes failing, it was so bad we started laughing and got pissed. Although it was clear that Fidi was gatvol (direct translation = ass full. Meaning =enough) of Christine, I couldn't blame him. I was too.



New friends

We were staying in an official campsite for the first time in ages. 2 pink buses called the Pink Caravan where there. It was filled with only Swedish girls. Good grief. It was too much.



A whole lot of Pink trouble.....

An Israeli couple called Ari and Avi helped us a lot. They had a great sense of humour but also learned to hate Christine.

At one stage the entire vehicle was off the ground. We had 3 jacks, 2 axle stands and the hi-lift all operational. Working under that lot was worrying but certainly assisted with efficiency and speed.

We went to the famous Carnivore restaurant one night. It was too good to be true. We had been on an extended diet for lack of funds and partly for lack of decent food for so long we totally overdid things and ended the night feeling rather queasy.

Another night we attended the cinema. It was surreal. It was some low budget B action film. Alcohol was served in the foyer and we sat in the rather grubby cinema getting totally sossled. The other patrons seemed to take the film rather seriously. So with every action scene there was shouting and screaming and gesturing as the viewers jumped out of their seats in excitement. This was Chuck Norris country! Fights broke out. It was chaos, and we loved it.

We were based in a campsite. It was full of private cars doing African trips. Not the crossing but East Africa. Everyone was working on their vehicles and there was a lot of camaraderie. There were a few overland companies there and some fascinating but disturbing stories were told.

Everyone though, had newer vehicles and more money. I felt a bit like the poor cousin. There was no water at the camp which was nasty as we were absolutely filthy from working on the car. Obviously the toilets were a bio hazard at this stage.

Maz advised us she didn't have enough cash to carry on and was bailing. We were sad, obviously but also concerned as now we lost her financial contribution.

As the days went by we developed a good relationship with a lady we called Mama. She ran a local restaurant that served food more suited to our budget. She was great. She is a legend in Kenya. She has been hosting people like us for decades and was a tough but sweet old lady.

Nairobi was filled with dodgy con men all trying to squeeze a buck out of us. They were called "Shakale" (Jackal), by me, in particular.

We had decided to see the Mara independently. It was too expensive with a company. And so off we set.

We were pottering along, with Kilimanjaro in the background, and as we entered a very busy village, a kid ran out of an alley and straight into the front of the car. We heard a bang and we stopped. Fidi and I stared at each other and knew we were in deep trouble. We could hardly bear to get out of the car and see if the kid was ok. Fortunately, the kid had hit the bumper and gone under the car without injury. We were so relieved until we realised the incident was far from over, the crowd started getting worked up and shouting and shoving. The mother came over to us and said "Go, go, go. There is trouble". We thanked her and got the hell out

of dodge. We were speeding along a gravel road, when we saw a convoy of cop cars behind us. At this stage of the trip we had got used to harassment and intimidation but this time it felt like we were in the wrong, by a long way.

They pulled us over and arrested us. We were thrown into jail. It felt surreal and like a horror story in the making. They kept us all afternoon advising us that it was hit and run, fleeing the scene of an accident and evading the police and we were in deep trouble. Apparently the mother was fine but the father was demanding a cash settlement. We had no cash, so that part was easy. After some more hours in a crappy little prison we were let go. Clearly we had no cash and were not worth harassing further. The next day we woke up traumatised. Not just from the day's events but from the rain, dogs barking, geese, and locals screaming and shouting, as normal.



One thing I saw that I will never forget, is that there are wild animals running around in the rural areas. The Masai are not big meat eaters. They drink blood instead. They also do not kill the game as it is a serious offence and keeping the parks healthy assists them financially. I

saw some magnificent Masai warriors and asked to take a pic. They wanted a lot of money. Not only had I never paid for a picture but I had no money. So, no. Fair enough.

The roads to Narok were terrible and made even worse with our on-going brake dilemmas. I think, in the end, we navigated at least half of Africa without bloody brakes.

Driving along at, say 60km/hr., seeing a huge pothole, pumping the brakes, standing on the brakes, that were working at about 60%, and then sliding into the hole and banging your head was trying. Doing it ten times a day was suicidal. The courage of youth. Although, those who know me now would say that not a lot has changed.

We departed to the Mara. The road was horrendous and the weather terrible. With all the rain I should have predicted the road conditions in the park. Eventually we got there. We bush camped –not allowed – and got chased by some Masai but sped away cackling like old hens.



The Mara was everything I had hoped it would be. Wide open plains, game everywhere and open space. It was magnificent.

We found a private project that was protecting Rhino's donated by the Natal Parks Board of all things. We paid a guy and went on a foot safari. It was unforgettable. We got within 10 metres of these massive beasts. They had 24 hour armed guards protecting them from poachers. They were so, well, prehistoric, it was glorious.



Rhino's from Natal in South Africa

The Mara region has that famous and notorious black cotton soil. It started raining buckets. Our dream safari changed instantly. The tracks got drowned, we got stuck. The ground just sucked at Christine and kept dragging her down. Under this mess were rocks. So, soon we were throwing rocks up into the chassis. It was horrid. Not only was the old girl, old, buggered and overloaded but we were broken too.



Road to nowhere

After several hours of struggling we realised we had to choose between taking a month to get out of the damned park, which we could not afford, or we had to ride faster. In mud, that is a reality sometimes. So we went faster and Christine paid the price. So did our backs.

One night we met a guy called Joseph. A modern Masai. He invited us to stay at his mother's "house". We were relieved as we were nowhere near the official campsite. We limped in. The night was interesting to say the least.



The woman on the far left was a legend

His mother was the real deal. A traditional, old school Masai woman. She was 48, had 8 kids and looked 200. Fair enough. We sheltered from the weather in her hut. It was special. It stank beyond belief, was beset by millions of flies, and dark as hell. A fire was kept going, deliberately smoky for the flies, which meant it felt like we were going to asphyxiate. His mother made us tea, and promptly blew her nose on the floor. Five people slept in a hut the size of a 3-man tent. The mother, her husband and child slept in the same bed, a rattan affair that was decidedly uncomfortable. They had sex there as well, with the kid in the bed. We were lucky as the husband was away.

If you needed the toilet, you went out into the cow area and actioned accordingly. Obviously, tending the herd is a messy business. The cow area was screened all round with thorn bushes. That night we realised why. We heard lion and hyena calls all night. My happy place.



Wide open spaces - Plains of the Mara

We entered the official park quite late and then proceeded to look for a bush camp. Eventually we found a deserted and broken down house. We moved in and were grateful for the shelter. After supper we lay down for the night. Suddenly, there was shouting everywhere. We woke up disorientated and put the lantern on. We were surrounded by Masai men shouting and threatening us with their spears. They were extremely agitated and began poking us with their lion spears. It became clear that we were going to have to go with them to the village. We agreed. We got into the car and began to follow them. Suddenly I turned the car and raced off into the night with furious Masai chasing us down the road.

We drove for several hours and then found a village and decided on a different course of action. This time we asked if we could camp with them, they agreed for a small fee – the Masai do nothing for free- and let us stay in an incomplete hut.

Once again, while fast asleep, with rain pouring in the unfinished dwelling, we were woken by shouting and much activity. We awoke to find that the young warriors had heard a lion in the distance, and were after it. It is their custom that young men are supposed to kill a lion to become adults. Nowadays this was becoming a problem as the young men were fast out stripping the lions! And so off charged about 30 young men armed to the teeth in pursuit of the poor lion.

We spent the next 2 days suffering. The black cotton soil was not agreeing with Christine. We kept getting seriously bogged down. It was heart breaking stuff. Eventually we chucked it in and returned to Nairobi to lick our wounds. More repairs followed.



Fidi and I debating our latest problem, with Tuskers for company



The Kenyan Crew at Mama Roche

14. TANZANIA

Heaven on Earth

We went to Arusha and looked for a trip into the Serengeti. These trips were pretty expensive. They still are. We were horrified. We had not anticipated it being so costly, but we knew couldn't drive past the Serengeti without a visit.

We haggled and shopped around like the poor whites we were, and eventually found a dodgy local operator who gave us the best price we could afford. We then found two Israelis who wanted to go as well and so, we teamed up. We found accommodation with a bed for 2USD each and a local eatery that served supper for 1USD. Pretty good going. A bed, a bed, a kingdom for a bed.

In our various dealings in town we ended up meeting a fascinating character called Jos. He was a big game hunter from the old days. We also met members of the Dutch Royal Family at Masai camp of all places. Random info, I know.

And so we were off. The first thing was a renegotiation of the price. Dilemmas at Dawn. We finalised that and set off. The road was wonderful and we couldn't understand why they thought it would take as long as they did. Very soon we saw why. The road deteriorated into a real mess. It hammered the hell out of their vehicle, which was dilapidated anyway, and us.



The new road and the old road

There were lots of beggars and hagglers screaming “Touri, Touri, Touri!”, “Tourists”, the equivalent to give me something! Nothing new by now and we really had less and less to give.

We passed Lake Manyara which was very beautiful. The camp above the crater is beyond description. The view of the crater is magnificent and trepidation and excitement was in the air. Everyone was bubbling with anticipation. The mist that gathers over the campsite in the morning was just priceless.

The Serengeti cannot be adequately explained by a word-butcher (not the Aussie from Zaire), such as me. The wide open vistas dotted with animals everywhere. The sense of Africa, and the wildness that still exists. I was in love.

Unfortunately, the campsites are disgusting. The government should be ashamed to charge those prices and deliver filthy, defunct campsites that are covered in rubbish with toilets overflowing with human waste. Funnily enough, this complaint exists 20 years later.

That night was pretty terrifying. The tents supplied to us were a joke. They were children’s tents. It was cold so Fidi and I climbed in for the night. It was hysterical. He is quite a tall lad and I was quite a wide lad and this tent was for one person, a short, one person. We eventually ended up spooning. But that was just the beginning. Suddenly we were awoken by the most horrible sounds. Hyena’s had entered the unfenced campsite and were going crazy over the rubbish as the park did not bother to secure it. They were having a great time but it did sound like someone had opened the gates of hell. The sounds started coming closer. Fidi and I scuttled closer and closer. Eventually we could hear their breathing and scratching around right outside the tent. Things were getting tense. With the tent being so small, we were both basically cling wrapped in it. The fabric was stretched tight against our bodies. Of course the obvious occurred. Not that. This was never going to be a romance novel.

Suddenly, I felt a poking nose sliding up and down my back. I couldn’t move. Normally this would be a good development but in this case I was dying. After a while the Hyena moved on and we could breathe again.

Moving on, the game viewing was spectacular and we saw tons of game but our partners in crime were annoying. They were demanding and arrogant it did create a fair amount of tension. Silence, still, remains golden.

Seeing the massive herds of Zebra making their way sedately across the plains was very moving. The place was just so beautiful, peaceful and yet full of menace and tension. I loved that feeling. I would come to understand that this would be something that I would need to have in my life, forever.

We were bumping along when suddenly the driver stopped on the track. He had spotted a lion. She was very hidden, but we switched off, and watched her. Lo and behold, a group of Thompson’s Gazelles came wandering along and suddenly the mood changed. She was hunting. We were the only vehicle there, which was amazing and unusual. Within seconds she was running at full tilt. Believe it or not she used the car as cover and actually clipped us

just before launching onto the unsuspecting gazelle and taking it down, literally 1m from the car – I kid you not.



A kill up close



The kill was a moving, brutal and exciting experience. As often is the case, the male lion only deigned to arrive when the hard work was done so he could hijack the prey.



Stealing the fruits of victory

Finally, we moved off now running a bit late. Unbelievably the Israeli girl Sharon had the gall to ask if we could find a Leopard kill next. Little did I know that comments like this would plague me for many years to come.

As we picked up speed to ensure we would not miss the park cut off times, we suddenly saw a brown blur shooting through the reeds about 100 metres away. I could not believe my eyes when it launched onto the back of a buffalo and went rolling down the river bank and out of sight. A lion had taken down a buffalo. Impossible. The rest of the afternoon was spent moving, to sadly, exit the park. What a crazy adventure. I had no idea that what had occurred was almost impossible.

The roads were very bad and I must be honest that I was very relieved it was not our car taking this pounding.



One of the best beers ever. Celebrating a remarkable day

Next up was Ngorongoro Crater. Again too beautiful for words. Descending down into the crater was quite something in terms of the road conditions and the scenery. The yellow flowers, mist and moss on the trees were fantastic.

The crater is a unique natural phenomenon. It is like a massive natural zoo as the animals on the crater floor remain there due to the steep crater sides. The abundance and density of game was mind blowing and having the crater walls as a backdrop, truly breath-taking. We all had to admit it that while the cost was high for people on our budget, the money was more than well spent.

On the way back to Arusha we saw a Land Rover that had rolled and had been squashed flat but was still driving along at a merry speed. Only in Africa.

Next it was off to Dar es Salaam. The funny thing is that, with the improved roads and Christine running well, we were going the fastest we had, since the start. The bouncing speedo was showing 80km/hr. The problem with this was, it was a lot more stressful. Not only were we not used to the speed but driving these roads was dangerous in itself. As always the brakes were not overly reliable and trying to stop 2.5tons of angry Christine because a child, goat or donkey had stepped in the way, at 80km/hr, was trying, at best.

One day, we stopped in, at a bus stop, atop a pass. It was a real eye opener. All the stalls sold the same items, displayed in the same way. With no unique selling points, and no display differentiation and everything at the same price it really didn't make any sense. What did I know. Busses pulled into the stop and were beset by traders, so it was chaotic and noisy. And very dangerous as many did not stop and blew through at over 100km/hr without any speed reduction. There were many signs that this often did not work out well.

Dar was hot, hot and sweaty. But it was an impressive and fascinating city. It had an African/Asian and European melting-pot, feel. While this sounds great for dinner, it made for interesting normal interactions.

We jumped on a ferry for Zanzibar and had a pleasant few days. The docks were insane and we were bombarded as usual by beggars, kids, hustlers and touts.



Stunning Zanzibar



Fidi about to be butchered

Fidi had a massive blood blister on his foot. It was very deep as well. We decided to visit a doctor. Boy, was that a mistake. We went to the hospital and were introduced to the oldest doctor you could imagine. And he had the tremors to boot. He examined the foot and indicated in his pigeon English that he needed to lance it. We had expected as much so told him to proceed. He whipped out a scalpel and slashed Fidi's foot. Blood sprayed everywhere and we stared in shock. He wiped it up a bit and left.



Classic Dhow scene

Zanzibar was like a mixture of Morocco, Venice and black Africa. I termed the phrase “The Venice of Africa”. We popped into the renowned Africa House and visited Livingstone's pad and watched the Dhows at sunset. We did a spice tour and checked out the Sultans Palace, as well as the slave jails. It was all very exotic and incredibly beautiful. I am so glad I got to see all those years ago. While still amazing, it is almost unrecognisable now.

We headed up to Nungwi beach in the North for a day or two. It was so clean, peaceful and stunningly beautiful. We managed to fit in a little snorkelling which was lovely. That evening we went to the night market and had octopus for dinner from one of the stalls. No words.

We went back to Stone Town and heard about Prison Island, just off the coast. It sounded cool so we arranged a little local boat to take us there. Once again our budgetary restraints saw us having to cut corners, and as often is the case, pay the price.

While spluttering along to the island the idiot “Captain” hit a wave side on. We sunk. The boat did have foam inserts in the structure so it bobbed along just under the surface but we had no life- jackets, and could not bale it out. The motor was drowned. So there we were bobbing along in the Indian ocean with me trying to keep my camera dry. Eventually a fishing boat came along and gave us a lift to the island. It was looking like it might live up to its name! How we were going to get back was a concern.



Venice Of Africa



Big Braai/Barbeque

Arriving to the island was surreal. Wandering around a most beautiful place with cells lining the coast was weird. Seeing 200 year-old tortoises that are truly massive, was sublime. We swam, and explored, and were mostly alone, which was fantastic.



200 year old tortoises

15. MALAWI

Puff the Magic Dragon



Finally the lake



Tricky but it's tar!



A true artist

We entered Malawi in the north and proceeded down along the coast. The curios we saw were magnificent. I began trading my old clothes and things I didn't need for them. My house today is still filled with them.

I will never forget cresting one ridge and seeing the lake appear. It was good to get back to water.

While cruising along we saw an old short wheelbase Land Rover broken down. I counted 20 enormous sacks of coal –easily 2-3 tons. The tow bar was actually digging into the ground as they drove along.

I went over to see if I could help. The nut holding the distributor (an important component that ensures the engine runs right), was missing. Being a Land Rover, it was still operating, which was scary. I couldn't help so the tied it with a string. Now, for those not familiar with the timing of a petrol engine, traditionally, the angle of the distributor is measured in degrees. God forbid it is out a few degrees and the vehicle won't drive. This distributor was vibrating and sort of, circling the drain. The vehicle should not have been able to run! But it did.

We continued on our way to Livingstonia. The road made for interesting driving as it had potholes, but not a crazy amount. What that meant was one could motor along swerving from side to side to miss the potholes. Surprisingly enough this was great fun. Well, for the driver anyway.

We got to the turnoff and I could see what people had meant. The road goes up 800m in a 2km straight line. There were 21 hairpin bends, some so tight that one had to do three point turns to make the curve. It was awesome. The ridiculous part was that it was almost a single track and yet there were cars and even small trucks coming and going. It made an amazing ascent even more colourful.

The nearby Chichewe waterfall was very impressive and was well worth the hike. The air up there was so clean and brisk, which made for a pleasant change from the humidity below. The little village was very sweet and the people incredibly friendly. It is a nice part of the legacy of Livingstone. He was a good man and I am proud I know his proper story.



Twist and Turn

Nkhata Bay was a complete surprise. It was not nearly as busy or developed as I thought it would be. It was a lovely place by the lake. We stayed at the Heart Vacation Motel – a unique and cute locally operated little backpacker style accommodation. Then it was Kande Beach which was even better. What a setting.

We swam to one island and went snorkelling which was fantastic. The colours and variety of the fish were very impressive.



Kande Beach

We got a lift in a canoe to another island and on our way back it sank. Fortunately, we were close to shore and I managed to hold my camera above the water, again, and paddle in. Usual chaos.

Although the roads were not great they paled in comparison to what we had experienced before. So travelling at say 80km/hr. felt like 200km/hr and we all felt like speed demons.

Christine continued her erratic and schizophrenic behaviour. One day running fine, and the next giving us headaches and heartaches. But we had gotten used to this. It really did seem like she had moods. And I talked so nicely to her...

As you can tell the trip was becoming almost boring compared to what had occurred further North but we enjoyed the relative lack of drama and chaos. At the same time, we were so tuned in to being on a mission for so long, we struggled to relax properly, had very little money and got itchy feet, quickly.

We met an old guy travelling around with his son in an ancient truck. The inside was like something from Arabian Nights. It was super cool but what a strange life. The boy was about 16 and home schooled, but seemed incredibly well balanced. This was before home-schooling, the internet and Corona.



An interesting character and his son

The group dynamics were a little strained by now. Fidi and I could smell home which didn't help. We went to Salima and Senga Bay. Both pretty. Malawi was incredibly friendly and sadly, poor. There was no commercial activity and people lived hand to mouth, mostly off fish from the lake. I remember worrying about the future of the waters of the Lake. It proved correct. We loved being able to swim.

Much curio shopping was done by all. The curios were cheap and they were beautifully made. The skill levels here were unbelievable. I had the privilege of watching a guy carve a devil figure from scratch and complete the job in about an hour. He had only 2 tools. Two files that were sharpened at the point. What a talent. I still have that curio. When I say devil, I mean a naughty entity.

Lilongwe was a pleasant surprise. It was relatively clean and organised. As usual we stocked up on a few things and scratched around for assorted parts and seals. We were sad when it was time to leave Malawi. It was a fantastic country with really friendly people.

16. ZAMBIA

IN TRANSIT

We entered Zambia, which had a different feel altogether. They wanted us to buy some bogus insurance, but it went further. We managed to sneak through without it which put us all in

good spirits. Lusaka was similar to the cities up north. The usual chaos ensued. We did what we needed to do, and got moving again.

Christine was going well so we made some good mileage and, in the afternoon, took a track to a farmhouse. We met a wonderful local family who were running the farm and they had no problem with us bush camping there for the night.

The next morning, we had no clutch. And so it was clutch- less driving for a while. In Lusaka we repaired the slave cylinder and continued on our merry way.

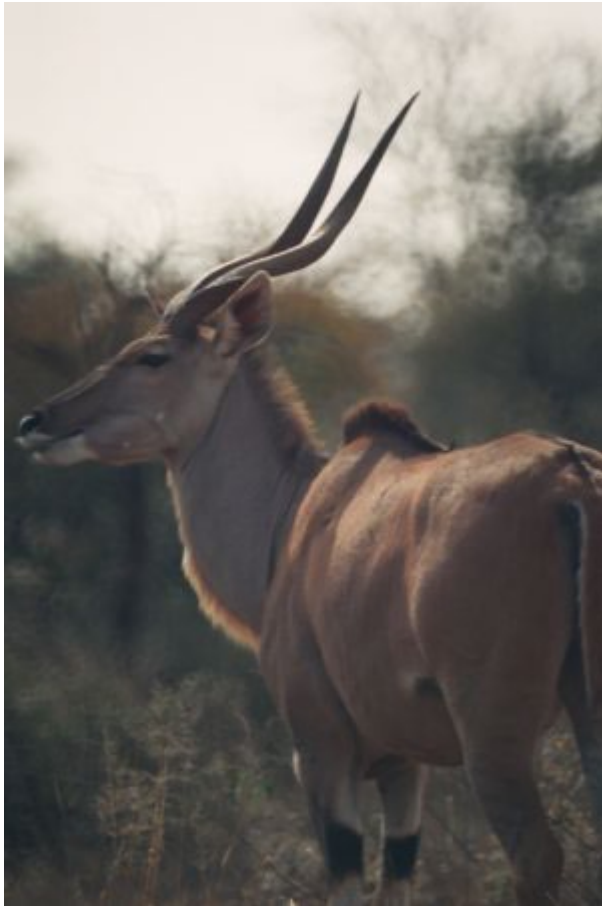
At our stop we were offered some diamonds from a very, very dodgy guy. They were uncut but they were real. Back then, if I had, had, any cash, I may have done the wrong thing. Nowadays things are different.

17. ZIMBABWE

BEFORE BOB BROKE IT.



Peter and family



A Kudu Eland Cross

We entered Zim and reflected on the fact that we had touched three countries in 3 days. That was not our usual pace and showed what decent roads could do.

Fidi was getting antsy about getting home so we passed Mana Pools and Lake Kariba without a stop. I was pretty pissed off. I didn't want to miss the good stuff but I got we were done. Fortunately, I would have the chance to visit them in the future. Fidi had been a saint the whole way.



Fantastic Baobabs everywhere

A stop in Karoi allowed us to have an ice cold castle. While I am not a big beer drinker I remember those ice cold beers fondly. Funnily enough the nights started getting colder.

We visited some of Fidi's friends that were based near Harare. They were farmers too and it was truly a wonderful thing to see farms in tip top condition and functioning as they should. Zimbabwe was absolutely amazing. Everything ran well, the roads were bliss and the people friendly, intelligent and well educated. Civilisation, for what that's worth. Harare was incredible and felt like New York to us.



How Harare used to look.....

That night I had a bath. It was heaven. We even went out on the town for a proper night out. I think honestly, that that was the first real night out in, like 6 months.

One afternoon we went with Fidi's friends to a Polo game. It was crazy and so Out of Africa/White Mischief. They truly led a magnificent life. They were not to know that within 5 years their whole way of life would be gone. Eradicated of the face of the earth by a raving lunatic called Mugabe. And yes, they were privileged. But they worked like demons, and treated people fairly, and built an economy out of nothing. Time will tell if their downfall was for the best.

As always we fitted in some work on the car, being in Harare meant that we could actually find people who knew what they were doing and parts were freely available.

The family we were staying with took us on a tour of the farm. Wow. What an operation. While they were obviously extremely well off, they employed around 500 workers and everything was impeccable. The staff seemed very healthy and happy and their life looked pretty good. The farm grew tobacco, various veggies and flowers for Europe.

We went to a tobacco auction in Harare. It absolutely blew my mind. Huge bales of tobacco were being sold for over a hundred dollars each (back then) and the auctioneer was selling them at a rate of one every three or four seconds. This went on for a long, long time. At the time Zimbabwe was the second largest tobacco grower in the world. A decade later, a city in South America would put up a statue in honour of Mugabe as that country had become the second largest producer due to his policies that decimated that industry and all others. Zimbabwe is no longer on the map in that regard, or any other, now.

We took the next 3 days to get the car in shape for the final push. We had a small, OK not so small electrical fire so we had to gut the electrics and redo a fair amount of wiring. A street metal worker managed to make our fender that got hammered in Zaire look respectable again. I was loving Zimbabwe and everything about it.

Our problems with starting continued unabated. As everything was patched, repaired, replaced and glued together, problem solving had become quite an art. A local guy assisted us and even provided us with free spares.

We went to the Zim Ruins. They were suitably impressive and unlike anything we had seen elsewhere. There was an eerie feeling about the place.

We did another stretch of road that had terrible corrugations. I felt genuinely sorry for Christine even though she was a bitch. Apologies for the language but the love affair was waning.

And then a stone knocked off a brake pipe and we were brakeless again. We must have driven half of Africa without brakes. In the beginning it is very frightening, but you would be amazed how good one got at braking with the handbrake and the gears. And of course using hills and pavements for stopping assistance.

One thing I remember so clearly about Zim at that time of year was the light. It was unreal. Everything was so clear and sharp.



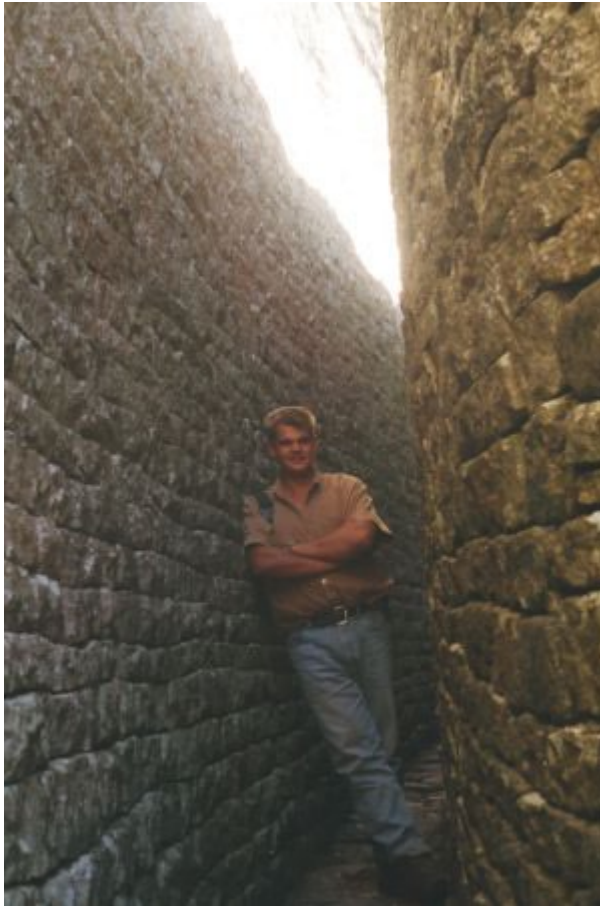
The light in Zimbabwe was breath taking



A tobacco auction



Topless again



Zim Ruins

It was getting bloody cold again in the evenings, much to our annoyance. We were headed for some distant family connection of mine that lived in the middle of nowhere. We were pottering along, brake-less, and we rounded a bend to find a gate, barring the way. We swerved violently and crashed into the bushes. We emerged unhurt only to find out that the guy we were going to meet was behind us and saw the whole thing. He thought we were nutcases. He turned out to be a very interesting chap – a fascinating war veteran with enough screws missing to last a cabinet maker for a lifetime. In a good way.

Peter had a fishing camp on his farm so we went to the dam for sun downers. Of course, he had a pet hippo that came out to be hand fed some grass. I thought it a silly scene and they advised that, as with all tame/wild animals they never really become tame. We saw a Kudu Eland cross antelope. Extremely rare and unusual.

One night this hippo chased Peter along the shore for some unknown reason. Being the most dangerous animal in Africa, he was something. Peter, not the hippo.

The next day we did some fishing and as usual, my luck with fishing sucked. But beers were had by all, which saved the outing. One afternoon I was out walking and decided to climb a koppie. While I was climbing, I grabbed a ledge and was levering myself up when suddenly I was faced with a livid mamba. I almost let go of the ledge which would have most certainly ended badly. I lowered myself slowly and beat a hasty retreat. While walking back I saw a

snake skin that had been shed recently. I shuddered and then almost stood on a puff adder. Although the house was only about 1km away it took me about an hour to get there.

While also visited some friends of Fidi's. Mart and Bill. We did a fair amount of socialising with them. We visited Bills dad's farm. It was very beautiful. The grandfather had been killed by dissidents in the bush war. The story was really sad. The boys took us all over the area. We climbed a massive Koppie that had a fantastic view. We saw some Bushmen paintings on various rocks along the way. It was so amazing that they were just there. In the middle of nowhere and not on any tourist track.

We also attended a local rugby match which again was fantastic and had an undeniably colonial atmosphere. While I get all the negatives I have returned to see the club derelict and the patrons gone.

Bills dad had a rather interesting scar. These people are all hunters and he told a heck of a story about a leopard hunt that went horribly awry. Apparently he went out to try and shoot a leopard that was decimating his livestock. He took about three or four local guys with him and set off. They tracked the leopard and he took a shot and unfortunately, wounded it. The leopard proceeded to reverse the situation and track them. Several times it pounced off the rock and savaged the men. Eventually it jumped on him and bit him on the head. Luckily he had a big head and it could not crush his skull and he was left with four puncture holes joined by long scratches. A great party story.

Eventually it was time to head south again. We set off and she seemed to be running well so we made good progress. And then of course we heard the familiar grinding sound of brake problems. One of our brake shoes packed up but luckily things like this were easily fixable now.

Our next stop was Matopos National Park. Home to the balancing rocks and Rhodes grave. We actually saw a lot of game on a walk which was brilliant. and the spot where Rhodes grave is situated, sublime.



Rhodes Grave

Bulawayo was next up. A nice pleasant town with massively wide roads that were designed to be able to allow an ox wagon to turn in them.

And then, we were in Vic Falls. Amazingly we met up with some guys we had met in Uganda.



Our buddies from Kenya - what were the odds?

The falls themselves absolutely blew me away. One of nature's wonders for sure. The spray was like rain and the force of it actually made the water go upwards. What a magical thing that was.

We went rafting which did not disappoint and definitely qualifies as an outing not for the faint hearted. The Zambezi justified its reputation in full.



Victoria Falls -what a marvel

Once again the brakes were playing up. Yes, yes I know. I am sick of it too. All the fittings and pipes and cylinders were so worn, damaged or broken it was a never-ending problem. We went to the local hotspot called Explorers Pub and it was heaving. I had not seen that many white people in one spot for nearly a year. It was a bit overwhelming. I wanted to turn around and go back North.

The relationship between Fidi and I had deteriorated by this stage. He was keen just to finish the trip by now. I still wanted to see a few things in the belief that I may never have the chance again. At the same time, I was becoming apprehensive about getting home. I still had no idea of what to do with my life. Money was running low and so sadly we set off again and headed to Botswana. I think he was probably right.

This next section was no less interesting to me but makes for less interesting reading for you. We saw most of the major highlight in these countries. Places like the Okavango Delta, Vic Falls and the Namib Desert blew my mind and subsequently shaped the next 20 years of my life. Suffice it to say that this portion of the trip was a breeze and far easier.

18. BOTSWANA

Wastelands and Waterways

Botswana was great in that game wandered freely to a degree. We visited Chobe and continued south. One night we bush camped near a little water hole. Lions came to camp and

kept us up the whole night with their roars and grunts. The fire got a special kind of attention that is only warranted when man feels he is about to be consumed. Yes that is a fearful face!

It was so wonderful to know the bush was teeming with animals. Such a far cry from the situation way up North. It is different now but the freedom then, knowing the animals were out and about, and not being in a park or similar was just amazing. I still seek those places but they are getting few and far between.

We visited the Magadigadi Salt Pans as we wound our way south. We were not doing justice to southern Africa but our money was almost gone and home was in sight.

Christine was spluttering a bit but a new fuel filter sorted that out quickly. We were now good at running repairs and problem solving. More brake problems meant another stop. While there, a drunken Tswana man stopped, and became very aggressive and problematic and indicated he would be back. We anticipated bigger problems, and were careful with our camp selection. Although we were technically closer to home and in a better situation, it was strange to feel more concerned about safety.

Our main objective for Botswana was the Okavango Delta. We found one of the many camps available and arranged a short Delta Excursion. We also got some beers and meat. What more can a guy ask for. The next day we headed off on a bumpy ride in a 4x4 truck to get to the famous delta.

It was a really magnificent place and I had never seen anything like it before. The hollowed out wooden canoes called Mokoro's were great fun to be in, and paddle. Each one was owned by a poler (driver), who had much skill in terms of navigation, as the water was never more than a metre or two deep. And in this water were crocs and hippos. Drifting past either of those devils with 2 or 3 inches of mokoro between us all was beyond amazing

Both sunrise and sunset was magnificent as the sun turned the river blood red. This place was heaven.



Exploring the Delta in a Mokoro

The amazing thing about the Delta is it borders a semi-desert and in dry season people drive in cars along the same routes we were paddling on. Many years later I would have the privilege of watching the annual waters arrive as the river crept around the corner. The next day the ground was gone. Too beautiful for words.



On one game walk we saw a dead elephant which is rather unusual and seeing lion prints on game walks with no protection was rather thrilling. Hearing them close, upped the anti. Sadly, the trip was only about three days and then we were back in the dusty frontier town of Maun which was very unappealing. And then it was time to head to Namibia via the Caprivi Strip.

19. NAMIBIA

MALARIA, MY OLD FRIEND



Fidi all cleaned up

We crossed into Namibia. The roads were excellent and it was fantastic to see open land without fencing of any kind. We stopped in at Drotsky's Cabins. A beautiful site along the river. In Rundu we purchased a type for \$1 which was insane. Then in Grootfontein we got another one for \$.5. This was getting silly.

At one stage, we were proceeding merrily, at a top speed of about 80km/h when there was a massive bang. I struggled to keep Christine on the road and we ground to a halt. It was a blow out and it nearly caused our first proper road accident. It really emphasised the weight of the vehicle and the difference when you are going faster.



A close call. Nearly had a big drama

We went to Otavi and stayed at Gert and Lynns, more friends of Fidi. They had two pet cheetahs. It was very strange and disconcerting when they eye-balled one. Great people, living a great life. We managed to visit Etosha National Park which was absolutely a show stopper.



The mood continued to deteriorate. I think it was a combination of cabin fever and too much strain for too long. Christine didn't help matters either. Fidi and I were done. We were broken and it was time to call this thing. We were not enjoying the good stuff nor laughing about the bad stuff. It had been a long haul. So we made a call to head south and put this thing to bed.

Suddenly I started feeling terrible. Sweating and shaking. I met a really young guy with a kid and it got me thinking, that one day you are a kid, and the next day you have one. Profound thinking there – I should have known, the Malaria was back.

We pushed on and got to Windhoek. I was feeling worse and worse. One morning I awoke with a massive pain in my leg. It was so bad could not walk. A spider had pulled a nasty on me. I was feeling shocking, so I spent the day in bed. I continued to deteriorate rather badly and finally went to the hospital only to find out that I had blood poisoning as well as a recurrent bout of Malaria. It wasn't good.

So I said to Fidi, let's go and we headed for home. In truth I don't think I actually called that.

20. SOUTH AFRICA

Home Sweet Home

The last thing I remember was passing out while passing by a road sign saying Kaapstad, 500 km. Happy place. I awoke as we crested the Sir Lowry's pass to a beautiful morning. I do remember feeling so much better that I thought a wee would do me good. So I staggered to the

edge of the car park and had a pee that started well but as many would know ended badly. The up-swell of wind saw me literally peeing on myself. Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

Although being nervous to come back with still no idea of what the hell to do, I was home dammit. Two hours later I was at home ringing the gate. My mother nearly had a plutz. She had no idea and was blown away. Shit, it was good to be home.

23 July 1996



Home at last

21. The End.

The trip of 1996 did so much more than make a man of me. I cannot express, in words, the endless lessons it taught me. I will try, in my stumbling way to summarise it:

- It gave me a love of Africa that runs deep and will never waiver.
- It taught me to be brave.
- It taught me that there is always a solution, answer, way out and if there is not, be patient, it will come.
- Anger has a place, but a sense of humour has a better place.
- It taught me that seeing Africa from underneath a land rover, is ok but a cruiser is better.

Life really does fly past. And while I sit here finally putting this thing to paper, nearly 25 years later, I can only say, it was the scariest, most incredible once in a lifetime experience of my life.

For now.

See you on the road.....

Alex