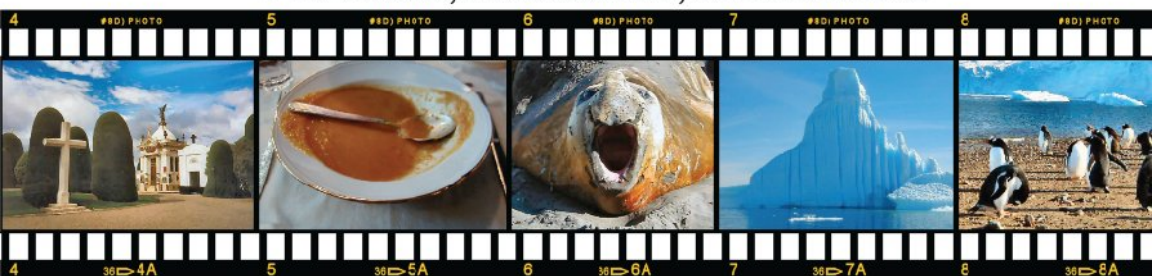


B.C. TØRRISSEN

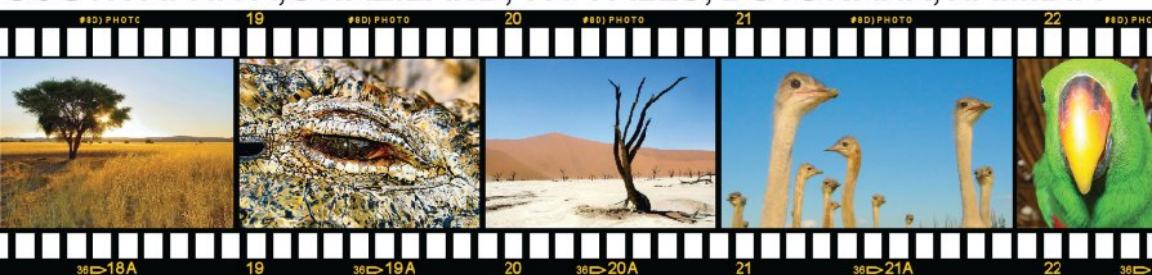


Stories only I can tell
Journeys you can make as well

FIRELAND, PATAGONIA, ANTARCTICA



SOUTH AFRICA, SWAZILAND, VIC FALLS, BOTSWANA, NAMIBIA



RUSSIAN FAR EAST, SIBERIA, URAL, VOLGA, MOSCOW



One for the Road

Stories only I can tell.
Journeys you can make as well.

Bjørn Christian Tørrissen

Translated from Norwegian by a Babel fish



URSINE SELF-PUBLISHING NOMADS

Excerpt from the book One for the Road

Please consider getting the full version of the book from bjornfree.com

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In and Out of Africa

A couple of years had passed since my trip to Antarctica. August was ageing. Myself, I was only days away from turning thirty. It's an age where talking to friends often brings news about acquaintances that are expecting children. Mothers in the making will tell you how amazing it is to be pregnant, to feel life growing inside of them. A unique privilege. For women only. Something a man can never fully understand or participate in.

"Bah, humbug!", say I. I had spent some time that summer reading up on Africa. One of many things I had learned was that simply by going for a swim in pretty much any natural lake, river or pond in Africa, before I knew it I would be full of developing life, despite my chronic lack of ovaries.

Schistosomiasis, also known as bilharzia, is a most fascinating, contagious and lethal disease. It spreads through contact with fresh water. You don't have to swallow it, it's enough to barely touch the water. Maybe you dip your toes in the lake for a few seconds to cool off at the unfortunate moment when a millimetre-long larvae floats by. It will effortlessly penetrate your skin. Inside, the larvae enters your bloodstream and follows it until it reaches your liver, kidney and bladder region. There it settles with great satisfaction and grows until it reaches the length of a centimetre or two. Then it starts producing eggs.

The host, meaning you, is unlikely to notice any of this until several years later, when your kidney or liver suddenly stops functioning. In the meantime, the larvae inside you will have produced an enormous number of eggs and released them from your body by putting them inside your urine or your faeces. By their calculations, that should give the eggs a fair chance of reaching fresh water. If they do, the eggs will hatch to reveal new larvae, and here we find the most incredible part of this mechanism of contagion. These larvae can *not* invade a new human body just yet. First they must enter the body of a particular aquatic snail and develop further. Only after having done so will they leave the snail. *Now* they're ready to invade another human being. And they will.

At first glance this might seem like a hopelessly elaborate concept, doomed to fail. Unfortunately it has proved to be a ruthlessly efficient procedure. In most of Africa's fresh water sources these larvae exist, from the Nile Delta in the north to various South African watercourses at the other end of the continent.

The possibility of fathering countless larvae was not the only reason that I wasn't particularly tempted to go to Africa. Several other issues also rendered Africa unappealing to me. Norwegian newspapers have always reported stories of war, starvation, diseases and disorder in Africa. And worst of all, deep inside I couldn't get over how a roaring lion in the intro to a TV series every week throughout my childhood had sent me hiding under the couch. Without even being part of my actual world, Africa had always scared me.

Anyway, I was just days away from turning 30, and stupid Bjørn had decided that a goal of mine was to have visited all seven continents before then. There was only one continent left, and I had the time and the money I needed to complete the list. So there you have it, my shallow and uncomplicated reason for going to Africa.

My journey offered a taste of the third world already when I boarded the plane from London to Cape Town. There were no chickens or goats running up and down the aisles, but I was seated next to a beast. She was the mother of all nightmares of any cabin crew, swearing and threatening everyone around her. She kept complaining and whining loudly about

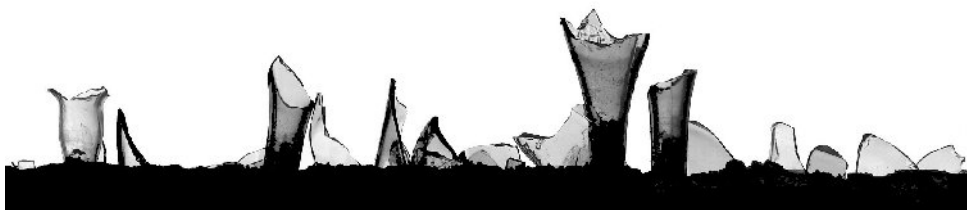
absolutely everything from the political situation in South Africa to the incompatibility between the width of the seats on the plane and her choice of body shape. In addition she was frighteningly ugly, even by British standards. Yet I was happy to have her there. I spent half an hour convincing her that I neither spoke nor understood English, and after that she ignored me. She also kept the in-flight attendants away, so that I could sleep instead of being woken up for food and drinks all the time. I could even sleep well. The monster had scared away the man who should have been sitting between her and me, so I had space to stretch out my legs. The poor man spent the last ten hours of the flight somewhere else than in his seat, that's all I know.



South Africa is far away from Northern Europe. Measured in kilometres my home town Oslo is about as distant from Cape Town as from Hawaii. Yet I could get off the plane after the long flight and not have to adjust my watch. I had travelled halfway around the world and not even left my own time zone. I did, however, have to adjust my sense of time with about six months, due to the southern hemisphere's opposite seasons.

I had never even entertained the possibility that Africa had seasons. Everyone knows it's just an eternal desert in the north and a jungle further south, right? Not so. Southern Africa appeared to have seasons, and very much so. Somehow it felt wrong to leave Norway in a late summer thirty degrees heat and arrive in a Cape Town where snow ploughs patrolled the streets. Well, it wasn't quite that bad, but it *had* been snowing in some higher regions of South Africa just a few days previously, and the air felt distinctly chilly as I walked out of the airport. Fortunately, on my way to the city centre I happened to catch a glimpse of a zebra in a park we passed. It made me feel at least a little bit as if I had finally arrived in the mythical and tropical Africa.

My journey wasn't exactly meticulously planned. Actually it wasn't planned at all, but an hour before I left home I had found the Web site of a hostel in Cape Town that seemed nice. "Have a nice stay in safe surroundings", the hostel bragged. The safe surroundings turned out to be a fortress constituted by the hostel itself. On a street corner outside it some sullen down-and-outs stood close together, drawn to an open fire in an old oil drum. They scowled at me. The driver of the airport minibus took off with screeching wheels as soon as I got out of the vehicle.



I was alone in Africa and on the wrong side of a wall adorned with the efficient third world version of barbed wire; numerous razor-sharp shards of broken bottles cemented in place. Puzzled about what to do next I saw no better option than to knock on the only door there. As in a badly written movie script a narrow panel in the door moved to the side, and two enormous, staring eyes appeared. "The eagle soars over the mighty mountain", I said, guessing that it might be the current watchword. An eyebrow on the other side of the door was raised considerably, but it must have been obvious to the guy inside that I was new in town and innocent. The door was opened and quickly closed again behind me.

Inside the walls I entered a parallel universe. The atmosphere was cheery and lazy. Backpackers, hippies and a group of British school children on a really long field trip enjoyed breakfast under the morning sun. The walls were covered with happy African colours and patterns. There was even a small, inviting swimming pool there, admittedly with what appeared to be a thin layer of ice floating in the water.

I was granted a basic room with a bed and a valid (but boring) PIN code for the front door. They also gave me advice regarding what I should and shouldn't do in Cape Town (well, most of the latter, really), and finally a wish of good luck with doing whatever I chose to do while in South Africa.

Since I wasn't jet-lagged or tired at all, I decided to head straight down to the harbour. That's where tourists are supposed to go, as it's a fairly safe area and most of the mandatory Cape Town excursions leave from there.

When the receptionist got wind of my plans, she called over a big man with dreadlocks. He was given the mission of accompanying me on the perilous journey to the taxi stand a hundred metres away. As we walked, he kept telling me to move faster and not look to the sides. I did well, and we made the trip unharmed. But there were no taxis there, just a tiny old lady who couldn't hear me because she was behind two layers of bullet-proof windows and a grid of metal bars. Understanding why I was there, she just pointed to a chair. I sat down and waited for my transport.

The taxi turned out to be not exactly a taxi, but a rikki. Apparently the driver had built the vehicle himself and on a low budget. The back seat was more like a cargo space. Cape Town had many rikkis, and you could easily hear when one was nearby. The one I got was named Rikki Martin, after the Latino artist with an international hit or two that year. Presumably because its passengers, just like Mister Martin when on stage, were likely to scream and shout quite a bit while moving their hips in suggestive ways just to stay inside the "car" when it made turns.

My greatest achievement that day was probably to prove that in less than 24 hours it is indeed possible to turn one's existence upside down, from doing the dishes at home in Oslo to sitting in a prison cell in South Africa

and ponder upon the mysteries of life. In my case the prison was Robben Island, which fortunately had been transformed into a museum and tourist attraction. The whole island was for now kept more or less exactly the way it had been when Nelson Mandela and a great many others were kept there for sometimes good, but just as often not so good reasons. A visit to Robben Island is probably most meaningful to people who actually lived through the apartheid regime, but anyone with an interest in history and politics would make a mistake if they visited Cape Town without going to Robben Island.

The mood on the ferry to the island was mixed. Most foreigners, obviously on vacation, gathered in the sunny spot on the aft deck, smiling and telling funny stories while enjoying the view of the city and Table Mountain. Many of the South Africans, however, seemed to prepare for a solemn and possibly even stressful experience. A visit to the island can bring both light-hearted and mournful moments. All kinds of visitors get what they come for.

On the island we were met by a stand-up comedian of a guide. "Have any of you been to Alcatraz in San Francisco?" (another infamous former prison, now museum) "Really? For what crime?", and so on. He pushed us into an authentic prison bus, previously used to transport the inmates in the penal colony to hard work in the stone quarries on the island.

A few years previously a large ceremony in celebration of international anti-apartheid work had been held on the island. Our guide told us with great enthusiasm that the guest list had featured celebrities like the US First Lady Hillary Clinton and the comedian Bill Cosby. With important visitors like that coming, it had been decided that a new bus was needed.

A luxury bus was acquired and a large helicopter was used to literally give the bus a lift from the mainland. Just a short distance off the island the wire used to lift the bus couldn't take the tension any more. It snapped. The thirty-two shipwrecks around Robben Island were joined by a bus wreck. So all visitors were still taken around the island in a very basic vehicle that once upon a time had been bought from Indonesia. I recognized it at once, having done a bit of travelling on Java. Indonesia is the only country in the world where the standard way of organizing the

seats is not 2+2 with an aisle in the middle. Instead they use a mix of 2+3 and 3+2, allowing for more seats, but also making it hard to move up and down the aisle.



Cape Town with Table Mountain in the back and The Lion's Head to the right

The highlight of the guided tour was supposed to be a visit in Mandela's actual cell. For almost a full five seconds each we were allowed to stand in it and contemplate what his prison life must have been like, and then we had to move on. Our next stop was a larger cell, more like a dormitory actually, where an authentic murderer and ex-convict, now employee of the prison, gave a truthful account of what life on the prison island had been like.

It seemed to me that in the reconciliation process initiated by Mandela when he became president, not only were political prisoners and prisoners of conscience released from captivity. All prisoners had been granted freedom, even those who had killed, like our current guide and narrator. You may have your doubts regarding the rationale behind the decision, but Mandela did it simply to save the country from a lengthy period of disruption and chaos. Fortunately it worked out more or less as he had hoped. For visitors to Robben Island this means that not only do the guides there *seem* a little bit rowdy, in many cases they actually are.

I had too little time in Mandela's prison cell to fully appreciate his suffering, but I had ample time to study the everyday life of some twenty-five thousand African penguins while I waited for the ferry back to the city. Previously the birds had gone by the name of jackass penguins, but apparently some advocate of animal rights had succeeded in raising the avian dignity ever so slightly by renaming the species. I'm guessing that an African American may have been responsible for the initiative, but I don't know for sure.

Lacking glaciers or even ice cubes to cool themselves down with, the penguins spent the hottest part of the day in the shadow of some shrubbery and inside caves they had dug out in the sandy ground. I was happy to notice that they looked and behaved much like proper Antarctic penguins. Coming out of their hiding places, it took them merely seconds to do something that looked really stupid to a neutral observer like me. Three ferries to the city came and went before I was able to leave them.

Seeing the penguins wasn't the only flashback from my trip to Antarctica that day. Back in Cape Town I checked my e-mail. Hidden between a number of offers to increase the length and girth of my manhood and promises of cheap medicine from Canada, I found a disturbing message from Keiko. The Keiko we're talking about is a Japanese, for lack of a better word, woman.

There are many countries in the world I have yet to visit. For some of them I still have a very clear idea about what it would be like to go there. Japan is one such country. They have blossoming cherry trees and overweight men confused about their age, wearing grandmother hairdos and baby diapers. Their cities are enormous, lit up by neon in such concentrations that they can be seen from the Moon. Japanese trains don't roll; they fly.

All this is certainly fascinating. For a Western male the most compelling reason to visit the country is still that he will experience something much like what Kal El (Superman) did when he arrived at a planet under a yellow sun. All of a sudden, inexplicably, he is equipped with superpowers, powers he did not possess where he came from. The superpower granted to the Western man upon arrival in Japan is that suddenly women will be enormously attracted to him!

Let me quickly point out that in real life, this is not necessarily true. Still, I *will* believe this until, theoretically, someday I'm proven wrong. I build my faith upon a number of mildly bizarre episodes involving various Japanese females and myself. Let me give you just one example.

Southwest of Melbourne, Australia, the Great Ocean Road is a magnificent scenic drive. It clings to the coastline in the direction of Adelaide, and around every turn there's a good reason to stop and admire

the view. If you want to experience the area properly, you must either drive your own car, or you can join a minibus excursion run by a hostel in Melbourne. I did the latter. Early one morning we set off, a small group of your average, mouldy-smelling backpackers, including some Japanese girls. The sights along the Great Ocean Road were as beautiful as ever, but to me the most memorable moment that day occurred when during a short photo stop by the roadside I pulled off my t-shirt to apply suntan lotion to my shoulders.

Before I had even gotten the lid off the bottle, one of the Japanese girls ran over to me, visibly excited. She looked shyly down towards the ground and politely asked "May I please lub your behind?" Even though her choice of words literally meant "Can I please feel up your butt?", I assumed she really wanted to say "What if I help you with that, and while I'm at it I can enjoy caressing your backside?"

I was terribly tempted to turn around, pull down my pants and say "Go ahead, baby!", but I don't do things like that. Anyway, my point is this: How many times has this happened to me back home? Zero. Never. What are the chances that something like this ever *will* happen to me in Norway? Again, slim to none. Not in a thousand years. But let me travel to Japan, and I guarantee you that I will return home with no sunburn anywhere on my body, to put it that way.

Oh well. Let's get back to Keiko, the Japanese backpacker I had met during my trip to Antarctica. The name was not all she had in common with the killer whale from the Hollywood-style environmentalist series of "Free Willy" movies. I was grateful for her sizeable contribution to stabilizing the ship on our way through the storms of the Southern Ocean, but I believe you have to be Japanese yourself in order to fully appreciate Keiko's other qualities.

The most obvious common denominator between Keiko the whale and Keiko the Japanese is that they were both completely lost as soon as you took them out of their natural surroundings. This is, of course, a trait possessed by any Japanese travelling on his or her own in foreign countries. They are simply unable to take proper care of themselves.

Somehow Keiko had heard that I was in Africa. From the e-mail I received from her, I learned that so was Keiko. She had just arrived in Zimbabwe, and in her opinion so should I, as soon as possible.

The e-mail scared me thoroughly. Few things can inspire more care and concern in me than the sight of a desperate, bespectacled, lone Japanese standing on a street corner, banging his head on a wall, miserable about having lost his group. However, baby-sitting Keiko on a continent where a thousand perils lurk under every tree and around every corner was simply not the primary goal of my trip.

Sometimes it's not so easy to communicate with Japanese people, and in Keiko's case it is permanently difficult to get any sort of sensible message across, both to and from her. On the boat to Antarctica she repeatedly came up to me to, and I use the expression loosely, talk. Our conversations invariably ran along this course:

– Biiioooo? [*Imagine a high-pitched, blaring voice*]

– No, my name is Bjørn.

– Biiioooo?

– No no, Biii-yearn.

– Biii-oooo?

– No, first 'Bi', then 'Yearn'. Bi – Yearn.

– Biii-ooooon?

We could go on like that for hours, until I pointed out an iceberg or some detail in the distance, and said "Photo?" This was her cue to run off to photograph whatever I was pointing at, while I ran in the other direction and hid as well as one can on a not particularly large vessel. Soon she would find me again, and we would continue our discussion regarding how to properly pronounce my name. With little success, I might add.

I have to give Keiko credit for her Norwegian being just as good as her English. Unfortunately she speaks neither of them very well, and the part of her brain that she uses to do so isn't even located inside her physical

body. Instead she uses a small, electronic gadget. The thing is simply a multi-language dictionary that translates directly word by word from Japanese to anything, whatever she wants to say. She types in Japanese words, and in return the doodad picks a seemingly random string of words from a long list of languages.

Sometimes the gadget will suggest a word that actually has something to do with what she's trying to say, but more often the message will be lost in translation. By looking through the list of suggested words, it *may* be possible to guess what Keiko is trying to tell you, but when Keiko herself chooses from the list and strings the words together in an e-mail, it can quickly turn into a most difficult read. What she herself gathers from what people tell her in anything but Japanese remains a mystery to me.

Anyway, this is the e-mail that scared me so:

Hallo Bjorn,

I am sorry for the writing to have become slow. I want to see the animal which runs about early in nature. A target is riding on the back of an elephant. Can it meet in Africa?

How are you!! I very fain! In Bulawayo. Now where you?? Vic Folls maybe better in Cape Town? Cape Town black criminal. And now Cape Town maybe very cold. Summer season Zimbabwe (swampy ground) maybe no malaria. Malaria attention!

And meet you early!

Hurry up!! Hurry up!! I'm wait here. Beautiful garden and pool and 2 dog!

(^^) (^^) Keiko (^^) (^^)

I know. The message can be rather difficult to comprehend. Yet I replied and politely declined what I supposed was her offer to accompany me on my way through a region of criminals, mosquitos and other African attractions. I told her that I would maybe go to Zimbabwe in a month or so, but for now I would stay in South Africa. I wished her a pleasant and safe journey, and good luck with everything.

I should have accidentally deleted her e-mail instead. Ten minutes later a new e-mail arrived. From Keiko:

Hallo Bjorn

It go Cape Town. Where stay Cape Town? See you tommrow!

(^^) (^^) Keiko (^^) (^^)

Most great travellers throughout history seem to have enjoyed companions that left a distinct mark on their expeditions. Marco Polo brought his dad and an uncle to China. Diego Velasquez was helped by the ruthlessly efficient Hernán Cortés in keeping protesting Aztecs from blocking his road to riches. David Livingstone, tormented by malaria on his way to the heart of Africa, was kept alive and on his donkey by Chuma. Lewis and Clark pushed each other forward through the Wild West, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Sir Edmund Hillary was lifted to the top of Mount Everest by his sherpa, Tenzing Norgay. Even Mickey Mouse had a loyal companion in Goofy on most of his journeys. Me? I got Keiko.

To calm down my nerves while waiting for the storm to arrive ("keiko" is almost certainly Japanese for a particularly violent typhoon), I spent a day enjoying the soothing smell of flowers. I'm not sure how it happened, but the flowers of the world have somehow organized themselves into six floral kingdoms. Ask any botanist, it's true! And the only floral kingdom contained within a single "real country" is the Cape kingdom in the south-west corner of South Africa. *Thousands* of plant species grow in the wild there and nowhere else. The Dutch, who centuries ago initiated the spice trade between Asia and Europe, used to stop for supplies in the Cape region. As enthusiastic about flowers then as they are today, they made sure to take home some of the local flower bulbs. Many of our popular garden plants, such as the Gladiola, Erica and Iris families, all stem from Dutch abductions from the Cape floral kingdom.

The real aristocrats of this kingdom are the fynbos, the "fine bushes". Fynbos often have a slightly surreal appearance and were named for their colourful and tiny petals. The fynbos family has some eight or nine

thousand members, of whom many have been found only within extremely limited areas. One of them grows only in the middle of the Cape Town hippodrome. On the same patch of greenery you can also find sixteen other plants of almost equal rareness. A peckish race horse gone marginally astray is enough to wipe out whole plant families for eternity!

Slowly these plants conquered the Cape Peninsula, so thoroughly that in the process they evicted all trees from the region. The trees that grow there today, an amazing number considering their recent arrival, are species brought from foreign lands by the Europeans.

The Cape flora is completely different from what you find in the rest of the world, so a trip to the Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden is of interest to almost anyone. To me, however, the most important feature of the place was that from just behind the garden there was a path up to the top of Table Mountain, Cape Town's distinctive landmark. An almost vertical walk led up from the bottom of the auspiciously named Skeleton Gorge. After a good hour of walking and climbing, surrounded by increasingly wild fynbos, I was definitely on a mountain. By then I had reached a pretty wild state myself.

On the way I encountered a group of English Boy Scouts. They were lost, and under the delusion that moss always grows on the northern side of trees. I gave them a short lecture in astronomy and the difference between the northern and the southern hemispheres, took out my map and pointed them in the right direction. Myself, I did fine until I suddenly was torpedoed by a bumblebee, of all things. I'll tell you this; the bumblebees of South Africa are enormous! Maybe that's not so strange, given the candy factory of a floral kingdom they hum and bum around in.

Anyway, this bumblebee slammed into my skull with so much force that I almost blacked out. I understand that large insects with ridiculously tiny wings may have problems with steering clear of meeting traffic, but the next time I go up on that mountain, I'll be wearing a helmet.

The top of Table Mountain is Malcolm's Peak, rising up to 1087.5 metres. A small dam there was full of frogs that had a far niftier view than most other frogs. Strong winds had closed down the funicular from the city for the day, so I was practically alone up there. At first I was

immensely pleased by the solitude I enjoyed in the usually busy tourist attraction. Then I realized that since there was no mechanical transportation available for going up the mountain, neither would there be any such service to take me down.

On shaky legs I carefully descended a path cutting through one of the gorges. In places it was a scary walk, and at the end of it an even more terrifying experience awaited me; a walk through the streets of Cape Town back to the hostel. Of course, I *could* have taken the bus. "The Topless Bus", a promising sign outside the lower funicular station said. Despite a stiff ticket price, "topless" turned out to mean just roofless and nothing else. I decided I'd rather walk.

The villas I passed indicated that their residents were so rich that they probably wouldn't be interested in robbing me. I still felt unsafe. The gardens and entryways of the houses contained enough security measures to put any American embassy to shame, and they probably did so for a reason.

To a Norwegian it can be difficult to fathom the extent of the wave of crime and violence that washes over South Africa. Having kept my eyes open while visiting, I can only say that they seemed to have *serious* problems. A small notice in the Cape Times newspaper announced that the local train company was on the verge of bankruptcy. The reason, you ask? Extensive vandalism on train cars.

Of course, similar problems are faced by transportation companies in many parts of the world, but in Cape Town the problems were on an entirely different scale. It wasn't just that the vandals had self-confidence issues forcing them to write their names in as many places as possible to confirm their own existence. No, in Cape Town entire carriages were being dismantled. People walked away with doors, window frames and aluminium pipes, taking them to the scrap dealer to sell the metal!

Reading another newspaper, The Cape Argus, was equally depressing. To be fair, the editorial called for all South Africans to pull themselves together and stop whining about how often they were being kidnapped and robbed. Instead people should show each other and the world that there *were* positive sides to the country. But then the rest of the newspaper

followed. One article after the other told of women being raped by police chiefs, of drivers who had been robbed and murdered after having stopped for maidens apparently in distress, of corruption scandals among the city's politicians, and so on. The only trace of South African pride I found in the newspaper was in eleven sentences in a corner, where the Minister of Education declared that the country increasingly was being acknowledged for its research on the mysteries of Outer Space. Imagine that. It was a light in an astronomical darkness, in more than one sense. Sadly it was only of infinitesimal use.

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Just to be clear before we continue: I am an *eager* reader of newspapers. Also, or maybe even *particularly* when I travel. To me, newspapers are the most reliable sources of information thinkable. I trust them more than I trust the people I meet. People tend to lie when they talk to foreigners. Yes, they do. Even you.

Let's ignore those who lie because they are trying to scam you for money. Ordinary, orderly people are also more than willing to lie to foreigners. "Yes, it's incredibly cold in Norway", we say, because we sort of enjoy being looked upon as a hardy people, tougher than most, ignoring the fact that most Norwegians really live in regions with a fairly mild climate. "Norwegians go skiing whenever we can", we say, even though most don't. "Norwegians are slender, fit people." Well, guess what? Exactly. Just like in other countries, obesity is increasingly becoming a health issue in Norway as well.

There's no reason to be ashamed of this. The lying, I mean. All over the world people will for various reasons tell not exactly the whole truth when they talk to foreigners about their country and fellow countrymen. Sometimes it just happens because the local and the foreigner communicate in a language that isn't the mother tongue of either of them, or for just one of them at best. Tiny verbal misunderstandings may turn into amazing facts.

At other times the local may worry that the foreigner will be disappointed, maybe even insulted, if he learns that reality doesn't conform with the beliefs implanted in the foreigner's head. Most often,

however, the reason is that the local wants you to believe something about his country or his people, something that may not be *entirely* untrue, but which nevertheless is at least a flattering exaggeration.

A newspaper doesn't think that way. A newspaper doesn't think at all. All a newspaper tries to do, is to quote facts that at least some of the people who buy the newspaper already know. So for a tourist, reading the newspaper is a most reliable way to learn about what exactly goes on locally. At least it's a much more trustworthy source of information than to base your knowledge on what someone you happen to meet happens to tell you. An even better way to learn what is true is of course to stay in the country or the region long enough to let you see through the propaganda from the locals. But if that's your strategy, you won't have time to understand much of the world during your ridiculously short human lifetime.

So clearly you should buy newspapers when you travel. Even in the worst of censoring dictatorships, a newspaper read the right way will tell you much of what you need to know. Also, it is much easier to catch what is being said when you can spell your way through it at your own pace, instead of having to relate to a steady stream of rapid utterances about something you've never heard of before.

The smaller the circulation of the newspaper, and the farther away from the many centres of the world the newspaper is published, the better. From a tiny newspaper in a remote region you can expect both the articles and the advertisements to be packed with intrigues and tales, stuff which you after having leafed through the tourist brochures would never imagine existed there.

Oh, and one more thing. Since foreigners aren't "supposed to" be interested in local news, walking around with a newspaper under your arm is of great help if you want to disguise yourself as a native. Particularly if at the same time you don't wear Bermuda shorts or have a huge camera hanging around your neck.

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At the hostel the atmosphere had changed. It was now inhabited, well, actually "infested" would be a better word, by a large group of not overly sophisticated South Africans who were smoking, drinking, swearing and playing billiards. They reminded me of northern Europeans on vacation in southern countries, which I guess is sort of exactly what white South Africans are. Keiko wasn't there, I noticed with a happy sigh. After dinner I went to bed while the South Africans were still relatively pleasant to be around. For the first time since I don't know when, I said my evening prayers.

"God is dead!", was my first thought when the next morning I walked out of my room and found Keiko in the corridor. She embraced me eagerly, smiling from one side of her glasses to the other, clearly overjoyed by finally having found someone who she thought understood what she said. Well, she actually didn't say much at first, but through some intense pointing to her electronic language gadget, I gathered that she had just spent forty consecutive hours on a bus, travelling from Zimbabwe first west through Namibia and then down the entire west coast of South Africa. Just to meet up with me.

She had not eaten since Zimbabwe, as neither she nor her Visa card spoke anything but Japanese. I have seen Keiko's photos from Antarctica. Fifty were of penguins, ten of icebergs, fifteen of me and then about a hundred photos documented in detail every meal and snack she had feasted upon during the trip. Keiko doesn't function well without a steady supply of food.

Two giant sandwiches and a large cup of coffee (she wanted it black with lots of milk in it) was all it took for her to get back to her old, jabbering self, the one I knew from before. I'm not entirely sure what she said, but I got the impression that she agreed that first I would accompany her through Cape Town for a few days, and then I'd get her safely through the rest of Africa.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but it appeared to me that dragging along an Asian woman that ran around pointing and laughing hysterically whenever she saw something she had not seen before, and this was often as Cape Town isn't Tokyo, led to more attention from the

seedy street people of the city than I had enjoyed previously. No longer ignoring me, they now showed an open interest in both me and my company. I pulled Keiko inside the first and best museum we passed, both for safety reasons and secretly hoping that maybe the museum would be interested in acquiring a new, living item for their Oriental collections.

Unfortunately it was The South African Museum. True, their collection of stuffed animals, which to a larger degree than most stuffed animals definitely must have seen better days, *did* for some reason include a not particularly African polar bear, but apart from that the museum was all about South Africa. It was highly unlikely that they would buy a babbling Japanese, no matter how cheap they could have gotten her from me.

The first display cases indicated that the highlight of the museum could very well be the strange fish that the local chieftain's son had caught last week, but fortunately the choice of exhibits soon improved. The geology section was good, as it should be in a country as full of natural resources as South Africa. They were also big on African tribal masks, of course, and there was a literally large collection of whale skeletons. Matching the whales in scale were the Karoo creatures, animals that ruled South Africa *before* the dinosaurs! I quickly decided that we shouldn't be too sad about the extinction of the gigantic and voracious Karoo lizards. Apparently they became extinct because in the end they had nothing to eat but each other, which they happily did.

I was denied a visit to the museum's most reputed display, "The Lives of the Khoikhois". This tribe is today almost as extinct as the Karoos. When the Europeans arrived in southern Africa, the Khoikhois had recently established themselves there, after having dislodged some other people in the usual, not very sympathetic way of violent newcomers.

Always keen to document the everyday lives of savages, the British, at the height of their colonial efforts, decided to create a set of lifelike displays of typical Khoikhoi activities. To ensure authenticity it was done by making casts of living people performing everyday activities. Unfortunately, this technique wasn't compatible with the respiratory functions of the models, so quite a few Khoikhois actually died in the

process. This little detail had surfaced just recently. While the debate raged over whether it was ethically correct or not to display the results of this human tragedy, understandably the exhibition was closed to the public.

The entire day I piloted my newly arrived friend between the safe harbours of Cape Town. She became a bit easier to control after we both witnessed an older tourist, presumably chosen according to Darwinian principles, being robbed by two glue-sniffing children. I was happy and relieved when evening fell and we were both safely back at the hostel.

When Keiko had eaten and eaten and eaten again and gone to bed exhausted, I quietly began to plan my escape. In great secrecy I booked a seat on a bus to Mosselbaai leaving a few days later. Cheered up by the prospect of regaining my freedom, I studied a fresh batch of newspapers. In Africa that's always an exciting enterprise, as not only their tabloids offer hilarious headlines, absolutely all newspapers contain unbelievable highlights.

The most cheerful report in the Cape Times was a follow-up to a mysterious episode on a city beach reported a few days earlier. A local rugby star had explained how a life-saver had rescued him when he had swum too far out from the beach and been caught in a dangerous undertow. Excited on-lookers to the rescue operation, however, had thickened the plot by claiming that the life-saver first had swum out to the rugby star, then returned to the beach and disappeared for a while, and then swum out again and apparently rescued him. Finally the event could be explained.

The only emergency the rugby star had been in, was the one caused by an enthusiastic wave. It had ripped off his swimming trunks and gone on to rapidly transport them in the general direction of South America. The rugby star didn't want to leave the water naked, as this was a family beach. Therefore he had lured the life-saver into the water, and then had him retrieve a new, tight, minimal piece of clothing to cover his bare essentials. And that's how you create front page news in South Africa.

Just like the North Cape isn't actually the northernmost point of Europe, neither is the Cape of Good Hope the southern extremity of Africa. Those honours belong to respectively Knivskjellodden and Cape Agulhas. Since those two aren't that picturesque, most tourists prefer to go to the North Cape Centre or the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve when they want to see the ends of the world. So did I.

My hostel ran day trips to the Cape Peninsula, and I had signed up for going the next morning. When Keiko saw me handing over money to the girl in the reception, she ran up to her and said "Same, same!" and pointed to me and my ticket. I put on an artificial smile, and thought that it would certainly be nice with some Japanese company on the narrow paths along the sheer drops by the coast, where dangerously strong gusts of wind often suddenly appear. While waiting for our departure I studied a map on the wall, locating the places with the most impressive precipices.

On our way south we made several stops. One of them was at the beach in the tiny town of Boulders. Most beaches in the Cape Town area offer lots of space for their visitors, since the average temperature in the sea throughout much of the year is a puny 8–12 degrees Celsius. But this beach was overcrowded and full of life. One day in the mid-1980s the beach had with no advance warning been invaded by penguins, and they're still there. Nobody knows exactly what they're doing there, or how long they're planning on staying, but the villagers of Boulders immediately and to this very day lost their access to the sea. Also, they had to accept that a permanently noisy and lively beach party became part of their lives, day and night.

My theory is that the group of birds is just a platoon of elite scouts, sent out to develop resistance against malaria. Like all foolish beings, the penguins desire world dominion, but so far they have been stopped every time they have approached the Equator. Despite what you may think, it's not because it gets too hot for them. The only thing that has stopped them from conquering the northern hemisphere, is the fact that they are highly susceptible to a strain of malaria that simply kills them. But give them a few million years more, and I'm sure we'll be seeing them on northern shores as well. I can hardly wait!

The Cape of Good Hope itself is one of the world's many undeniably special places. Two oceans as well as two climate zones meet there. Both of these encounters can be seen with the naked eye, as a noticeable difference in the colour of the two oceans, and as storm fronts and cloud formations almost continuously crashing into each other up in the sky.

The cliffs along the coast stand tall and proud, their looks complemented by a couple of lighthouses put on top of them. First a large and monumental lighthouse was built in the highest location possible, at Cape Point, 235 metres above sea level. They put it there to make it visible from as far away as possible. A few shipwrecks later, they put up a smaller lighthouse only 80 metres above the sea. You see, on a typical day a thick layer of low-hanging clouds will cover the Cape Point completely, and since boats and ships most often stay at sea level, they are more likely to actually see the lower lighthouse than the upper one.

From the Cape Point a twenty minute walk led to the famed Cape of Good Hope. The area surrounding the path was lush, fresh, steep, wet, blue, green and grand. The original vegetation was preserved, so there were no trees, just a wide selection of moss, shrubbery and flowers. Solid fences had been erected in front of the sheer drops down to the sea, so Keiko had no trouble surviving the walk.

“Cape of Good Hope indeed”, I thought as upon arrival there I eyed a new opportunity to get rid of Keiko. A group of baboons suddenly appeared over the hill. “Mannkees!”, Keiko beamed. I smiled, and



Penguins on the beach in Boulders

encouraged her to go over to the animals so that I could take a picture of her with them. Keiko is probably to this day blissfully unaware of the fact that the fangs of a full-grown baboon are longer *and* sharper than a lion's. And she certainly didn't know that the Cape Peninsula baboons are among the most aggressive animals in the world, having been fed regularly by stupid tourists for decades.



Not Keiko

My plan didn't work out that well. Keiko came out of it without as much as a scratch. She walked right up to the baboons, and for some strange reason they didn't raise an eyebrow at her, much less any teeth. Instead they allowed her to sit smiling in their middle, treating her as one of their own. The idyll lasted until the whole group suddenly ran off with frothing mouths and loud screams. They were on a mission to devastate the leather interior of a rental car, whose windows had been carelessly left open by a horrified Italian couple who had run out of luck.

Over supper that evening, Keiko pulled out a ticket to Mosselbaai for the very same bus

that I had planned to escape in. I resigned. We played backgammon for the rest of the evening, while I pondered upon who her spy was. It certainly wasn't me!

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The bus out of Cape Town was full of British backpackers. They, in turn, were full of some beverage of alcoholic contents, and they stunk so bad that I spent most of the trip like a dog with my nose out of the

window. Actually, I guess to someone with a sense of smell a thousand times better than ours, even a freshly showered person must smell pretty bad in a hot car. So now I know why dogs prefer to sit with their heads out of the window when travelling by car.

What had been a short bit on the map between Cape Town and Mosselbaai, turned out to be four hundred kilometres of road. It made me wonder with worry how long the *long* stretches on my itinerary were. I am used to long distances from my own stretched country. South Africa, however, is four times the size of Norway, and with its significantly higher concentration of British teens on pub-to-pub tours, I suspected I was in for much time with wind in my hair, hanging out of bus windows.

We left the wine country outside Cape Town. The farms became ever more scattered. There were almost no buildings to see as we drove into the foggy mist of the Klein Karoo mountain range.

The mist hid the views along the road. I didn't mind. All the turns and bends of the road through the mountains made me nauseous, so I kept my eyes closed anyway. Eventually we left the greyness and arrived in another world on the other side of the mountains. Cows didn't graze the hills in this place. The moo-moos had been replaced by large herds of ostriches. I had never seen an ostrich outside of a zoo, so suddenly to see hundreds of them wandering in the fields by the road was a strange sight to me. At last my trip to Africa was turning, well, Africish!

Having grown up in a small village on the North Sea coast, coming to Mosselbaai was almost like coming home. Even with more than fifty thousand inhabitants it was definitely a cosy small town. Wherever I turned I could see fishermen dressed in coveralls. Most of them were black ("African Africans"? No, I'll stick to black), but their children sported blond hair, for reasons I never established. They ran freely in the streets even though it was late in the evening, so I decided to venture outside as well.

I went down to the harbour to watch the boats come in with the catch of the day. For sure, none of the fishermen had any reason to complain. They showed off impressive amounts of giant sardines. The fishermen all seemed to lack their front teeth, but they smiled happily nevertheless.

Either there's a fair amount of fighting going on in the village on Saturday nights, or it was just their front teeth they didn't brush well. All their other teeth sparkled brightly towards me there in the dusk on the docks, the men joking and laughing as the end of their working day drew closer.

Mosselbaai happened to become the spot on Earth where I celebrated my thirtieth birthday. I was quite happy about that. My only wish for the day was that I wanted to enjoy myself thoroughly, and the path leading out of town, west along the Indian Ocean, was perfect for that purpose.

The sky was a perfect blue and the sun shone bright, giving the scenery surrounding the path deep, rich and happy colours. All stones were partially covered in orange lichen. An eternal row of turquoise waves crashed loudly as they made landfall against the rocky shoreline. Fynbos and other plants in purple, yellow and green welcomed me around every turn on the path, and the smiles from everyone I met were astonishingly white. That is, I met people only during the first half hour of walking. They stood in the water filling buckets with the mollusc creatures that gave the town its name.

15–20 kilometres southwest of Mosselbaai lies Dana Baai, a small fishing village. Between these two places you can walk on the beautiful St. Blaize Trail. Doing that walk was both my gift and my challenge to myself that day. At first it seemed like an easy stroll, something I was certain to survive. Then the path made a sharp turn, and suddenly I came face to snout with something deer-like. This could have been a pleasant wildlife experience, except the beast was equipped with pointy, spiralled horns, two giant sabres of ungulate manhood. The beast was making guttural sounds. Really, really scary groans.

On the narrow ledge that we shared there was space neither for me nor for the animal to escape easily. First we were both scared stiff. At least I know I was. Then it seemed as if the four-legged one got a bright idea. Apparently it had decided that attack was the best defence in this case, and it started running straight towards me.

Two thoughts filled my head. 1) Whatever people say, it is *not* a good idea to stop wearing diapers before you turn 30. 2) Would I rather die from having two long horns perforate my stomach, or would I prefer to

end my life by flying with a one-way ticket onto the ragged cliffs fifty metres or so below? I stood for a second weighing pros and cons of my options against each other. Before I had picked my poison, the buck sailed over my head in a most elegant leap and quickly disappeared around the corner.



From the St. Blaize Trail

Enormously satisfied by still having a non-pierced navel, and stomach, I continued my walk through the beautiful cliff landscape. Just after noon my heart jumped up into my throat for the second time that day. Keiko sat seemingly exhausted on a rock next to the path. By now I was long since convinced that she was a psychic, so I didn't ask her what on earth she was doing there. Instead I just sat down and politely greeted her, "Harakiri sushi". After some pointing to devices and creative thinking, I learned that she had gotten up at six in the morning and started walking along the path she assumed I would follow, and now she figured that we might as well walk together. And so we did. Slowly.

We reached Dana Baai late in the afternoon. It was obvious that walking back to Mosselbaai before nightfall was not an option. Neither were there any other obvious ways to get back to Mosselbaai safely that day. Fortunately we found a fisherman in the quiet village. He pointed us in the direction of the main road back to town. We went there, and I put my thumb to work.

Keiko started trembling when she saw what I was doing. It was obvious that it wasn't because of her tired legs, but because she was scared. She babbled away, shook her head and pulled out her guidebook. In it she found a particular page, on which she pointed to a picture of a policeman watching over a black citizen who happened to be wearing handcuffs. The swarthy man didn't exactly put on a smile for the photographer, and in the background I could see a bloody stretcher being lifted into an ambulance. "Denn-gee-roos!", Keiko stuttered.

Later I got ample opportunity to leaf through her guidebook. Japanese guidebooks are not like others. Where the books I prefer to use mostly describe what there is to see, eat and do, Japanese publications seem to put more emphasis on covering in full what is dangerous, what *not* to do and which areas have more shops. If you've ever wondered why Japanese tourists standing around alone with a book on a city corner look so worried, you can stop wondering now. It's probably because they've just read that where they're standing, they are 112 times more likely to be robbed and/or murdered than in, say, Kyoto.

The picture in Keiko's book was meant to illustrate the notion that hitch-hiking in South Africa is not necessarily a good idea. This was in line with my own perception after having read the Cape Town newspapers, but in lack of any better suggestions I continued to let my thumb point in what I hoped was the direction of Mosselbaai.

It didn't take long before a pick-up truck stopped. The white farmer behind the steering wheel told us to go in the back. There were already two African families and a couple of farm animals brought along for the ride there, but they were happy to make room for us. Keiko's eyes completely filled her glasses, and she shook her head while muttering "Iie, iie, iie! Denn-gee-roos!", over and over again. When I got up she

realized that the alternative to following me would be to stand alone on the road somewhere infinitely far away from the nearest Japanese consulate. She made the right decision and quickly climbed up and sat down next to me.

The ride went fine. Keiko's face shifted rapidly between confusion and fear, keeping the rest of us entertained. I imagined it wasn't too often they saw Japanese people up close there, and judging from Keiko, that's the way it will stay for a long time to come. Yet we arrived safely in Mosselbaai by sunset, which made us both very happy. She was glad just to be alive, and I was pleased to have experienced that even in a country with widespread fear and uncertainty among its citizens, there were still people who trusted others enough to help them out in this simple way.

My birthday and our survival were both causes for celebration, so we went out for dinner at the local steak house. Half a kilo of entrecôte for me, the rest of the cow for Keiko. From her bag she pulled out a gift, one that I spent quite some time interpreting the meaning of. It was a typical Japanese hand fan. You know, one that folds up nicely, so it's easy to carry and bring out when you need some air in your face. It came with a drawing on one side of a fat, bald god who with all his might blew up a wind. "Kamikaze!", Keiko said and smiled. "The Wind of the Gods".

Now, I *do* believe that the gift was meant to bring me good luck, and not an allusion to the various suicide attempts I had been trying to lure Keiko into. The kamikaze wind was originally a special kind of storm in the Sea of Japan. In its time it had stopped



the Mongolians several times from invading Japan, by sinking their boats or otherwise kept them from crossing the sea. After this, the lethal wind has been associated with luck and success by the Japanese. Later the term kamikaze acquired a new meaning. The Japanese fighter pilots of World War II who ran their planes, and themselves, straight into the enemy's

ships became known as kamikaze pilots. I guess the Japanese put more emphasis on how their country escaped invasion a long time ago than on more recent war history.

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A trip to the local museum the next day taught me that the squid is the smartest molluscan creature in the world. They had one there who could open screw cap bottles and then squeeze itself into the bottle in a way that was painful to watch. There the patient hunter waited to see if anything edible would swim by. This, in turn, taught me that molluscs in general cannot be *that* smart, since even a more stupid being could easily see the squid hiding inside the transparent bottle.

Despite this fascinating display of marine intelligence I decided that I would leave the coast. With Keiko hard on my heels I travelled inland.

Oudtshoorn is an ordinary city in an extraordinary valley. That is, the valley itself isn't that unusual. There's a river and some land with lots of farms on it and the Swartberg mountains around it. What was unusual, at least to me, was that the farms were home to almost exactly a million ostriches! This alone was more than enough reason for me to visit the place, but it soon turned out that the area offered other attractions as well.

The African winter was more discernible there, a vertical kilometre from the sea. We rented bicycles and with them on a trailer behind us we were taken another few hundred metres up, to the top of the Swartberg Pass. Amusingly, the highest point was just called "Die Top". Seriously chilly gusts of air came down the mountainside, providing me with motivation to step hard on the pedals to get back down to the wonderful valley of fairy tale farms full of friendly fowls.

Unlike the wind, the road told me to slow down. It lay there the way it had been built more than a century ago. From a distance it looked as if it had been laboriously put together using grey Lego bricks. It reminded me slightly of the Inca Trail in Peru and of ancient mountain roads in Norway in all its robust yet decayed simplicity. The road wound down

the mountain through countless sudden turns, all the time offering splendid views of the valley. Clearly, the Maker of Everything had never intended anyone to build a road there.

With the rounded, dark mountains semi-covered by fluffy clouds and with the green valley below, I found the landscape to be almost cute, if that is something a landscape can be.



The Swartberg mountains

Another attractive feature of the Swartbergs is that they can be admired from the inside as well. Limestone grottos, the Cango Caves, were several kilometres deep and open for visitors. I took Keiko there, obviously with only the best intentions. For our own safety, we were not allowed to wander freely in the caves. We only got to walk on our own into the first, well-lit cave hall, where we would meet our guide.

Two guides arrived. One of them to do the tour in English, the other in German. Keiko understood nothing of what was said, and ended up standing confused between the two groups. I pointed to a dark crevice in the wall, smiled (it *was* a joke, really), and said “Japanese tour in there”. Keiko returned my smile, said “Oooo keeee!” and disappeared into the hole.

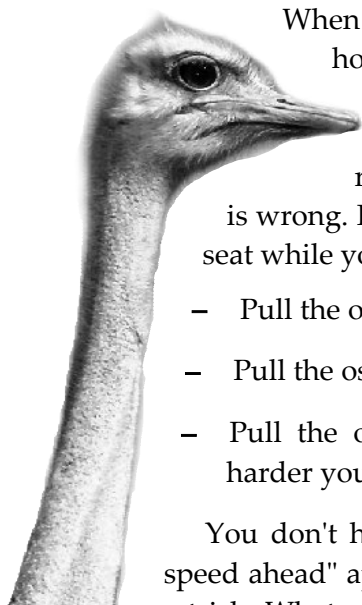
I was torn about what to do. Just then the guide said that we didn't have to worry about getting lost. He would make sure that no one was left behind, and besides, the maximum penalty for unauthorized walks in the caves was twenty-two years in prison and a giant fine, so he figured that we would probably want to stay close to him anyway, ha-ha.

Twenty-two years is a long time. I decided to tell the guide that I thought that maybe a Japanese girl had wandered off into that hole there. The guides and another cave ranger lit their flashlights and quickly went after her. It took them some time to locate her. In the darkness she had of course pulled out an ultra-hi-tech flashlight from her bag and walked off in the direction that intrigued her the most. Brusquely the men brought her back to the rest of us, while she still smiled as if she had fallen into a cauldron full of Prozac when she was a child. Then she joined the German group.

The caverns were nice. Lots of colours and peculiar stone formations gave me the feeling of being in the Hall of the Mountain King. When photographs were taken, the flash revealed that the walls were actually grey, but in the opalescence of the artificial lighting it was easy to be fascinated by the many natural sculptures with inspired names like the Bridal Chamber, the Fairy Hall, the Drum Room and the Crystal Forest.

Back in the daylight and on our bicycles we soon arrived at one of the largest ostrich farms in the valley, the country and the world. A fellow named Roland eagerly showed us around. There were ostrich eggs, young ostriches and *fully* grown ostriches everywhere. I even got to ride an ostrich. Well, maybe I shouldn't really mention that. In photos from the event, where I'm being assisted by Roland in straddling the creature, an untrained eye could get the wrong idea and think that I was doing something entirely inappropriate with the poor bird. But it was great fun!

Ostriches are simple-minded creatures. If you weigh in at less than 80 kilograms (176 pounds), an adult ostrich can carry you on its back. That's not to say that it *wants* to carry you around. So before you climb on, you put a hood over the ostrich's head. Like a giant cage bird the ostrich thinks that night has come and that it should calm down and rest. Then you put your feet over its wings and sit down as comfortably as you can.



When you think you're ready, you remove the hood. The ostrich will be confused by the sudden sunrise, but it quickly gathers that something is wrong. The bird's natural reflex is to start running away from whatever is wrong. Fast. Real fast. Your only job is to stay in your seat while you steer the ostrich using these basic controls:

- Pull the ostrich neck to the right = Turn right
- Pull the ostrich neck to the left = Turn left
- Pull the ostrich neck towards you = Brakes on. The harder you pull, the more sudden the stop.

You don't have to worry about how to accelerate. "Full speed ahead" appears to be the default setting for a troubled ostrich. What you *should* concentrate on is how to fall off as softly as possible. Riding an ostrich is not exactly something you do into the sunset. I tried to slide off backwards and hit the ground running, but instead I got myself a bump in the back of my head.

Roland had explained that sometimes an offended ostrich can become so worked up about being used as a horse, that after having thrown you off it will come running back at you to yell hard at you, and then some. If that happened, Roland said, I should start running away from the ostrich. This is of course a hopeless venture. So just before the ostrich got me, I should throw myself at the ground and lie still. According to Roland, the ostrich would then proceed to think like this:

- *Oh, I'm going to get him! That monkey descendant has got some nerve, sitting on my back like that! I'll show him a good kick in the butt, I will!*

- *Gotta run, gotta run, gotta run!*

- *What a strange human-shaped rock! I'd better jump over it.*

- *Gotta run, gotta run, gotta run...*

- *Why am I running? I think I'll stop and think about that for a while.*

And then you're safe.

"My" ostrich was kind enough to jump straight to that last thought, so I could just brush off the dust I had gathered and get back to learning more about ostriches. Roland bombarded me with bits and pieces of information, most of which I instantly archived in the "Useless and forgettable" section of my brain. Only the main facts stayed with me; Oudtshoorn was the first place in the world where they managed to domesticate ostriches. This happened in the late 1800s, making Oudtshoorn the ostrich capital of the world, which was a good thing in an age when an ostrich feather could be sold for more than its weight in gold. Ost-rich indeed!

The sudden wealth, "the great feather boom" as it was dubbed, was caused by the popularity of feathers among fashion designers in Europe and America. They were used to enhance hats and dresses, and for a long time it was impossible to meet the demand for them. The farmers built elegant manors, "ostrich palaces". Many of them can still be seen in Oudtshoorn. The first World War came and went. The times had changed. People had less money, and the fashion houses chose new and less extravagant styles where ostrich feathers played no part. Many of the farms went bankrupt. In fifteen years the number of ostriches in the valley collapsed from about a million to an estimated twenty-five thousand.

Slowly Oudtshoorn recovered. Today the valley exports literally tons of ostrich meat to the whole world. Painted ostrich eggs are best-sellers in souvenir boutiques all over South Africa. Even the fashion designers favour the ostrich again, now for its leathery, robust and lightweight skin.

On the fields we bicycled past there were tens of thousands of ostriches, happily unaware of being part of a major industry. I stopped and walked over to a fence to have a closer look at the birds. They behaved just like cows, being curious, social and innocent creatures. Soon I had dozens of ostriches pushing at each other to get as close to me as they could. There's something special about those trustful birds with the large, round and melancholic eyes.

My heart warmed, I went back to Oudtshoorn and had dinner. Ostrich steak, a lovely and loveable meal.

A night in Oudtshoorn spent freezing inside a sleeping bag and under a blanket made me return to the coast so quickly that not even Keiko managed to keep up with me. I said goodbye and smiled at her from my window seat on the bus. Her face was less than cheery.

My escape vehicle brought me to Knysna. It's pronounced "Nice? Nah", and I should have gotten the message. Knysna is the largest town on the Garden Route, a group of pleasant villages and towns along the coast east of Cape Town. The Garden Route is not at all the most exciting or interesting part of South Africa, but next to safaris in the north and Cape Town, it is nevertheless a heavily promoted tourist attraction. This has several explanations. For one, tourists can actually feel safe on their own there, as the risk of becoming victim of a crime there is low. Besides, I bet the local tourist board had figured out that the most profitable tourists are elderly, slow-going people who are easily tempted by anything called something with "garden".

Knysna consisted of a cluster of buildings on both sides of the main road, picturesquely located next to a small bay. Every second house seemed to be inhabited by an eccentric artist. Gardens and windows were embellished by abstract sculptures and paintings with lots of artificial colouring added. The place clearly attracted the kind of people who are unquestionably creative, but who still are unable to use their skills for anything useful. Knysna had that distinctive spirit of the free arts, like you can find it in certain cities and neighbourhoods spread all over the world, the regional capitals of the arty, if you like.

Places like that are always interesting to visit. It was easy to enjoy walking up and down the streets and let myself continuously be surprised by the art on display. This was all nice and well, but after a while I began to wonder what other things I could do in Knysna. "Go on a cruise in the bay, you'll like that", suggested the Indian matron of the hostel I stayed in.

That was one cheap hostel, by the way. It was so cheap that the bread at the breakfast included in the room price wasn't edible until it had spent five minutes in a toaster. Also included in the room price was an annoying, small boy who I repeatedly caught searching through the

contents of my backpack. I tried to put my dirty laundry on top, but not even that helped. Desperate to get on good terms with the snotty brat, I decided to try the balloon trick.

When I travel I always carry a pack of party balloons in my backpack. They are perfect for befriending village people. First the young ones, then their parents, and in the end the chieftain will see that you are a good person, one who should be allowed to put up his tent nearby. Balloons can also be traded, for instance for food on a bus ride of unexpected duration. Or if you're suddenly surrounded by kids begging you for candy, balloons are better for their teeth. The possibilities you have when you own a bag of balloons are many, and now I discovered a new one.

As soon as I pulled out a balloon, the boy stopped moving. His eyes grew to double their normal size and the rascal ran screaming down the hall to seek comfort from his mother. She explained to me that he had recently had a traumatic experience with a balloon exploding in his hands, and the memory of this had stuck well to his brain. So all it took to keep him away from my stuff was to attach a balloon to my backpack. I also enjoyed chewing gum and blowing small gum bubbles in his presence. Popping them paralysed him every time, before he ran off and hid in the garage.

With the balloon on guard I could safely leave my backpack and head down to the harbour. A sign outside the ticket office of "The Featherbed Experience" promised a memorable cruise in the lagoon and a delightful guided tour of a nature reserve on the other side of the bay. I started having second thoughts when I saw a busload of retired people slowly crawl onto the boat. Both my guidebook and Madame India had recommended the tour, so I walked on anyway.

The "Featherbed" was the inner part of the lagoon. When the Europeans first started rounding the Cape of Good Hope to travel to Asia, this had been known as a great place to seek shelter from the large waves of the Indian Ocean. Captains could bring their ships there for a good night's sleep. They might as well have chosen a less alluring name for the place. No fewer than 46 shipwrecks lay strewn across the seabed near the entrance to the lagoon. Many a sailor would rest there in eternity.

On our way to the nature reserve we sailed past the Thesen Islands, named after some Norwegian emigrants. In 1869 they had been on their way to a new life in New Zealand, when they sailed into the bay for the night. Their ship sank, and the family had to come up with a new plan. Luckily they were skilled carpenters and shipbuilders, and they started cutting down trees to build a new vessel. Before they knew it, they had established a lumber yard and a shipyard and found that they could make a good living from it. The Norwegians chose to stay in Knysna and came to play an important role in it's development.

The lumberjacks were so efficient that today the remaining forests near Knysna have been declared protected primeval forests. The Thesen family had left the area, but the Thesen Islands were under heavy development, now as some sort of an African Venice. Out in the lagoon, the islets had attracted a large number of luxury dwellings surrounded by canals, a modern-day moat efficiently shielding the inhabitants from the worries of the mainland. There were restaurants out there as well. I was sad to find that none of them served their food with Thesen Island dressing.

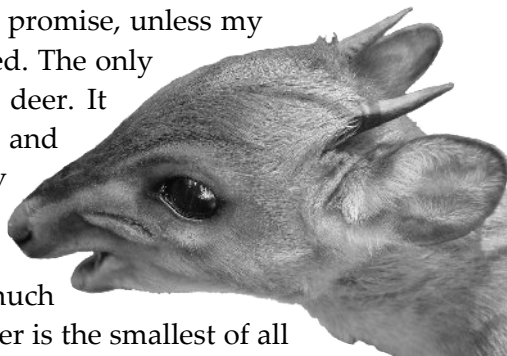
The crossing came to an end, and it had been pleasant. The gentle waves had made me relax. But when I walked off the boat, the whole tour began to smell of camphor and mentholated mints.

We were loaded onto a tiny train thing, which soon chugged miserably up the hill from the quay. After fifty metres, at the top of a steep slope, we came upon a perplexed turtle. The guide was excited; "Wow! Look at that! We are unbelievably lucky today! By pure chance, a giant sea turtle has left the sea to enjoy a few rays of sun here!" The train tilted heavily to one side as fifty elated tourists with either grey or no hair leaned over to photograph the poor reptile. A bit further on it became clear that not only was the slope steep enough to stop even the friskiest turtle from climbing it, there was also a tall fence in place to prevent anyone from coming or leaving.

Sixty metres later we made another stop. "Whoa! Here we actually have two blue herons, the national bird of South Africa! Spectacular!", the guide shouted. "And they have almost not had their wings clipped either", I mumbled, less enthusiastic. Continuing like this we moved

slowly through the nature reserve, a place far less beautiful than the Mosselbaai coastal trails or even the mountain road in Oudtshoorn. Soon I couldn't take it any more. I jumped off the train as it moved ahead at full steam, we must have done least three kilometres per hour, and I ran off into the forest. The guide, slightly panicked, shouted something after me about there being wild animals in the forest.

This turned out to be an empty promise, unless my temporarily maddened self counted. The only slightly wild animal I saw was a deer. It was a real deer with antlers and everything, but it was extremely skittish and quickly disappeared into the scrub. Standing only forty centimetres tall that wasn't much of a challenge for it. The blue duiker is the smallest of all cloven-footed animals.



I also happened upon an interesting insect. I have spent enough time in dirt cheap hotels to be able to recognize a cockroach from a long distance. This was a cockroach, but not a normal one. It was fairly large, almost ten centimetres long, and it didn't seem at all scared or worried by my presence. While a normal cockroach will run for cover at the slightest disturbance, this one just kept cockroaching no matter how close I came, as if it knew I wasn't going to harm it.

Now, when an animal or insect acts indifferently like that, there's always a good explanation for it. That'll be either A) You're in Antarctica and the creature has never faced evil humans before, or B) There are good reasons, obvious or hidden, for not bothering the thing. Since I wasn't in Antarctica, I of course had to investigate further. I got the insect up on a stick and poked at it with a straw. Explanation B struck. Hard.

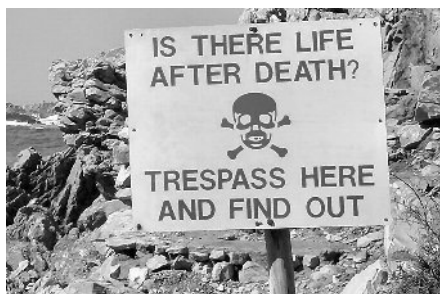
The cockroach quickly realized that it was dealing with an ignorant idiot. With a sigh it shrugged its shoulders, leaned back and started emitting a whistling sound of astonishing intensity. It was obviously a warning signal ahead of an incoming attack. The attack followed without delay. Little Mister Cockroach raised his butt and produced a small canon

out of its, well, you know, back there. A thin, small jet of a mysterious liquid matter was sprayed in my general direction, and it stunk. It stunk of a dead man and his wet dog. I chose to give the insect some privacy and retreated quickly. It was the most marvellous discovery I made that day. The cockroach seemed less impressed by my performance.



A howling skunkbutt cockroach

As far as I knew, I was the first human to observe this species, so of course I had to name it. Should you ever happen upon an insect with looks and behaviour fitting this description, congratulate yourself on having met the howling skunkbutt cockroach.



An empty promise on the beach

Exiting the forest I came down to a nice beach. I sat down in the sun and watched oysters being harvested in the bay. Oysters do not exist naturally in the area, and strangely that is exactly why it is such a perfect place to breed them. Since they "shouldn't" be there, neither are there any oyster parasite algae around to worry about. Algae like that can be the downfall of an oyster farm, as they love nothing more than to invade oysters and make them unsuitable for people to eat. Without the algae around, growing oysters can be a sweet business.

All you need to grow oysters is a place with suitably clean and nice water, and you have to buy "oyster seeds", typically from France or Chile. Put the seed in the water, and eighteen months later you have lots of small and tasty (by which I of course mean tasty in an oyster kind of way) delicacies. If you wait twice that long, you'll get big ones. To me,

however, two days in Knysna was more than enough. Then again, I wasn't expecting my stay to make me neither more pearly nor edible.

The local newspaper didn't do much to persuade me to stay longer. The Knysna-Plett Herald's lead story, spread all over the whole front page and the following two pages, was about a young man who had killed some dogs because they had been harassing cows and sheep in his neighbourhood. Seen in the light of the cruelties chronicled by the Cape Town newspapers, I thought that making such a big fuzz out of a relatively harmless event had to be a sure sign of the area's innocence.

Unfortunately, that's when I saw a small notice tucked away in a corner in the back of the newspaper. It put the dog killings in perspective by listing the arrests that had been made by the Knysna police the previous week: Fourteen armed assaults, one normal assault (whatever that means), two cases of domestic violence, nine men had spent a night in the drunk cell, there had been one case of illegal consumption of alcohol in public, eight burglaries, three possessions of ganja (hashish), three rapes, five cases of shoplifting, four other thefts, two cases of contempt of the court, three incidents of malicious vandalism, and, saving the best for last, four murders!

That's a pretty impressive amount of crime, considering it had all been performed by just sixty thousand people in Knysna in one week. If this was a normal week, and the size of the notice certainly didn't indicate anything else, Norway would have to increase its murder rate some 250 times over to keep up with the Knysnas. *If* the Norwegians had done that, I bet that our newspapers too would have chosen to ignore the *real* tragedies, and instead concentrated on minor felonies like dog shootings.

Where all this crime went on was hard to understand when I walked in the streets full of art galleries. All I could see were white, smiling faces. But on a hill above the happy town loomed a township, a large number of shacks and sheds, the homes of the unemployed, poor and more or less desperate black people. I walked up the hill and had a look around. In the sunshine it actually seemed like a nice place to live. It had the atmosphere of a large campsite. Friendly faces everywhere, children playing with each other and with chickens that walked around as they pleased. Laundry in

a hundred colours hung waving between the houses. I could see no crimes taking place there either. Unfortunately the sun only shines during the day.

I walked back to town in time to watch the sunset. When darkness fell, men from the township suddenly appeared in the town centre. Wearing Rastafarian caps and colourful t-shirts they occupied just about every street corner along the main road. With faces void of expression and nervous head movements they sold marijuana, or dagga as it's called in southern Africa. Their business seemed to go well. The youth of Knysna probably needed all the excitement they could get, and most of the excitement in Knysna was sold by the gram.

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Guess who I met on the bus out of Knysna? Yes, indeed! Keiko was there, with a smile as wide as ever. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised, but it still had the same effect on me as my balloons had on the kid at the hostel. While on the surface I managed to stay in control of myself, inside my head I ran off, screaming for my mum.

My worries about Keiko's return were quickly forgotten when we met Kenji at the hostel in Jeffrey's Bay, South Africa's premier surfing spot. Kenji was a Japanese surfer, or more precisely, a surfer wannabe. This was his third week in Jay Bay, as the übercool surfer dudes of course had renamed it, and no one had yet heard him speak. He had the newest, most expensive and most advanced surfing gear that could be obtained, but his success rate when it came to getting up on the board was rather low. To be a cool guy in one of the surfing capitals of the world was clearly more a dream than something he could actually do. He was visibly depressed.

And that's why everyone at the hostel were touched to see how he and Keiko both suddenly blossomed like cherry trees in the spring when they met each other. "Soko, soko, soko! Fujitsu hokkaido wakarima-su!", they bubbled. And they just kept going for hours, speaking continuously and simultaneously, literally jumping of joy from having found someone they could talk to. It had obviously been a while since the last time for them both. In their ecstasy I quietly slipped out to explore the town.

Sixteen degrees Celsius in the sea in Jay Bay was not enough for me to work on becoming better at surfing. Neither were there many others braving the chilly water. Although the beach supposedly had the best surfing waves in the world, the world's best surfers were certainly not around. So there was not much to do and not much to see in Jay Bay that day. Fortunately the beach could be used for tanning as soon as I found a place to lie down with some shelter against the ice-cold wind. I was finally able to comfortably sunbathe for the first time in Africa, two weeks after I had left Norway in the middle of a heat wave. Our world is truly a strange one.

The main story in *The Star*, a Johannesburg newspaper, was also strange. A carjacking is when a bad and usually armed guy hijacks a car and forces the driver to take him to some secluded spot. There the carjacker will claim ownership of the car and often commit a bit of raping and murdering of the previous owner. Carjackings are so frequent in Johannesburg that they're rarely even mentioned in the news. But this story was about a carjacking out of the ordinary.

A white woman and her two children had been carjacked, and they were just minutes away from being left without a car in the middle of a bad neighbourhood in a Johannesburg township. It's a situation with poor prospects no matter how you look at it. But then the guy who had ordered a white Volvo arrived and started to complain about the fact that this was not a white Volvo, it was a *beige* Volvo! "Get me another car, and in the right colour this time, if you would be so kind!", he said and returned the keys to the beige car to the lucky and bewildered woman. He even gave her directions for where to drive to return safely to the white world.

Now, *there's* a sad sunshine story for you!

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It was easier to spend the time in Port Elizabeth, a larger city on the coast a bit further north. That was partially because Keiko had decided to stay longer in Jeffrey's Bay to continue her Japanese happy-dance with Kenji, but also because Port Elizabeth really tried to keep its visitors satisfied. Actually, maybe they tried too hard. I rented a room a couple of

blocks from the beach in what was just about the only small house left there. Most buildings near the sea had been torn down to make room for a number of high-rise hotels and apartment blocks. That was probably the only way to make room for all those who wanted a home with a view towards the sea, and I'm sure it had been done with only the best of intentions. It was nevertheless sad to see the original, colonial Port Elizabeth be replaced by modern concrete.

I'm not suggesting that the best reason for visiting Port Elizabeth is to see its museum, but the colour of my skin (bright red) after my day on the beach in Jeffrey's Bay indicated that spending some time indoors would be a good idea. The museum was of the typical African kind, containing a little bit about a lot, and a lot about almost nothing.

In this case, the almost nothing was a huge exhibition about the Great Storm of 1902. No less than 27 ships had sunk right there in the harbour of Port Elizabeth. All sorts of strange items had randomly been salvaged from the shipwrecks and put on display in the museum. Then there were various outfits and traditional dresses from South Africa throughout the ages. For some reason most of the dresses were in typical European styles from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, but they had thrown in a couple of grass skirts as well, apparently as an afterthought.

One section in the museum was called "The Curious", and that it was. Actually the only thing the different displays there had in common was a certain weirdness. The first treasure I found was a human foetus in its fifth month, well preserved in a jar. "Eigte" ("Real"), was written in Afrikaans on the sign in front of it. I'm sure it was. To its left stood two larger bottles, one containing a whale foetus, the other a puppy with two heads. Maybe it was meant to symbolize that all creatures on Earth must live in peace side by side. I don't know.

Delving deeper into The Curious I found a giant hairball from a cow, complete with a long explanation of how cows ruminate by sending balls like the one on display back and forth between the different compartments of the stomach.

Judging from its impressive display case, the most unique treasure among The Curious things was an 8x10 centimetre piece of cloth. "Part of

an Abyssinian king's tent" was the only explanation offered. It certainly looked like any piece of cloth to me.

Having enjoyed these gems I was curious to know what kind of stuff they *didn't* put on display, but kept hidden in their archives instead. "Abnormal ribs from goat" I thought belonged in an inaccessible corner of the backroom, but instead they had been given a prominent place. To me they looked like normal ribs from a goat. Then again, I'm not really a goat rib connoisseur.

Much excited by all this, as you can imagine, I was forced to pay a visit to the toilets. A plaque next to the sink said "Akuvumelekanga ukuba kusetyenziswe ez! Zindlu zanganese njengezindlu zokuhlambela enkosi". It turned out to be a lengthy way to notify visitors that bathing was prohibited in the sinks as well as in the toilets. If the woman in charge of selling tickets and translating museum signs could be trusted, that is. She hesitated with revealing the true nature of the text to me, so she was probably serious. Some of the tribal locals who came to town to visit the museum every now and then apparently had not yet acquired sufficiently sophisticated museum habits.

For once I exposed myself to McDonald's. I can go without a Big Mac longer than a camel can go without water, but in Port Elizabeth the fast food giant's outlet on the beach offered a view that was hard to stay away from. A herd of enormous southern right whales hunted for whale snacks just a few metres from the burger joint. They patrolled the waves back and forth along the beach the whole day, indifferently finding their way through the crowd of surfers. In the beginning the surfers just lay fascinated on their boards and watched the show, but by noon they had become visibly annoyed by the giant chunks of meat and blubber getting in the way of all the best waves. I happily ordered another chocolate milkshake. And another one.

Time forced me to move on. The next day a bus took me almost a thousand kilometres north, from the pretty coast in the "white south" to the centre of Zululand, the KwaZulu-Natal province. Our driver was a fresh graduate from the national tourist guide academy. He introduced himself as Jay and told us that we were in for a treat, as he would give us

plenty of interesting information about all the spectacular sights along the road to Durban.

Shortly thereafter we received our first treat; "We're now driving out of Port Elizabeth." An hour later he said "I think that was Grahamstown we just passed through." And that's how it went. "Here's a bridge." "That's Umtata, I think Nelson Mandela has a house somewhere around here." I appreciated his comments being so brief and concise, as Jay was unable to say anything at all without turning his head towards the passengers and looking us in our eyes. Maybe that's an excellent skill to have when you're a tourist guide in general, but while driving, especially in South Africa, it's just plain stupid.

No one really listened to him anyway. That is, we all listened intently when he suddenly left a hundred metres of smoking rubber on the road in a way that almost put us all to death, yelling "Where the hell did that *cow* come from!?"

It was indeed a cow. I wish I could say it was a big, fat, scary cow, but it wasn't. It was a meagre heap of bones wrapped in a shabby cowhide. We had entered Zululand.

North of Port Elizabeth, a distinctly European city in good shape and with Victorian buildings, lies the former Ciskei "homeland". The apartheid presidents Vorster in the 1970s and Botha in the 1980s still dreamt of a predominantly white South Africa, where the black population was to be kept out of sight in segregated homelands. There they would manage themselves under the watchful eyes of the white government. Although the black population constituted about seventy-five percent of the country's total population, only ten percent of South Africa's area was given to them to live in. To ensure that they wouldn't have too much fun living there on their own, the homelands were located in areas with barely any roads, industry or infrastructure for electricity and potable water.

All the blacks were classified into ten loosely defined tribes. These tribes, of course, had precious little to do with the actual population groups that lived in South Africa when the white man arrived. This didn't worry the apartheid government much. After being classified, people

were forced to move to the homeland they "belonged" to. Unless you had a special permission to go and work for a white employer somewhere else, you had to stay in your homeland. Black people were not even allowed to travel from one homeland to another without a permit.

In most cases those who were allowed to work outside the homelands were men. Because of this, many men had to live apart from their wives and children for long periods of time. The homelands were heavily overpopulated, and what natural resources had been there originally were soon exhausted. In other words, the homeland system functioned exactly as intended by the government. People starved and suffered.

By the time I got there the homeland system had of course long since ceased to exist, but the former homelands were still the poorest regions in the country. It was easy to see that we were now entering one of them. Lush farmland was replaced by dry and unproductive fields. The roads were suddenly full of potholes. Cows and goats roamed about freely, including in the middle of the road. There was a noticeable change in the buildings as well. Houses of the European kind became rarer. Instead there were sheds resembling bricks with chimneys, and simple, round straw huts, except they weren't made of straw, but of concrete. Having changed the building materials, the houses were still traditional with only one large room with a fireplace in the middle. Strangely, even though there were no visible streets, telephone poles or other modern development, the houses still stood neatly in rows, as if some kind of city planner had put them there. Maybe that was even the case.

Judging from the long lines at the water pumps along the road, the houses probably had no water installed. The most common hair style in the two former homelands we passed, Ciskei and Transkei, indicated that people had access to ample supplies of electricity, and that they were no strangers to using it. It was like driving through a troll catalogue, people's hair pointed skywards all over the place. Still, electricity must have been scarce. The whole day I saw many a buxom mama with a goat in a leash and a pile of firewood balanced perfectly on the top of her head, presumably on her way home to cook dinner on an open fire. When the sun came down and night fell, it got *really* dark. The only light came from the flames of numerous grass fires spreading up the hillsides.

Finally I had arrived somewhere that actually looked like the "real" Africa and in accordance with my expectations. Big and beautiful women in large, colourful dresses danced home in the evening sun. Impenetrable bush hugged the road. The most visible indication that people were using their heads was all the stuff they balanced on top of them. Most of the trade in the area took place less than three metres from the traffic and without the use of any cash registers.

Even though people lacked electricity and TVs at home, their evenings were not spent in boredom. Instead of sitting on a sofa, drinking coffee and endlessly watching the news and sitcoms, people went to the main road. There they stood around and chatted while they waited for something interesting to happen. And something of interest seemed to happen often enough, if I am to judge from the many car wrecks along the road. It wasn't the fault of the locals if a day went by without a car accident. They certainly did their part to make things happen. Wide smiles and terrified faces kept popping up in front of our car as the locals danced and ran between the vehicles driving at roughly a hundred kilometres per hour.

It is possible that car accidents were looked upon not only as entertainment, but also as an opportunity for acquisitions. The wrecks by the road were picked clean of any loose or detachable parts, only the vehicle skeletons were left. I saw a girl embellished with two furry dice around her neck. She admired herself in a Toyota side mirror she held in her hands.

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I had always wanted to go to Durban. Unfortunately, the reason was that I thought Durban was in India, and that it would probably be an excellent base from which to explore nearby hill stations and picturesque tea plantations. Okay, so that was probably stupid of me, but the matter of the fact is that as soon as you start believing this, it's easy to continue to do so. Durban is a place you never hear much about in Norway. After a couple of hours of city walking, in the shade of a Swiss girl giant who strangely enough was more afraid than me to walk alone, I realized why. There *isn't* much to say about Durban.

The city has more than three million people and is the capital of the KwaZulu-Natal province. No, that's not "KwaZulu-Natal". It's pronounced "**CLICK*Zulu-Natal*". The guttural sound that most of us use only for snoring has been developed by the Zulus to become a functional part of their language. And it's not even a rare phenomenon in their speech. The mysterious clicks appear all the time in the most unexpected places. It's nigh on impossible to learn unless you start practising as a child.

My first impression was that Durban had to be the ugliest city in the world. I had not yet been to Russia, obviously. This notion was probably intensified by the fact that I came there straight from the well-kept Port Elizabeth, but Durban *is* a foul, grey and noisy place. It desperately tries to be Miami, with its enormous Art Deco buildings on the beachfront. Unfortunately, their façades rise so high up into the air that they almost disappear in the smog.

Equally high are the crime rates in Durban, on a well deserved second place in South Africa after Johannesburg. People handling cash in shops and kiosks were all sitting behind bars and bullet-proof windows, with armed guards in place at every door. As soon as money was handed over, the person inside the fortress would quickly throw it into a safe with a time lock. It was depressing to watch, as I realized that it probably was like that for a reason.

When evening suddenly arrived and I was somewhere I shouldn't have been, there was only one thing to do. I slunk my way back to the hostel through alleys and backstreets that were as dark and shady as possible, so that no one would see me.

I glimpsed a trace of grim humour in a newspaper that reported on the difficulties the city's prestigious golf club experienced. For years they had suffered from cows straying onto the green and eating it. They had built fences to try and stop the cattle, but the fences were stolen again and again. So the feast of the cows continued. Then they had tried planting a wall of trees to keep the animals out. The trees were stolen as well. It was rough times in Zulu City.

The surfers on the beach in the middle of the city had taken the usual surfer laziness to a new level. They didn't even bother to swim out to wait for the waves. Instead they just sauntered to sea on top of long piers, jumped in and surfed back to the beach. Repeat.

I was happy to leave Durban, but the journey got off to a bad start. First, I was seated next to Maureen from Canada, who was consuming a large bag of buns at an impressive pace. Strictly speaking, she should have bought two tickets to justify the amount of space she required to sit comfortably. But that was okay, I managed fine on my half-a-seat. What I found harder to cope with, was that as I sat there and practised making click-sounds without choking, Maureen first turned silent, then green, and suddenly a fountain of breakfast bun goo cascaded forcefully out of her mouth and into the plastic bag I had brought, containing postcards I had planned on writing during the day. "Not to worry. It's just my malaria medication kicking in", Maureen said, and had another bun.

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Both malaria and malaria medication are at the same time scary and fascinating stuff. Malaria is an illness that affects half a billion people every year, killing one, two or three million of them, depending on which source you believe. No other disease spreads more efficiently. We have tried in many ways to stop it, but we just can't do it.

Exactly how and why malaria medicine works is still a mystery to science. Using it can to some people lead to psychedelic experiences recognizable only to the most eager flower children of 1968. Other users have been driven by the medicine to murder the person next to them on the bus, themselves or their families back home several years later. At least that's the claim of the rumours you constantly hear when you travel in tropical regions.

From Medieval Italian, "Mala aria" translates to "bad air". European explorers realized early on that there was a connection between the outbreak of the illness and staying in places with unmoving water and damp, moist air. These are of course great places for mosquitos to prosper. Still, as we all know, mosquitos do not limit themselves to pestering people near swamps and bogs. No, the mosquitos are almost

everywhere, and they're happy to attack not just humans. Apes, frogs, birds and large deer are some other favourite targets. If there's blood in a body they will go for it, whether they'll have to penetrate skin, feathers, fur or scales first.

The keenness of hunting mosquitos is possibly only eclipsed by the willingness of biologists to map the diversity of species on our planet. Inconceivably they have managed to identify more than three thousand different species of mosquitos. Some four hundred of them belong to the anopheles branch of the mosquito family tree. These are the mosquitos who can carry the malaria parasites that make people sick. In some cases so sick that we die, other times only so sick that we wish we were dead. The risk of actually dying of malaria depends on which malaria parasite you are exposed to. There are four different kinds; vivax, malariae, ovale and falciparum. The last one is the one you really should worry about. It kills.

You may take slight comfort in the fact that to the mosquito, *you* are the carrier of the infection. In many ways it is just as correct to say that *we* infect the mosquito with malaria as the other way around. Both human and mosquito are slaves of the malaria parasite.

To outwit us in our attempts to eliminate them through the use of medicaments, the parasites use a complicated life cycle which begins and ends neither here nor there. To understand how it works, we will start with a healthy, young and pregnant mosquito of the anopheles family. She, the poor thing, buzzes around in the air, desperately seeking just the *tiniest* amount of blood to ripen her eggs with. Sooner or later she finds what she seeks: A human. The person is probably sleeping, or maybe not. It doesn't matter. He won't see the mosquito anyway, as she sensibly hunts only in the dark.

The mosquito prepares its proboscis and plugs it into the human source of life-giving, thick, red liquid. Most often this is good for her. Other times, though, when the mosquito has picked a human that carries malaria, Miss Mosquito will leave its prey as an infected and soon to be sick insect.

You may feel sorry for yourself if you ever wake up in the morning with a pounding head and a dysfunctional stomach. Well, imagine how it would be to feel like that when your expected lifetime is about two weeks, and you know that you have to go to work today no matter what. That's what it's like to be a mosquito with malaria.

The parasites acquired from the human blood stream find their way to the mosquito's stomach. If the temperature both inside and outside the mosquito's body is at least 16 degrees Celsius, the malaria parasites will start having massive orgies in there. As a result of all this passion, the rascals will melt together and fasten themselves as cysts to the walls of the stomach. We know precious little about what this feels like to the mosquito, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was a triggering factor behind the suicidal behaviour often observed in mosquitos.

Sooner or later the cyst breaks, and the parasites again move through the fragile body of the mosquito. They meet up again near their host's salivary glands. The next time the mosquito strikes a human blood vessel, the parasites will accompany the chemicals that are injected into the human by the mosquito to keep the blood flowing. In a few seconds or minutes, the parasites will have reached the human's liver.

There they calm down for at least eleven or twelve days. Some of them will remain dormant for a long time. Months and years can go by before they develop any further. Others will almost immediately start invading and destroying red blood cells as they spread through the human body and excrete poisons. The new carrier of the disease gets sick from the poisoning and must lie down, unable to defend him- or herself against new bloodthirsty mosquitos. And there you are, the cycle is kept going, apparently forever and ever.

For obvious reasons our battle against malaria has focused on eliminating only one of the two involved carriers of the parasite, namely the mosquito. Many methods are in use, everything from the universal, forceful pat on the mosquito's back, to mosquito nets, repellents, burning spirals and even extensive use of DDT in areas where they can't afford to stop using it. All these actions limit the spreading of malaria, but it's not at all enough to make neither mosquitos nor malaria parasites go away.

Unless we get rid of the mosquitos, we will not get rid of malaria. Therefore antimalarial drugs is something tropical travellers must relate to, whether they like it or not.

Fortunately there are many ways to avoid being infected by malaria. Sadly, the safest method is to stay in polar regions, preferably far away from any international airport. If you insist on going to the tropics, you will have to stay inside air-conditioned rooms and make sure that you keep your skin covered in a highly toxic liquid. This is hardly compatible with having memorable travel experiences.

A wide range of drugs meant to save you from malaria are available if you want to go to places where there's a real risk of meeting up with infected mosquitos. This kind of medication will not stop malaria from entering your body. Instead it aims to prevent the parasites from developing the disease in your body. Sounds good? The problem is just that, well, actually there are several complicating factors.

The problem that should be of most interest to you, is that the medicine may very well not work at all. Every time we come up with a drug that kills malaria parasites, the parasites will sooner or later develop a strain that is resistant to our chemicals. If you read the small print that came with your medicine, you typically find that medicine X gives you seventy percent protection when travelling in area Y. Hmm. We're talking about life and death here. *Your* life. How many condoms would be sold if they were marketed like this: "With this thing on, only three out of ten women will become pregnant"? How popular would bungee-jumping be if the brochures on it said "Jump off a ridiculously tall bridge here! (The bungee cord occasionally snaps)"? Not much, is my guess. But okay, if you know exactly where you're going and you have updated information on what strains of malaria parasites are at large there right now, you *can* find a drug that will give you decent protection.

Then comes the second problem, which is also the reason why we will *never* get rid of malaria completely. Medicine that actually works is expensive. To poor people they are prohibitively expensive, and even to a tourist on a long-lasting trip the cost can be harder to swallow than the pills themselves, as the medicine must be taken both before, during *and*

after the duration of the trip. Two weeks of travelling may mean seven weeks on drugs. If you travel on a limited budget, you may end up spending more money on protecting yourself against malaria than on food or accommodation.

Some of the drugs, typically those that actually work, can only be used for a limited amount of time before to continue taking them becomes seriously harmful to your body. These medicines will of course never be an option for those who live permanently in malaria areas. And there are plenty who do, so the parasites will for a long time to come have lots of victims to attack.

The high price of the medicine may be related to the third problem, namely the many potential side effects. The pharmaceutical giants must pay good money to print the pamphlets that accompany the pill bottles, where all known side effects of the medicines are listed. In addition I guess the companies have to pay an army of lawyers for their assistance as new side effects present themselves.

The number of identified side effects from taking normal anti-malaria drugs is vast. Your skin may become more sensitive to sun, which isn't really that dangerous, but neither is it desirable when the reason you take the pills is because you're in the tropics. You may experience nausea and vomiting, cramps, rashes, loss of hair, an irregular heartbeat and dizziness. You lose your balance, and in return you just get paranoia and problems with sleeping, often due to frantic nightmares. If you're really unlucky, the medicine can give you anxiety attacks and psychotic reactions. That another side effect is depression can hardly come as a surprise. Tragically, it has also been documented that individuals have been driven to clinical madness and suicide after taking some of these drugs. Because the chemicals are active and stay in the blood for a long time, the side effects can be experienced for several months after you stop taking the pills.

Fortunately only a few people experience the most severe side effects. It's still easy to be scared off by the long list of worst case possibilities. Especially when at the same time you know that no one really understands why or how the medicine works. The chemicals used to

make the drugs have been extracted from various rainforest plants. I can imagine how a witch doctor with a feather hat and an eerie wooden mask took a bearded white scientist into the jungle and pointed out the plants that his tribe always had used to cure malaria. The white man brought the plants back home, analysed them, scratched his head and did some testing on rats. Sure enough, they seemed to work. Granted, they had some side effects, but who cares about that? He certainly didn't. Now he's sitting somewhere by a swimming pool with lots of servants running around, hoping for the best while his bank account keeps filling up.

Before you choose to take the drugs, you *must* give them a test run at home. Maybe you'll discover that your trip probably will be better without the medicine after all. *If* you find the right medicine for your destination, at a price you're fine with and without you starting to see pink elephants the second you swallow the pills, there's still at least one key point to consider: Should you do what's best for *you* or what's best for the greater good, here represented by the lives of people living in the area you visit?

Despite what you may think, malaria can in many cases easily be cured. If you get sick, one treatment consists of taking a large dose of the same drugs that are usually taken to prevent you from being infected with malaria in the first place. This is the cheapest cure, hence it is also the one that is usually offered to financially challenged locals in malaria areas. The only problem is that when people use a medicine to prevent being infected, malaria strains will develop immunity to exactly that medicine. This will in turn lead to the medicine becoming useless as a cure for people living in malaria-prone areas. Tough luck for them, huh?

If you value other people's lives anywhere near as highly as your own, you should probably do what they do. Only use the drugs in the fairly unlikely case that you're actually infected with malaria. If you ask doctors back home what to do, they will probably tell you that for the sake of your own health you should take the medicine. It's their job to say that, and you are free to listen to them. But you should *at least* investigate what strains of malaria actually exist where you're going. If the lethal one, *falciparum*, is among them, there's more sense to taking malaria pills than if it isn't.

All things considered, the most important thing is to take all necessary precautions to avoid being bitten by mosquitos at all. You know, put on mosquito repellent, wear long sleeves, don't fall asleep drunk in the jungle and just try to stay away from mosquitos, especially when it's dark. If you still get bitten, don't panic. Most likely there are no malaria parasites in the mosquitos that bite you. Just be aware of any symptoms of illness. Remember that it'll take almost two weeks before the malaria can be felt. If you know you've been to a region where malaria exists and you start feeling feverish and shivering cold in turns, immediately seek out a doctor. In places where malaria is common, medical personnel can quickly find out whether you're infected or not, and if necessary they will treat you in the best possible manner. Soon you'll be fine again and can move on.

It's not often you can make a choice that saves both other people's lives and your own money, plus you can avoid some nasty side effects! This is one such opportunity!

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Back from the malaria lecture, we're on the bus out of Durban. My next stop had an amusing name. KwaMbonambi! Which in turn was located just outside even funnier Mtubatuba. I wouldn't be surprised if Africa's first spaceship, ready to go in the year 2365 or so, will be named Mtubatuba. It means "He who was flung out", after a local king who once upon a time started life as participant in an unusually lively birth.

I don't know what KwaMbonambi means, but I will always remember it as the place that was drowning in rain. We drove under a large, black cloud full of heavy raindrops as we entered the town. The intense, vertical shower explained the thick vegetation surrounding the place. It was a small and rural town with only two thousand inhabitants. Nevertheless, they had a total of eight butcheries, two "surgical medical" offices (which I guess may have bordered on being butcheries as well), fifty billion mosquitos and about a hundred old women sitting next to each other on the main street, selling everything they had. Their teeth they had sold a long time ago. Or maybe not. During the day we had driven through

endless sugar cane fields. Most of the children I saw walked around chewing on sugar canes, so the toothless gaps in the faces of the grannies may have been just the long-term effect of the local staple.

The observant reader probably noticed that I wrote "we" several times in the previous paragraph. Keiko was back. In the end Kenji had had enough of her. He apparently preferred to escape back to the sea, to surround himself with voracious white sharks and murderous jellyfish the size of cars. Keiko had not read more than half a page about Durban in her guidebook before she decided not to stop there. And that's how she caught up with me.

The transition from danger zone Durban to the completely relaxed mood in KwaMbonambi was pleasant. I had left a hostel where the staff was distressed by merely the thought of how to get home safely after work, where the beds were stacked four high and where the narrow corridors would be sure to kill in the event of a fire. Now I was staying in a large, old wooden house and playground, run by a funny bunch of kindergarten assistants.

It began at check-in. "Would you like to stay in the main building or in a tree house in the garden?", they asked me. A quick look up the trees outside, from which rain water was gushing down, made me decide to stay inside. But hey! It was great to have the choice! When I asked what my room would cost, they answered "Well, it depends. Do you want to walk the plank?" One of them wore pirate's pants, but I didn't quite understand what they meant. It turned out that they had a long, slippery log placed across a swimming pool in the garden, and anyone who could walk across it wearing whatever they had on at check-in, got the first night's accommodation for free. If you failed, you'd pay wet money for your bed. I was already soaking wet from the rain, so I tried the walk. I ended up paying anyway.

In the forests near KwaMbonambi almost half the world's population of wild southern black rhinos can be found, about two thousand of the toughest natural combat vehicles on the planet. There's also a fairly large group of white rhinos there. I had hoped to go into the woods and pay them a visit, but the staff at the hostel figured that with all the rain lately,

the ground would be extremely muddy. That would make it all too easy for the rhinos to flatten me into the ground, if I should be lucky enough to happen upon them.

Fortunately there were lots of other things I could do. The hostel kept a large supply of rhino dung, a superb material for making paper. The result isn't something that will be mistaken for perfumed love letters, but if you know any hippies or environmentalists, I'm sure they'll be delighted to receive some thoroughly recycled organic matter in the mail.

Another activity on offer was to visit a small, "authentic" Zulu village, where the poor residents sat around wearing next to nothing, shivering from the cold weather. This made me understand why the first Europeans to round the Cape of Good Hope had not encountered many Africans. South Africa can be so cold that most Africans of course stayed further north for as long as possible, in a warmer climate.

A small, thin boy stopped me and begged me for a job. Painting walls or cleaning up my garden, perhaps, or whatever, really. It was the first time in my life I wished I had a garden. I gave him a few dollars, hoping it would improve my conscience. It didn't.

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The next night was like the first. Rain and thunder came down from the sky when I fell asleep, and thunder and rain crashed to the ground when I woke up. All eight times. I didn't sleep that well.

Rainy days are good for changing your location, so for the time being I waved goodbye to the forest with the rhinos and got on a bus to a small village on the coast, Saint Lucia. Now, that was a different story than KwaMbonambi's poor, basic community. This was a rustic resort town located in the middle of a wetland area, a national park with a well-earned World Heritage status.

All kinds and grades of accommodation were available. I ended up staying in a simple room in a rebuilt barn. I'm glad to report that the only part of the building that still smelt vaguely of horse was the communal shower area. In my own room I had a bit more of that genuine African feeling. Over my bed there was a mosquito net, and for once I could say

that I shared my room with a monkey without that being an insult to the creature in question. He was tiny and cute, and not supposed to be in the barn, yet he came in anyway whenever he felt like it. Most of the time he would stay up on the roof, but he came in to check out what I was doing every time he heard the sound of rustling plastic bags. If I said something out loud he looked at me with great interest. I'm pretty sure I taught him the word "banana" before I left Saint Lucia. I made sure to close my backpack *very* thoroughly before I left the room.

There are thousands of things to do in South African national parks, of which the most important one is to stay alive. To find out how that was best done there, I went to the crocodile centre just outside the village. The rules were simple. All I had to do was to stay away from any rivers, lakes and the ocean. If I really had to go near the water, I had better keep at least one crocodile length of land between me and the shoreline. Apparently the local crocodiles couldn't be bothered to move further inland than that, even though they were perfectly capable of running both fast and far. Judging from the most impressive beasts in the park that meant I had better stay at least six metres away from the river that ran through Saint Lucia.

In the crocodile centre some old crocs had just been fed for the week. They lazily lay resting and digesting close to a simple wire fence. Since there were no guards there, I decided it was completely safe to crawl up to them. I wanted to see my reflection in the beautiful, awe-inspiring eye of a crocodile.

A crocodile's muscles and teeth can easily tear you to pieces. Its brain will never regard you as anything but fresh food. Yet it's the eye of the crocodile I find to be the most scary part of the animal.

Surrounded by armoured camouflage skin it sits there, observing, immovable, large and round with a hypnotic glimmering of green. In the middle there's a narrow, black stripe which nevertheless is wide enough for all of nature's cynical cruelty, or rather indifference, I guess, to shine through. It's the last eye in the world you want to see looking back at you through the keyhole when you're trying to find out what causes that strange sound outside.



The hungry eye of a crocodile

If you ever have to fight a crocodile (which few do, and extremely few more than once), you will want to know that precisely the eye is the only soft spot on the entire animal. If you stick your finger in there, you have at least in theory the possibility to inflict some discomfort on the monster, maybe even enough to put it in a bad mood for the rest of the meal. Good luck with that.

Fascinating crocodile eyes aside, the most exciting sight in the crocodile centre was a warning sign at the top of a semi-steep hill. It showed a terrified man. He was sitting in a wheelchair accelerating down a slope, and at the bottom a large mouth full of big teeth waited for him. I wonder if the sign was a result of learning from the past or just precautionary



Check your brakes!

thinking. I felt a sudden urge to steal the sign, but sadly it was too large and well secured.

The crocodile eye wasn't the scariest thing in the park. That honour went to a glass cage in the snake section, where a sign read "Puff adder – Extremely poisonous". The door to the cage was slightly ajar, and there was no snake inside.

I crossed over the peninsula to the side that faced the ocean and walked back to Saint Lucia on the golden beach. The whole time I kept my distance to the water. There were enough signs with pictures of grumpy crocodiles and hippos on them to help me remember what I had just learned.

My evening was spent in a small car driving up and down the streets in the village. It's not the way I usually like to spend a Saturday night. Driving back and forth in the main street in small towns is in many countries mainly a favourite pastime of young men with limited intellectual interests, but in Saint Lucia this activity offers something of interest to almost anyone. As soon as darkness falls over the city, animals come out of the water and the woods to rule the parks and the gardens. Sharing a room with a monkey was one thing, but to have hippos, chameleons, leopards and other wild creatures roam freely around the house corners was definitely a novelty to me.

The hippopotamus leaves the water to feed on grass and if necessary to trample down any humans that are unfortunate or stupid enough to get between the animal and the water. Leopards come to search for all kinds of food. In Saint Lucia the dogs are kept indoors at night. If they weren't, the pets would soon be gone.

Having dangerous animals loitering around us was all well and good, but it was an encounter with a chameleon that fascinated me the most. I had never seen a wild chameleon before, if you can say "wild" about an animal that is a few centimetres long and moves at a snail's pace. All I knew about chameleons was that some of them can change their skin colour to blend in with the surroundings, a trick they use to make themselves hard to see for both its prey and its predators.

This skill and the fact that it was now completely dark made me think that we were unlikely to find any chameleons. But then Mother Nature struck in a most unexpected way. Chameleons have special cells in their skin that give the animal its ability to change colour. Those cells come with a side effect. If you expose them to intense light for a while, they will glow in the dark! So by turning a powerful flashlight on a tree in Saint Lucia for a minute and then turning it off, I suddenly looked up at a tree full of small, insect-eating stars.

The chameleons weren't invisible any more, to put it mildly. I carefully picked one down from the tree. It immediately clung innocently to my finger, although it was probably rather annoyed about being disturbed in its nocturnal hunt for food. It didn't complain, but my driver told me that it had probably taken the chameleon several days to get up there. I felt guilty and tried to put the animal back exactly where I had found it. With a bit of luck it wasn't eaten by an owl before it managed to get rid of its glow again.

As I fell asleep that night, I told myself to be happy that I wasn't a chameleon. It would be annoying to turn off the reading lamp on the bedside table and then have to wait another fifteen minutes or so for myself to go dark.

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The next morning I woke up early. The monkey wandered noisily back and forth above me. I had always imagined monkeys would sleep in late. It's not as if they have a job to go to. All they have to do is stuff that can be done just as well later, so they should be able to relax. Apparently they don't.

A coral reef, the southernmost in the world, stretches north-east from Saint Lucia towards Sodwana Bay. I'm not a big fan of attractions based on latitude. Even though it can be looked upon as a mark of distinction, or at least a curiosity, anything presented with its location as its chief achievement is often disappointing. Like the taste of wine from a place where there's not really a climate for growing grapes, but somehow

someone managed to force a few grapes to grow there anyway. It's much like being introduced to the world's largest dwarf. But I do love coral reefs wherever they are. So I went on a kayak and snorkelling trip, hoping for an encounter with the reef.

On our way to Lake Bhangazi we picked up a group of radio presenters and disc jockeys from a luxury resort. They stayed there for free in return for saying nice things about the place in their programs. Apart from Sir Richard Attenborough and Helen Keller, I'm not really sure who I would want to accompany me on a kayak trip in a nature reserve where you have to be quiet if you want to see any wildlife. But I *do* know that never again will I go with radio talk show hosts on an excursion like that. They babbled away nonstop. What they said sometimes actually was quite entertaining, but I soon longed for a volume control and an off button. The beautiful surroundings required and deserved some peace and quiet to be enjoyed thoroughly.

Until a few years previously the area had been dominated by lumberjacks and the felling of timber. Now South Africa let the place transform itself back to something as similar to virgin forest as possible. Slowly time healed the scars in the landscape. Already there were many signs of progress. I saw zebras, kudus, warthogs, fish eagles and the aptly named Goliath heron, standing a metre and a half tall. And all this before we had even gotten our kayaks on the water.

Even more exciting wildlife appeared as soon as we left the beach. First in line was a large crocodile. When it saw us approaching, it slid down from its sweet spot in the sun. A few seconds later it lazily tailed my kayak some ten metres or so behind my nervous butt. It did this for a while, until it to my great distress suddenly just disappeared below the surface of the water.

My worry was quickly forgotten when all of a sudden I found myself facing a hippo and seven of its best friends. They were visibly curious as they cautiously closed in on us without making any sound. When they were only twenty metres away from my kayak they stopped. Quietly they just stood in the water, snorting and eyeing us suspiciously. Even the radio people were speechless.

Africa's hippos are probably responsible for between three and four hundred human deaths every year. It's not because hippos are so aggressive. It's because they are so big, yet oh, so anxious. Despite their five centimetre thick skin, sunlight is harmful to them. Because of that they have to stay in the water all day. With teeth up to a metre in length and extremely powerful jaw muscles, they can easily create two half crocodiles from a whole one if they have to. So they're safe in the water, but vulnerable on land. That's why they always make sure they can quickly get back to the wet whenever they leave the water. If they sense any danger, such as someone blocking their path to safety, they will immediately run back. Because of their size, they don't see the need to run around any obstacles. They just run them straight down instead. And that's how people die.

A few basic precautions will help you avoid any hippo hassles. When on land, *never* get between a hippo and the water it came from. Yes, that *can* be hard to remember when half-asleep on a camping trip you need to go to the bathroom in the bush in the middle of the night, but *do* try.

The same principle goes for when you're on or in the water. Never ever get between a hippo and its access to *deeper* water. Sometimes being in water is simply not good enough for a hippo. They like to go well below the surface, where they can rummage happily around like the ballerinas they can never be on land.

By floating slowly between the beach and the inquisitive hippos, we got more than close enough to have a good look at them. We survived with a comfortable margin, despite our frail kayaks.

The beach also housed some beasts. In the science fiction novel "Dune" there's an unforgettable seriously scary sandworm. It lives underground in a desert world, and sometimes its enormous mouth bursts out of the sand to wolf down whoever happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The role model for this worm lives among other places in South Africa, fortunately in a much smaller version: The antlion.

The beach was dotted with small depressions in the sand. Inside them there were antlions. They are neither ants nor lions, but to an ant they are far more terrifying than lions are to us. The antlion is an insect as well as

an expert on digging holes. It doesn't dig very deep, but it makes sure that the steep sides of the hole are covered with loose sand. When the hole is ready, the antlion hides at the bottom of the hole. There it will wait for an insect to come by and slide into its den.

Sooner or later a small, unfortunate insect will wander into the hole. As soon as it's over the edge, the loose sand will start to roll down and bring the insect with it. Gravity will feed the victim to the gaping mouth and the two gripping tentacles of the ruthless antlion at the bottom of the hole. When all life has been sucked out of the prey, the antlion pulls the corpse out of the hole and takes it out to sea to dump it with concrete shoes on. After a while, I'm guessing, the antcrocodile will come by and destroy all evidence of the slaughter. Or maybe not. Anyway, having disposed of the corpse, the antlion will go back to its hole and wait for its next guest and meal. If only safari tourists had not been so rude as to fake sliding insects by playing with straws down antlion traps, life as an antlion would be close to perfect.

After the kayaking we ditched the radio people and drove to Cape Vidal. It was time to see the coral reef. Bursting with joy and high expectations I put on my snorkelling gear and waded out from the beach. I was ready for the parrot fish, the clown fish, the trigger fish and infinite variations of patterned and coloured corals. I was to be a weightless god soaring in the deep blue space over a marine world. Like any other god, I would observe the puny beings below without disturbing their eternal struggle for survival, no matter how tempting it might be to intervene.

The previous night had been windy and rainy. Instead of lying peacefully down at the bottom of the sea hiding flounders and treasures, the sand was whirling wildly about in the water. I saw nothing, and certainly no reef, until after a few minutes of blind swimming I banged my head straight into a coral wall. This was not the day for a grand snorkelling adventure.

After a short discussion we brought out the kayaks again. The rest of the day we surf-paddled in the large waves off the beach. I have never ever swallowed and retained as much sea water as I did that day. Several decilitres of ocean spent the afternoon and the evening exploring my

cranial caverns, until it all suddenly escaped out of my nose as I lay down to sleep. Used to being single, I rather enjoyed for once having a chance to sleep on a wet spot.

It was well worth getting up early the next morning. I was to have a great day on a guided driving safari in the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi wildlife reserve, South Africa's oldest and possibly also its finest. Zack, a local pothead and surf dude, drove off with Keiko and me in the back seat at four thirty in the morning. Our hope was to be the first car allowed into the park when it opened at six. I was slightly worried about how Zack would perform as a guide with lions and elephants about. All I knew was that his speech was slow and slurry, and that much of what he said made little sense. It turned out he did an excellent job.

On our way to the park we hit the morning rush. Luckily, in rural Zululand the morning rush consists mainly of people who walk for hours to get to jobs that don't pay much. They work for so long every day that they barely have time to return home in the evening and go to bed before they have to get up and walk to work again. Observing this I thought of people back home, who will complain loudly about buses and trams that sometimes are a few minutes late and where if you're unlucky you have to stand. The hardships of the two worlds simply do not compare.

The drive through the reserve was one long climax. Zack knew exactly what terrain and vegetation the various animals preferred to stay in throughout the day. Little by little we found all the creatures I had hoped to see.

The elephants were of course the easiest to locate. Our first clue that they were nearby was when we came to a place where all the trees had broken branches and were stripped of their elephant-edible bark. It was generally a sad sight, really. From there we just had to figure out in what direction the enormous piles of elephant dung were most smoking hot. Following the smelly pointers we soon came upon four huge elephants enjoying their breakfast.

The rhinos weren't much harder to find, not even the rare black edition. I discovered two of them standing motionless right next to the road.

We didn't have to search at all to find the white rhinos, who really are grey. They just turned up by themselves all the time. While the elephants arrogantly had ignored us, the rhinos considered our car just too much of a threat to leave us alone. If we came too close to their comfort zone, they laid their ears flat and started wagging their heads slightly this way and that. If we didn't get the message quickly enough, they set off on wild runs straight towards us. I guess they weren't interested in damaging their horns. They stopped a few metres away from us every time and backed down again. This didn't prevent a panic-stricken Zack from crashing the car in reverse straight into trees several times. Great fun, and scary too!

The hours went by quickly. We kept finding new animals, and I kept thinking “Oh, so *that's* how tall a giraffe is”, “Warthogs are unbelievably ugly”, and so on. Each animal was allowed to excite and amuse me for just a few minutes before Zack decided that we had seen enough of it and moved on to find other species. Driving from one animal to another that way was a bit like watching TV when someone else is in charge of the remote control, someone in the mood for an intense session of channel surfing. You only get to see fragments of many stories, not enough to actually understand what you're seeing.

I wasn't satisfied. I mean, it was great to see many different animals, but I really wanted to see more of everything. I decided that next time I would find a way to get closer to the animals and have more time to watch them.

We returned to Saint Lucia. For now there were no more wild animals for me. A wild country was a good substitute.

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Of the two hundred or so independent nations in the world, there are many who do not exactly put their heads up and demand attention all the time. Or maybe they do, but nobody listens to them anyway. Two of the most modest countries are Swaziland and Lesotho. They're both located more or less inside South Africa. The countries are tiny, only together can

they match the size of a Switzerland, and their populations are respectively one and two million people. In cunning ways they avoided being absorbed by the large country surrounding them, unlike so many other tribal nations.

These are young countries. Both were established by potent kings in the nineteenth century. With the arrival of the first white settlers, a forerunner of the modern day South Africa claimed sovereignty over Swaziland. After a bit of fighting, the Swazi king wisely cooperated with the British Empire and had his kingdom declared a British protectorate. When the Union of South Africa was created in 1910, Swaziland was not a part of it. If it had been, the country would no doubt have become a homeland of some kind, and the apartheid regime in South Africa would have tormented the Swazis. Instead the people was free to keep its traditional culture and general way of life going, as they were living in almost complete isolation from the rest of the world. Their large, surrounding neighbour certainly didn't want anything to do with Swaziland. The government of South Africa already had more than enough with dealing with its own black and coloured population and all the problems *they* caused.

The age of colonization eventually came to an end, and semi-kings of protectorates became real kings of free nations. In the case of Swaziland this happened in 1968, and the king in question was an old-fashioned absolute monarch. When he died his son took over, but nothing else changed. King Mswati III is not the kind of king who willingly lets democracy gain foothold in his country. The king and his hand-picked band of advisers and majority of members of the parliament rule freely and completely. Opposition parties are illegal. In a speech he gave in 2003, the self-confident king basically said that democracy is just a buzzword that the rest of the world is obsessed with. The Swazi people has its own culture and its own ways to do things, and they should not be changed, the king claimed.

Nobody knows how much longer his time as undisputed chief of the nation will last. His people suffers badly from HIV, draughts and starvation, and they are beginning to open their eyes to the fact that what little money the country actually has, could maybe be spent more wisely

than in the ways King Mswati III seems to prefer. For a long time he tried to buy a large jet plane, "for official use", priced at tens of millions of US dollars. At the same time a large number of poor people were dying from malnutrition and AIDS in Swaziland. The madness was averted when Western countries threatened to withdraw all development aid from the country. The order was cancelled, but too late to avoid a deposit of millions of dollars from being lost into the pockets of the plane manufacturer.

Unruffled by the increasing criticism, the king keeps coming up with new ideas and projects. More or less every year he takes a new wife, and for every new wife he also has to build a new palace. Now, the definition of "palace" in Swaziland isn't more than what would pass for a reasonably comfy modern home in Europe. Still, that is many notches up from what the average Swazi can afford. People are beginning to grumble audibly about this. While the country for a long time appeared to be an African idyll surrounded by apartheid in South Africa and civil war in Mozambique, the normalizing of those two countries has made the misrule of Swaziland increasingly visible.

By the way, it's not just in financial matters the king appears a bit eccentric, but people seem to be more tolerant towards his other quirks. An example? It's a tradition for young students to spend their Christmas vacation weeding the royal fields. When in 2003 the weeding took a bit longer than usual, the king promptly postponed the first day of school in the new year with one week. There were no protests.

Possibly the most serious problem in Swaziland today is HIV and AIDS. More than a third of the adult population carry the virus. The king displayed great determination when in the fall of 2001 he decided that all young and unmarried women were in for five years of celibacy. The law *was* enforced, and the penalty for breaking it was a fine of more than a hundred US dollars, alternatively one cow.

This may all seem just tragic. Yet everything I had heard about Swaziland made me look forward to visiting a place where so many things were so different. My expectations were met right at the border. I waited for Keiko to finish photographing the border patrol office, the one

with the big sign that said "NO Photography!!!" on it. In a kiosk next to it I bought an ice cream, ten metres inside Swaziland. The ice cream was okay, but I was immensely pleased when in addition to the ice cream I also received a handful of something that looked like cog wheels, nuts and bolts. They were my change!

I have no idea what the Swazis used before they got a modern monetary system, but normal, round coins was obviously not good enough for them. Instead they had come up with small pieces of art, some with twelve sides, others shaped as flowers. For a long time all their money looked weird, but eventually they came up with at least one normal coin, the one lilangeni. Possibly after a lot of pressure from manufacturers of slot machines. They still messed it up slightly. The coin had the exact same measurements as the British one pound coin, worth about ten times more. So now the Swazis could go to expensive England and enjoy cheap parking meters and vending machines.



Money makes the world go around

Keiko's clash with the border officers ended disappointingly well. After some initial fear, one of them pulled himself together and walked over and told Keiko that there had been enough photographing now. She complied, but only because she was out of film anyway. The officers were barely interested in doing any work at all. I had to use all my charm to even get a stamp in my passport, and there was no visible customs control.

Maybe that's not so strange. The South Africans on their side are *extremely* eager to perform, so criminals crossing the border will be taken care of anyway. Besides, Swaziland doesn't fear anything that can be brought from other countries, with the exception of ideas regarding political reforms, of course. Its neighbouring countries, on the other hand, have good reason to worry about what comes out of Swaziland. The country is a major producer and exporter of dagga (marijuana) and a transit country for various designer drugs from China.

Those wishing to sneak something into or out of the country have ample opportunity to do so elsewhere than at the official border points. Just the thought of what can be accomplished with an elephant trained to swallow condoms filled with various substances is enough to dishearten any border patrol. This may even explain how some European circuses are financed. I'm pretty sure using minimum wage Bulgarians as workers and dressing the orchestra in flea market uniforms from 1970 isn't the whole secret.

We drove on and there was no doubt that we had arrived in a new country. The concrete "straw huts" in South Africa were gone, replaced with the real thing with straw roofs and straw walls. To the great satisfaction of all the cows walking freely on and next to the road, I imagined. Finally I had found the real Africa, and at least on the surface it seemed like a nice place to live.

The fields were green and wide, decidedly easier to cultivate than the rolling hills on the other side of the border. Earlier on my trip I had seen Lesotho in the distance from the bus. It had appeared to be a rugged mountain realm, a place I'm sure no colonial power of the 1800s saw much value in. Swaziland, on the other hand, looked lush with vegetation and manageable. It was easy to see why the British and the Boers bothered to battle each other for this land. Everyone I saw along the road seemed happy. I'm not sure if there's a connection here, but one of the districts of Swaziland is called Hhohho.

I stayed in a hostel in the country's largest city, Manzini, right in the middle of Swaziland. In the smallest nation in the southern hemisphere that meant it was an excellent base for exploring the country. Everything of interest was an easy day trip from there.

We arrived late in the day, so I had to limit my initial exploration to buying the local newspaper, The Times of Swaziland. The front page alone was worth the price:

POLICE CAR STOLEN FROM STATION

BABY NUMBER 27 DUMPED

A DISGRACEFUL UNCLE (niece pregnant)

In the story related to the last headline, all individuals involved were identified by name and address. Apparently little was kept from the public in Swaziland. I also found a statement from an interviewed police commissioner slightly disturbing and controversial. He advised other fathers and uncles with incestuous inclinations to find themselves a cow to cuddle instead.

As soon as daylight returned, Keiko, I and an Asian named Kinji, who we never found out exactly where came from, were picked up by a small guy who was fortunate enough to own a minibus. He was to take us on a grand tour, *The Highlights of Swaziland*. It seemed the Swazis must be exceptionally fond of shopping. Everywhere we stopped, the main attraction had something to do with exchanging money for merchandise.

Our first stop was the Manzini market, a trading centre that according to a sign by the entrance had proud traditions all the way back to 1983. A number of stalls offered fruits and vegetables, plastic baskets, colourful textiles and music cassettes, most of them from 1983 as well. In the souvenir section there were elephants in wood and stone, shirts and skirts with portraits of the king, as well as a full range of Zulu articles, including spears, shields, cowhides and scary masks.

Everything was authentic and impressive, no doubt, but my backpack had little room for souvenirs, so I bought nothing from the aggressive salespeople. Kinji walked around mumbling something in whatever language he spoke, while at the same time practising some rather clever martial arts moves. It was an efficient way to keep pushy salesmen away. Keiko bought three skirts.

We drove out of town, to a batik factory outlet. It was more of a sewing circle than a factory, a room full of eighteen chattering women experimenting with paint and needles. They explained so thoroughly what they were doing that I understood even less of batik afterwards than I had done before. Keiko bought three more skirts.

The next mandatory stop was a candle factory, which really was quite impressive. They made elaborate elephants, rhinos, cows, cats, owls, hippos, jaguars, Zulu queens, Pharaohs and in general pretty much anything you wanted them to make, with wax, wicks and the works. A

sign there said that the candle art was one of the the most important export articles of Swaziland, and I'd like to believe it. All shopped out, we were ready for what we from the loud enthusiasm of the guide understood was the climax of the tour; House On Fire.

The House On Fire wasn't burning. It was just a hot spot for cultural and musical performances, the arena to which international pop stars flock when they want to conquer the important market of Swaziland. It was quite cute, with a tiny royal balcony and everything. My estimate is that it could comfortably fit an audience of about two hundred people, provided they sat real close to each other. The stage was large enough to accommodate at least a string quartet, as long as no one played the contrabass.

The place also had a small restaurant, so we ordered lunch. Our guide was convinced that it would take a good hour before the food was on the table. He suggested that we went to see a museum in the meantime. On our way there he found time to drag us through a couple of handicraft shops, where among other things they sold traditional wood sculptures. One of them, surprisingly, sported a pair of wooden sunglasses with a Calvin Klein logo.



An exhibition about the previous king, Sobhuza II, constituted the lion's share of Swaziland's only museum. It was probably the creepiest display I've ever seen, macabrely competing with the Paris catacombs and the pickled Siamese twins at a medical museum in Bangkok.

Outside it looked like a nice enough place. The car park was huge, well-kept and covered with grass. The only parking wardens were two cows, happily grazing on parking spaces C24 and C26. Except for them and us, the whole place was deserted.

We passed a marble entrance and made some noise to wake up the guide and gateman who was relaxing on a bench there. Having collected the ticket fee, the man explained to us how much the Swazis love their royal family, and how they will never love anyone more than they loved King Sobhuza II, who had been the father of the nation for more than 60 years when he died in 1982. Sobby truly must have been married to or

literally father of a larger part of his subjects than any other king in history. He worked his way through about two hundred wives, creating some six hundred children in the process. No wonder he claimed strong support from his people. Most of them must have been his descendants! Yet the overgrown car park and the guest book in the museum disclosed that it could go days between the visitors there. That the deceased king was dear to the people was probably true mainly because it said so in a decree written by the king himself before he died.

Behind the museum there was a small shed with glass walls. Inside it I could see a withered wreath of flowers. A guard wearing a shame of a uniform had been given a good old blunderbuss to stop people from coming too close. Once upon a time King Sobhuza's coffin had been inside, and there the king's spirit had dropped off all its power before it left this world.

In Swaziland the percentage of people who believe in spirits and ghosts is negligibly smaller than the percentage who are of Christian faith. And yes, those two groups *do* overlap. Many Swazi truly believe that if someone goes too close to where the coffin once stood (apparently apart from bored men wearing stupid uniforms and carrying elephant guns), he will be able to steal the king's power and can use it to enhance his own position in society.

To be allowed inside the shed you had to already be a head of state of some nation or people, because then you would have no interest in stealing the spiritual power. Revolutionary Leader Gadaffi of Libya had recently paid a visit, but more impressive was the claim of the guide that the president of China had also been there. That guy doesn't usually waste his time visiting tiny countries in Africa, so I asked the guide if I had heard him correctly. He pulled out a photo to prove it. Except the man in the photo wasn't the president of China, but of Taiwan, as usual on a desperate mission to seek out countries willing to recognize his country's right to exist. "China, Taiwan, it's all the same", the guide said, presumably to the dissatisfaction of the president of Taiwan, should he ever read this book. (And why shouldn't he?)

The photos and signs in the museum, accompanied by our guide's less than balanced praise of the previous king and his reigning son, made me dislike the place strongly. I left an extremely caustic and radical comment in the guest book before I left. I wrote it in Norwegian. You never know, you know?

Lunch arrived at our table back at the restaurant just as we returned. Instead of freezing inside the air-conditioned dining room, we took our meals outside and ate it next to a large, intensely green sugar cane field. It was slightly distracting to have several chickens running around literally between my legs while I ate one of their recently deceased friends, but it didn't seem to bother the little birds at all.

It had been evident from the very beginning of our tour that it was a pure dollar tourist thing. So I wasn't surprised when after lunch we were brought to a culture park, an "authentic village" full of the kind of homes those who are not related to the king must be content with. Whether it was authentic or not I do not know, but at least I learned that it's possible to build much more elaborate straw huts than the ones I used to build in my summer vacations when I was a boy.

The village lay beautifully in a green valley with steep mountains around it and a lazy river in the middle. To be honest, the scenery was a lot more inviting than the culture. It didn't help at all when the locals gave a song and dance performance. In honour of a busload of American tourists they wore decent t-shirts instead of the traditional costume, where both men and women appear topless.

The performance was supposed to be our last stop, but our guide stopped the car at a street market when he discovered that some of us had money left. Keiko bought her seventh skirt that day, while I only managed to be accused of insulting the monarch, as I tried a little bit too hard to haggle down the price of a large piece of clothing with an almost full-size king on it.

The guide was satisfied. It had been an easy day for him, driving us from one cash register to the other, probably earning a nice commission at every stop. He smiled broadly when he dropped us off at the hostel. Some new guests had arrived, a group of Germans who had travelled all over

the continent for months. Sitting in the common area, they loudly declared how hopeless and awful everything was in Africa. I couldn't help but ask how they could bear to travel in such miserable regions. It turned out that as long as they were cheap enough, even bad places were good for visiting.

When I asked them what they thought would be a solution to all these problems, their answer was stunning, ideas I'd be prepared to hear from war criminals of World War II, but not from young Germans of today. We should withdraw all aid programs, they suggested. Instead we should let the Africans fight their wars until they were all dead. Only then should we return and build a proper continent, without any black people around to mess everything up.

I admit that I too several times on my trip had found the African way to organize things to be less than perfect. Especially when I compared it to how we do things in my own country. But now I discovered a side of me that was willing to defend Africa much further than I had previously thought possible. With little success, sadly. It was difficult to discuss common sense into the Germans, but it was surprisingly easy to accidentally drop a cockroach into the casserole they prepared for dinner.

Someone else who wasn't overly enthusiastic about African ethics was a guy living near the hostel. After a number of burglaries he had put up this sign several places around his house:

IMPORTANT MESSAGE!

To all local thieves who can read and write, please bring this message on to those who cannot.

When you break into my house, please use the gate instead of cutting a hole in the fence. The gate is never locked anyway. (Remember to close the gate behind you.)

You do this on your own risk, since it is dangerous, simply hazardous, to break in here. (You are hereby warned.)

I found this to be a more sympathetic approach than what most house owners seemed to go for, namely to fill their gardens with dogs that obviously were on steroids. I doubt it was equally effective, though.



Beware of slobbering!

The local newspaper told me that something else definitely wasn't effective. Many suffered under the royal decree about mandatory sexual abstinence for young women. Abandoned baby number 29 that year had been found in some bushes near a latrine in the village Ludzeludze. Poor Cebi, who according to the newspaper had just been on her way to the shop on the corner, told the reporter that since this was her first time finding a baby, she was a little bit shocked.

I got the impression that she figured that this could very well happen to her again, and that the next time it happened, she would probably not be so surprised. Unfortunately she might have been right. It certainly wasn't impossible that she would find another baby someday. Few families and especially not single mothers in Swaziland were able to pay the fine for breaking celibacy, a cow. If an illegal baby was lucky, it would be dumped in a place where it could be found alive by someone. The unlucky ones were just killed and buried as soon as they were born.

Another story in the newspaper reported that twelve men had been caught driving under the influence of alcohol. That's a *lot* in a country where you can legally drive a car with a blood alcohol concentration of up to 0.15 %. I stayed a good distance from the road when I went shopping for dinner after reading that.

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Swaziland isn't just handicraft and feigned worship of royals. Even though it's a small country, it still has its share of natural wonders. Mbekhwa, a man who had walked from Mozambique to Manzini with not exactly all his papers in order, hung around the hostel and offered his services as a guide to anyone with money. He told me about Sibebe, the second largest granite rock in the world, surpassed only by Ayer's rock, the red, magical mystery nugget in the Australian desert. Sibebe was only an hour's drive away, a perfect trip on a day like this, Mbekhwa claimed. I persuaded Spanish Guillermo to join us, and off we went.

Mbekhwa had no transportation, so we started by walking down to the main road to Mbabane, the capital of Swaziland. We hitched a ride on the first pick-up truck that came by, and it was with lots of wind in my hair and heart in my throat that we made our way to Mbabane. The road was good and straight, and our trajectory upon it the same. I soon forgot about the drunk driving article. As soon as I managed to relax, it was plain fun to be shaken back and forth in the back of the car that moved at nearly a hundred kilometres per hour.

In the centre of Mbabane the driver slowed down slightly, to a speed in which he reckoned we could survive jumping off the car. It turned out he was exactly right, and as I came down from the adrenaline rush I found myself in the middle of a typical third world bus station. People carried chickens and walked around with cows and goats on a leash. A woman balanced the left half of a pig on the top of her head. The whole bus station was chaotic, full of honking and otherwise noisy cars, minibuses and buses. They kept gently crashing into each other, but no one pulled out any accident report forms. Men with thunderous voices called out "Manzini – Manzini – Manzini!", "Phuzumoya – Big Bend – Lubuli!", and so on for all the places the buses could take you. No one

knew of any schedule, the buses would leave when they were full and then some. The bus terminal *was* the city centre, surrounded by mostly modern buildings with soulless shops. There were no tall structures. The ground was too unstable. If something was built too high, it would simply collapse. This they had learned by trying and failing, I could see. Complete chaos reigned. I loved the place.

A sign read "Four Ways Meat Market – Body Parts Specialist". It wasn't as bad as I first feared. It was just a slaughterhouse and a car repair shop sharing a building.

We waited half an hour for our bus to fill up enough for the driver to start the engine and get going. The journey took less time than the wait at the station. When we got off, Mbekhwa pointed almost straight up, grinned like a madman and said "This is world's number two largest rock! As you can see, it's very steep and difficult to climb, but I do it many, many time." He looked at Guillermo and me, obviously expecting us to acknowledge and admire his mountaineering experience. The wall in front of us was indeed massive, precipitous and impressive, but it was also rough and had lots of cracks and edges, making it seem quite possible to conquer.

Mbekhwa took us to what appeared to be the steepest side of Sibebe Rock and pronounced that this would be our starting point. I thought it a bit strange, but hey, he was the veteran! So we began gaining altitude, putting our feet wherever we could find an edge to support us. We tried finding a route along some tufts of grass that looked solid enough to hold on to. Sometimes we slipped, or the grass we held on to was suddenly not a handle, but just grass, useless to anyone but a hungry cow. For a second or two I would sway back and forth. I could easily see myself sliding screaming down the hillside, leaving a trail of skin cells. Somehow I managed to hold on to the rock face every time, and I continued my climb ever so slowly.

After a while Guillermo's footwear forced him to stop. He was wearing a pair of frail sandals, and after a couple of accidents they had now ceased to provide him with a trustworthy foothold. Mbekhwa seemed delighted and said "Oh well. I guess that's it. We must go down, then." But my

hiking boots were having a blast and refused to turn around. I suggested that Guillermo could just wait there while Mbekhwá and I continued. "Weeell...", Mbekhwá hesitated. "It actually gets a lot worse from here. Pretty impossible, actually. We really should go back", was his opinion.

Fine. Except it wasn't. I just can't give up on something I both want to and believe I can manage. So I kept going. I had to find the way on my own, as Mbekhwá declared that he thought it would be best if he stayed with Guillermo, in case he wanted to play chess or something.

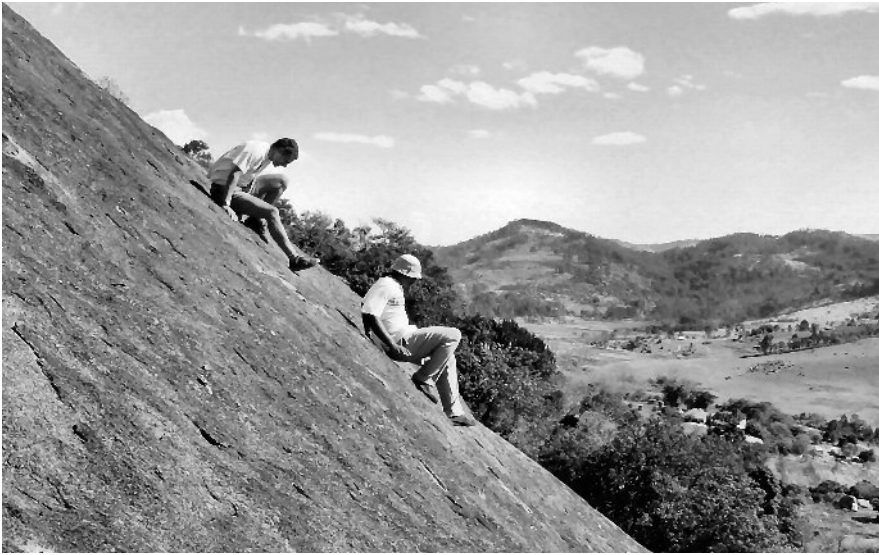
It soon really got worse, as promised, but I found a nice crack in the rock that enabled me to continue in relative safety. The crack provided me with a good grip, and after some time I reached the top. My reward was rich. The view down was slightly scary, especially when I remembered that soon I would be going down the same way I had come up. But in all other directions the scenery was a great, rounded landscape with straw huts, fields and miniature roads and rivers.

Behind the top of the rock I came upon a green meadow. It was full of cows. I started to suspect that there might exist an easier route up than the one Mbekhwá had picked out for us. The cows seemed even more surprised to see me than I was to see them, but after some initial scepticism, the bovines relaxed and went back to ruminating.

Having enjoyed the view to the fullest, I started tacking my way back down. Even before I reached the first serious descent, I suddenly heard heavy breathing. The cows had not followed me to watch me die. Mbekhwá had changed his mind about stopping and was now finishing his crawl up the rock! Ecstatic about this accomplishment he confided to me that this was actually the first time he had come more than half-way up the rock. It wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear from the guy I had hired as a guide, but at the same time it was hard not to be charmed by his enthusiasm over finally having conquered Sibebe Rock. His shoes were old and torn, and I felt bad for sort of having forced him up there. He had taken a much larger risk than I had.

Mbekhwá insisted that I came with him to the top, so that my camera could perpetuate his hour of triumph. He wanted to make a brochure with a photo to document his now actual experience with climbing

Sibebe, to be used in future marketing of his services. I did what he wanted, and to this day I often pray to the powers that be that in doing so I have not contributed to anyone's death or mutilation.



Hardly a graceful descent from Sibebe Rock

Thanks to modern hiking boot technology I got down from Sibebe alive, while Mbekhwa did the same thanks to his hardened palms. Safely down, we wiped off blood and sweat and began walking back to Mbabane. The last few kilometres we hitched a ride with a minibus. We shared it with seventeen other passengers, two cages full of live chickens and five cases of Coca-Cola. I think I would actually rather have walked, but happily intoxicated by the Sibebe experience I still sat there smiling the whole way.

At the hostel I declared the day a complete success when I learned that the Germans had moved on.

My days in Swaziland were long and relaxing. It seemed like the perfect place to recuperate for a weary traveller. I, however, was hungry for new experiences, so I moved on.

After rural and recumbent Swaziland, it was a bit of a shock to be exposed to South African efficiency again, at the Oshoek border crossing. The place was swarming with properly uniformed, fair-haired, blue-eyed

personnel. With an ice-cold stare my face was checked for sufficient resemblance with my passport photo. Straight to the point they questioned me about what I might possibly want to do in their country. Not even Keiko dared to photograph them.

Waiting in line I inspected my passport and compared it to the passports of my fellow queuers. The Norwegian passport is a boring and humble document. In a previous edition at least there was a page where you could put comments and list any personal hallmarks of the owner of the passport. That page is gone now, and I miss it. There we could write things like "This person is on a diet and must under no circumstances be allowed to enter the USA!", or "The bearer of this passport has a fetish for women in uniform, especially immigration officers". The Norwegian passport doesn't have the appearance of a particularly serious document anyway, so I'm sure it wouldn't hurt.

Other countries exceed Norway by far in their pompousness. The British passport, for instance, declares: "Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary". Now, *that's* the way to get things moving. And what does my passport say? "The bearer of this passport is a Norwegian citizen." That's all. Amazingly, I am still allowed to go anywhere without any trouble, so maybe my passport isn't that bad after all.

The city of Nelspruit in the province of Mpumalanga is no beauty, but it *is* the best place to go to arrange a good and fairly inexpensive safari in or near the Kruger Park, South Africa's largest national park. There, on the doorstep to a large number of wildlife reserves, the local tourist information expertly mediates last minute deals for a wide variety of wildlife experiences. With a bit of luck you can get a large discount compared to what you would pay if you booked your safari from home. Travel agents often charge huge commissions for their work, which often amounts to nothing more than to make a quick phone call. Also, if you buy your trip in Nelspruit it's likely that the price includes being picked up from wherever you stay in the city.

My requirements were simple. One: I would like to *walk* among the animals rather than just watch them from a car. Two: There should be no Keiko nearby. The most promising alternative was something called the Transfrontier Walking Safaris. They offered three full days of walking, and they only had space for one more person. In a private wildlife reserve just outside Kruger, the nights would be spent in small cabins with walls and beds and everything. During the daytime we would stalk giraffes and lions on foot, accompanied by a guide with a gun. According to the tourist information the company had not yet had to kill any animals. I signed on immediately.

As I paid for my trip, the girl in the office rather unexpectedly told me "When you walk, you stink!", just like that. Nothing personal, I hoped. "No, of course not", she laughed. "It goes for anyone, and it means that you will probably not see as many animals on this trip as you would on a driving safari. In return, the animals you *do* see, you will see extremely well, and you will experience their sounds and smells much more intensely than you can from inside a car." "Maybe you'll even be eaten alive!" Well, she didn't actually say that last bit, but from the tone of her voice I felt that was what she really was saying. But I didn't worry. As long as I listened to the guide, I was most likely in for three days full of close encounters with many different animals.

This made me so happy that I wasn't the least bit annoyed about having to share a dorm with three German girls who snored in unison, and with Keiko. Keiko doesn't snore. She's too busy talking in her sleep. Loudly. In Japanese. To share a bedroom with her inevitably leads to nightmares reminiscent of bad karate movies from the 1970s. I know more about this than I would have liked to.

Carelessly I showed Keiko the Transfrontier brochure and told her what I would be doing for the next few days. She grew silent and walked away. That's never a good sign. Two hours later I nearly exploded.

Keiko had found Jeff from Canada, who also wanted to go on a walking safari. She had told him about my trip, and had made him talk to the Transfrontier people and arrange for a couple of extra guests on the trip. My brain burst out in a stream of swearing, but all that came out of

my mouth was a whispering “Excellent...” while my face put on what must have been a very stiff smile. Then *I* grew silent, walked away and locked myself in the bathroom until I felt better.

Next morning I eyed a tiny hope. Maybe I wasn't going on the same tour as Keiko and Jeff after all? They were picked up by a minibus at eight in the morning, whereas I had been told to be ready at ten o'clock. My hopes were crushed when the minibus returned at ten to pick me up after having criss-crossed through Nelspruit and picked up others the whole morning. “Herro. Priest to meet you!”, Keiko greeted me, smiling.

My paradise for the next few days lay a couple of hours drive into a fenced wilderness. The camp was considerably more civilized than I had expected. Two large African mamas worked full-time preparing food for our group of ten. The cabins had electricity and a flood-lit water hole just in front of them, a great place to watch animals come for a drink at night.

“Do we have anyone with abnormal eating habits among us? In other words, are any of you a vegetarian?”, our god/guide demanded to know. That's how a macho setting for a safari is established. Fortunately we had none such deviants among us, so Maria and Nomsisi in the kitchen could put all their energy into preparing an excellent steak for dinner.

We went for an introductory walk at once, to learn how to behave when walking in the wild. It was obvious that we had much to learn. It was winter and the middle of the dry season, so bushes and trees offered little foliage for animals to hide behind. Yet all we saw on that first walk was the buttocks of two flummoxed kudus, three old and wrinkly giraffes who slept standing even as we walked past them, a hole that may or may not have been dug out by a porcupine, one termite mound and two unidentified birds.



The rules for bushwalking were simple and similar to the rules for any kind of parade. We had to stay behind the guy with the gun and walk close to each other on a neat line. The idea was that to the animals we should appear as one large, slow organism, rather than as a number of smaller individuals. This, in theory, would make us seem like less of a threat, so that we maybe could get quite close to the animals. If that

wasn't motivation enough, we were warned that certain predators would be happy to pick out anyone who strayed too far behind or away from the rest of the group.

Different from normal parade behaviour, we were asked to keep any shouting and yelling inside our heads, and in general to make as little noise and smell as possible. That's probably where we failed miserably on our first walk. The minibus had been sauna-like, making us reek of sweat. In addition, a certain Japanese female tended to scream in joy or horror whenever she saw something she had never seen before. And this wasn't exactly a walk through Japantown.

The group was your typical safari bunch. First there was Keiko. Enough said. Then there was Jeff, who was enthusiastic to the extreme about anything to do with nature conservation and aboriginal tribes, and who said "Amazing!" every time we saw something he had never heard of in Canada. A tiny, old Australian lady limped along in the back. She rarely said anything, despite her claim to have worked in marketing her whole life. Of course we also had a couple of Germans. Tina and Herbert didn't speak much English, but this was their honeymoon, so they spoke more than enough body language between themselves. Finally there were two Spaniards, Andres and Barbara. They had originally come to South Africa to see the great white shark, and sadly that was the only remotely exciting thing about them. But I didn't mind the bland gang of people I was walking with. With all the lions, buffaloes and other four-legged creatures around, I was sure there would be enough excitement anyway.

Of course our guides were stereotypical, khaki-clad, Australian-inspired tough guys called Bruce, Brandon and Bryan. It gave the safari a distinct flavour of Discovery Channel. I looked forward to when a crocodile or a lethally venomous snake would show up, so that we would get to watch the guides do something incredibly stupid. The Bruces had recently assisted a Norwegian film team. They had taught them to say "Fy faen, fine pupper!", which is Norwegian for "Hot damn! Nice tits!" This immediately became their general greeting to me, morning, midday and evening. It was great fun for at least almost half the first day.

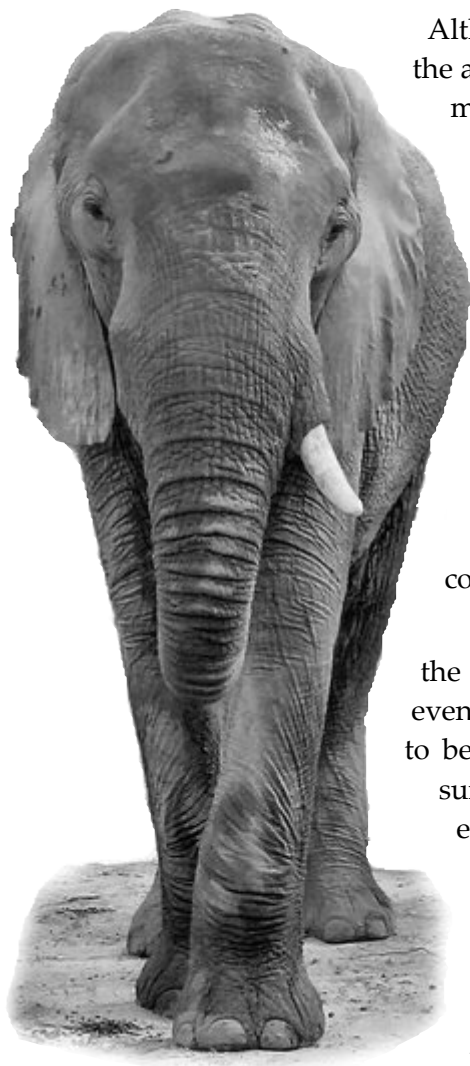
Our nature walks improved gradually. As I grew familiar with some things, other new and interesting details would come to my attention. The guides passionately shared their knowledge with us. Granted, I suspect that much of that knowledge was created on the fly as we asked questions one more stupid than the other, but still. We always followed a visible path, along which mysteriously there was a steady stream of curious things to see. An eland skull here, some lion dung there. The paths had been made by rhinos, the guide said. And I guess that would be difficult to disprove.

Even though the trees were dry and grey, they were still beautiful. Large, crooked and bent, exactly how I had pictured trees on the savannah to be like. I photographed and studied them closely during the breaks we took. As I approached a tree that looked ancient, Bruce suddenly asked me to not investigate it too closely. I had discovered the tambotie tree, a species that can easily become a thousand years old. It does this by being extremely poisonous, so lethal that only rhinos can digest it and not die straight away.

The Africans have of course found a way to utilize the tree. They use it for fishing, in much the same way that we, uh, *some people* fish using dynamite. You just cut off a branch from a tambotie tree and throw it in the water. Dead fish will soon float to the surface. And yes, you *can* eat the fish. Just make sure that you don't use wood from a tambotie tree to build your cooking fire. If you do, consider yourself lucky if the only result is that you experience some interesting hallucinations. More likely you'll never eat fish again for the short rest of your life.

The hours spent walking passed quickly. Every walk started out with a feeling of part fear, part excitement, all natural when you know you're about to enter an environment full of wild lions, giraffes, hyenas, buffaloes, snakes and all those other factors that you don't usually have to worry about when you go for a walk. Gradually the feeling changed into a trance-like condition. My thoughts cleared up, and I found the solution to many questions regarding my life back home. At the same time, my brain lazily followed the signals from the guide.

A frantic, low wave from Bruce quickly brought me back to Africa. Three large rhinos were playing around in the grass just a few metres away. It was a spectacular sight, which unfortunately ended prematurely when Keiko ripped open the Velcro on her camera bag. When she finally had her camera up and ready, she looked infinitely surprised that the rhino had run off to somewhere over the horizon. I won't say that I was upset with her, but it took quite a bit of walking before my meditative state returned.



Although much can be written about the animals of Africa, I think that pretty much all of it has been written by someone already. They certainly have received more attention than most other aspects of travelling in Africa have. So I won't tell you more here about what I saw and experienced in and around the Kruger Park. Only that it was great, exactly like it should be, and thanks to South Africa's tourist industry, the way it's going to be for a long time to come.

My most memorable moments in the reserve took place late in the evenings, when all the others had gone to bed to get ready for a new walk at sunrise. I sat alone and let an enormous dinner and the many impressions of the day sink in, while I thought and listened. The air was full of sounds from nocturnal animals and insects. A darkness filled the world, only broken by the weak glow from the

many clear stars above and the slightly fewer smouldering bits of wood in a dying bonfire. It was even more thrilling than the daytime walks. Indeterminable rustling in the dark bush around me could be literally anything, including the end of the world as I knew it. Rhythmical insect sounds became loud, intense chanting. I could hear lions hunt, all the time communicating between themselves by grunting. It sounded as if they were right nearby, but they may well have been kilometres away. I sat quietly, completely satisfied, listening to the sound of wilderness until the heat from the open fire became too weak to keep the cold night away.

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Thanks to the Germans, who had bought a package including transportation back to Johannesburg, the rest of us were also invited to come along instead of being taken back to Nelspruit. Keiko caught me trying to escape just in time to throw her backpack and herself into the moving car. The journey took most of the day, and it was a nice and relaxing thing to do after all the walking. First we drove along the Small Drakensberg, which weren't at all small, but rather mighty mountains. They looked as if they had been built to be used as backdrops in a Western movie, but then they had been left in a corner for so long that moss had started to grow on them, so now they couldn't be used after all. They looked perfect for spending a few days of solitude in.

We turned and drove straight towards the mountains. Via a pass and a tunnel we came to the Highveld, South Africa's richest farmland. All the way to Johannesburg the straight-ahead road was surrounded by fields, only interrupted here and there by tin mines, nuclear plants and large accumulations of poor people's shacks. Enormous grain elevators loomed over the land, telling the world that this was southern Africa's pantry.

Johannesburg was exactly as nice and friendly as I had imagined it. The driver looked around nervously every time we had to stop for a red light. Well, except for the times when he decided that the safest thing to do was to keep on driving, red lights or not. When we dropped the Germans off at a luxury hotel and casino, we first had to zigzag through the hotel's entrance, a seven lane labyrinth of concrete and barbed wire.

The hotel's private army watched over us, a large number of armed guards wearing full body armour and sour looks. As if the hotel's room rates alone wasn't enough to make anyone stay away from the place.

When people say that the crime rates in South Africa are high, it's an understatement. And the crimes we're talking about are not limited to bicycle thefts and driving without wearing seat-belts. It's difficult to compare the situation there with other countries, since the government is reluctant to release updated statistics.

A South African politician observed in the summer of 2006 that the parliament was surprisingly willing to spend much time debating how to respond to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, an atrocity that took at least 1,110 lives. Surprisingly, because during those same thirty-four days, according to official numbers, 1,750 people were murdered in South Africa, and no one wanted to talk about *that*. That's 51 murders per day. On average! Officially!

If you ask the tourist information agency of South Africa, they'll quote you a somewhat lower average number of daily murders. If you ask the morgue workers union, they'll tell you the real number is much higher. Whether the correct number of murders in the country per day is fifty or a hundred, it's not really what you would call a high crime rate anyway. "War" would be a more appropriate description.

The biggest battles in this war are fought continuously in the streets of Johannesburg. The 2001 statistics tell us that for every 100,000 citizens, some 600 people were murdered in the city centre. That's a murder rate almost six hundred times higher than Norway's. It was even a hundred times worse than New York City that year. Even though New York City may be one of the safest cities in the US, it still makes Johannesburg's murder rate impressive in a disturbing way.

The city also had some 2,000 burglaries per year, again per 100,000 citizens, and the burglaries and the murders often came together. The thieves of Johannesburg didn't always bother with waiting for the residents to leave the building before they acted. If all this made you want to leave the city, you had better do it in an armoured vehicle. Carjacking was another dangerous and frequent crime in the city.

I took great pleasure in explaining to Keiko what a criminal mess we were in the middle of, even though I wasn't completely comfortable with being there myself. Fortunately the highway quickly brought us further, to nearby Pretoria, a pleasant surprise of a laid-back city, especially considering its evil twin city.

We chose a hostel located in a venerable old building in a neighbourhood containing mainly embassies. I got a great room with a beautiful wooden bureau, a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, a large bed with tall bedposts and a floor that creaked when walked upon, exactly like a floor in an old wooden house should. My happiness was further increased when I discovered that the hostel offered full laundry service. I handed over all my dirty clothes, and wearing what little I had left I had dinner with Keiko. Time had come for the first phase of Operation Sayonara, a farewell to Keiko.

When Keiko's e-mail had found me in Cape Town, she had been in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. She had told me several times that she wanted to go back there and see more of the country. Now I told her that I too wanted to go there, maybe with the train from Pretoria in a few days time. I said this despite the fact that in secrecy I had booked myself onto a different trip. I was going on a tour by minibus, and even though it would take me to Zimbabwe, I would be going through Botswana, a different route than the one the train to Bulawayo takes. I felt slightly evil, but by then Keiko had been tagging along for about a month, and I had decided that was enough.

The reception clerk at the hostel told me that if I was just a little bit careful, I could safely walk the streets of Pretoria. So the next morning I went wandering, as soon as I had gotten so much of my laundry back that I could walk around without being arrested for exposing too much skin. My goal was set. Coming to Pretoria I had seen something I thought only existed in Disney cartoons; Uncle Scrooge's massive Money Bin!

The Bin was farther away by foot than it had been by car the night before. I walked swiftly and nervously through the city for about two hours before I decided that I needed a break. It seemed safe enough to stop for a while in the city prison.

Until 1990 the place had been used to house death row prisoners. With the end of apartheid it became a normal prison. In honour of those who unfairly had been put away there, part of the prison had been recycled as a museum. It was a strange place. Some old benches used for torturing people were on display, blood-stains intact. Along the walls there were shelves full of home-made, or rather cell-made, pipes for smoking dagga, plastic keys that actually had been able to unlock cell doors, knives, guns and various other weapons and items. Strangely, there was also a replica of Nelson Mandela's cell on Robben Island. The museum bathroom was out of order, but I couldn't let that stop me from leaving it as a relieved man. According to the museum guest book I was their first visitor that week. I wasn't surprised. Before I was allowed to enter the prison I had to agree to have my person searched rather thoroughly. Or I could have committed a serious crime, of course.

Visiting the domain of The Beagle Boys made me even more eager to see Scrooge's Money Bin. I had it in clear view, up on a hill just south of the city. The pavement along the road ended, so I had to walk in a ditch next to the highway to continue. Just as I thought I was there, a robust obstacle appeared, a high fence with barbed wire on top. I was disappointed. Surely Uncle Scrooge and Gyro Gearloose could come up with something more ingenious to stop people from getting too close to the money?

It was annoying to have gotten so far and then be stopped like that. I reckoned that there had to be another way in, and I followed the fence to find it. After a while I saw a large goat on the other side of the fence. Or rather, the *remains* of a large goat, half-eaten by someone or something who must have had sharp, big teeth. A voice in my head congratulated me on being on the right side of the fence.

At last I found a gate where they sold tickets to the Money Bin. It turned out it was not a money bin at all, but the Voortrekker Monument, the pride of the white South Africa. It was basically a huge, cube-shaped stone building with various statues and decorated walls, built to commemorate the European pioneers in South Africa. Settlers' wagons encircled the building, as if they were expecting the Zulus to attack at any moment.

This glorification of the actions of the first white men in South Africa's interior is controversial. Some look at it as a tribute to those who with bravery and ruthless efficiency went first and conquered the land for themselves. To others it is a symbol of the apartheid regime. It was originally intended as a war memorial, to remind people about both the wars against the Zulus and the struggle for independence from the British. To me the similarity to Scrooge's home in



The Money Bin outside Pretoria

Duckburg was an extenuating circumstance, and I hope the monument will be left standing as it is. If you can ignore the fact that it's not a pretty building, its size is certainly impressive enough to merit its continued existence. Dismantling the thing would be prohibitively costly.

For a long while I was the only one there, and I started to suspect that it was *really* politically incorrect to visit the place. Fortunately a busload of Japanese tourists turned up. The atmosphere became less gloomy thanks to their cameras, their Hello Kitty umbrellas and their pale faces positively glowing with total incomprehension.

The view towards the city was great from the top of the monument, and in the basement there was a museum. It taught me all I needed to know about the challenges involved when you have to conquer a new continent and all you have to help yourself is a bible, a few ox carts and a huge supply of weapons that are vastly superior to anything the locals have to defend themselves with. It will never be a place you feel good about visiting.

—

I met Keiko for dinner. Beaming with joy she showed me her brand-new train ticket to Bulawayo. I smiled and appreciated her treasure, saying that I too looked forward to going to Zimbabwe. Technically I wasn't even lying.

As a gift on the occasion of the farewell Keiko did not yet know about, I offered to accompany her through the city for a trip to the zoo. I was going to the Norwegian embassy anyway, and according to the phone book it was located close to the zoo. My business there was to find out whether or not I needed a visa to enter Botswana. When I booked my trip I had asked and been advised to get a visa. So I walked over to Botswana's embassy and politely asked for one. The fat man behind the desk told me that this could only be arranged by their consulate in Johannesburg. "And it will take about two weeks", he said, before he lazily patted himself on his big stomach and went back to sleep. I was to leave the next day, so this was not good news.

I wailed about this to the reception clerk at the hostel. "Fokkit! African embassy workers! They're not willing to lift a finger!", she said and called the consulate for me. They claimed that there was no reason to come and bother them with any paperwork. Of course I could get my visa at the border. Maybe. My guidebook believed that Norwegians didn't need a visa for Botswana, but these facts change more often than travel guides are revised. When in doubt, it's always a good idea to check with your embassy what is the current truth.

After an hour of hurried walk through the city behind a visibly worried Keiko, we found the zoo in a rather lugubrious neighbourhood. The people at the Norwegian embassy must have realized that the area was no good. A security officer at their old address told me they had recently moved to a new office just a few blocks from my hostel. I gave up on finding out about the visa situation and decided I would instead bring enough dollars to be able to put matters straight at the border, one way or another. And then we went inside the zoo.

A few hundred Keikonian photographs later we returned to the hostel. My Japanese friend meticulously packed her things, and she thought it strange that I didn't do the same. I just told her that I was leaving later.

She was happy to have me accompany her to the station, though. I did it to make sure she was disappearing out of my life, but I also wanted to see Pretoria's famous old railway station, built in classic colonial style.

Unfortunately I was too late. South African railway customers had again demonstrated their great short-sightedness and willingness to act like idiots. The very same skills that Cape Town scrap dealers benefited from, as you may remember. But where Cape Town had been bad, Pretoria was pure madness.

One Monday afternoon in February of 2001 the local commuters at the station were told that all trains had stopped due to problems with the signal system. This made them angry. Very angry. They went completely bonkers. All six thousand of them. They charged over the counters and into the railway offices, demanding to see the signal system, presumably not intending to repair it. We'll never know for sure exactly what they wanted to do to the signal system, but when they failed to gain access to it, they simply burned down the whole place. So when I got there, all train journeys from Pretoria started out surrounded by burnt-out ruins.

I merrily waved goodbye to Keiko. Finally I was on my own again, for real for the first time in a month. Sometimes it's better to be alone than not, and to me this was definitely a time like that. Keiko wasn't so lucky. She seemed unhappy when she entered the train. Later I received this e-mail from her:

Date: Mon, 07 Oct 09:12

2. Oct. from Bulawayo to Vic Falls by train inside my bag storen! Passport, visa card, money, camera, other....

But big bag is OK.

4. Oct. arrival at Harare. To Enbbcy!

Now where you?!

The underlying message was impossible to interpret as anything but accusing. No happy Japanese-style smiley (^)(^) Keiko (^)(^) at the bottom of the e-mail this time.

She had apparently managed to get to Bulawayo and presumably spent some time in confusion there, before she had moved on to Victoria Falls. I suspect that she may have gone there to look for someone. On the train on her way there she had fallen victim to theft of her money, essential travel documents, camera, photos and, well, pretty much everything you really don't want to lose when you travel. I was impressed that she had managed to find her way to Harare, where the nearest Japanese embassy, or embassy, could be found. Apparently they had helped her, and now she could continue her trip.

The last sentence in the e-mail worried me slightly. Was she about to hunt me down, to get me for having abandoned her? To be on the safe side, I didn't reply to her e-mail until after I had returned to Norway.

Yes, I did feel bad about the whole thing when I first read the e-mail. But that was later, and not two minutes after having regained my status as a free traveller, looking forward to new adventures beginning the very next morning.

Time heals all wounds. Weeks later I received another e-mail from Keiko. It showed that it's just not possible to stop her:

Date: Fri, 08 Nov 11:22

I'm now Hermanus! (South Africa)

It is very happy today.

It is because the whale was seen.

*There is Whale crier, and a trumpet will be played
and taught to here Hermanus if a whale is seen.*

*The parent-and-child whale was seen from the shore in
the 50 meter place.*

*And the tail of a whale was also able to be seen with
the jumped whale!*

(^_^) (^-^) Keiko (^-^)/~~~~

So she was back in South Africa, probably seeking safer surroundings. Hermanus, a town in the very south of the country, is known for its excellent whale-watching. During the right season you can walk along the

beaches and watch whales play close to the shore. From Keiko's e-mail, I'm guessing that as a service to the tourists they play some kind of fanfare or signal in the town when there are whales around.

It was a relief to know that even without me by her side, there was still African travelling to be had for Keiko.

—

Just as I finally had gotten rid of one helpless individual, another one entered my life.

I was supposed to be picked up at 5:30 in the morning. A minibus was to take me to Botswana to join a group of travellers. As per instructions I stood outside my hostel at the appointed time, but not until well after six o'clock did the car and its stressed-out driver Wayne turn up.

You can say a lot about Wayne, and I'm going to, but let me start by pointing out that the man at least was able to look at himself with some irony. He wore a blue t-shirt with the Superman logo on it, slightly de-superified by a giant blotch of ketchup and four cigarette burns.

An unassuming couple from Wales had been Wayne's passengers for an hour already, but they were still only a couple of kilometres from where they had been picked up by Super-Wayne. This was his first day working as a minibus driver, he told us. We could tell. We stopped at no less than three gas stations to ask for directions before we even got out of Pretoria.

North of the city centre the densely populated area soon ended, and we entered the proper countryside. The cars we met were mostly trucks sporting bumpers large enough to deflect cows, and the grass stood tall and green everywhere along the road. Enormous desert areas loomed just around the corner to the north and to the west. Thanks to a number of rivers and streams it was still possible to farm the land there. People in the area knew they depended on the river, even though they hadn't always known exactly which river it was.

One of the towns in the Bushveld region is called Nylstroom, literally "Nile river". When the whites first arrived they didn't know much, but they knew they were in Africa, and they knew that the river they had

found was flowing north and that it had papyrus growing in it. Therefore, according to the only guidebook they had brought, the Holy Bible, the river had to be the source of the Nile. No time was wasted in choosing a name for their little settlement. I'm guessing that Wayne's ancestors may have been among those most insistent on the Nile theory. To be fair to them, back then there were few gas stations to seek information from.

On the straight road we moved quickly northwards. Wayne celebrated the early morning by playing thundering techno music on the car stereo. At the South African border I was attacked by the national tourism authorities. They wanted me to sign an evaluation form, mysteriously filled out in advance by someone with a remarkably positive attitude towards all things South African. They promised me a nice gift if I would only give them my signature. Before I signed, I made a few adjustments to the form, especially regarding the statements "In South Africa I felt perfectly safe at all times" and "I will recommend Johannesburg to my friends back home". Guess what? Suddenly I no longer qualified for the gift. Oh well, at least they allowed me to leave the country.

On the Botswana side of the border we immediately made a stop at a gas station. Believe it or not, but it wasn't because Wayne was lost again. It was just that the fuel was so much cheaper there that it was important to start driving on petrol bought in Botswana as soon as possible. While filling the tank, Wayne took the opportunity to have a cigarette.

I immediately took cover in the safest place I could find, a restroom located inside the gas station. My knowledge about Botswana increased instantly.

The first thing I noticed was that petrol smells different there, but I don't know why. The second was that restrooms smell a *lot* different there, and I don't want to know why. The third was that now I knew I was in the third world, because there was no toilet paper there, and I know why. It's hard to find a more telltale sign that you're in a poor country than when even toilet paper gets stolen. You don't have to do much travelling in countries like that before you acquire the habit of always bringing your own toilet paper.

The petrol station was also a currency exchange office. I bought some pula. I sniggered a bit about this country having a currency named something rude in Norwegian, and then we drove on.

OK, if you insist. The pula thing. To me it's like if you came to, say, Burmania, and you literally could exchange your dollars into "fucks". Later I learned that "pula" means "rain". In a desert region, where rain is more precious than anything else, what is more natural than naming your currency after it? The beauty goes further. One pula consists of a hundred thebe. "Thebe" means "raindrop".



Raindrops keep falling ... against the Euro

Botswana didn't impress me much on the first day. Driving through the flat, dry country on the straight roads of decent quality had a calming effect on me. It helped me slumber through some heavy rock music of an intensity and a loudness I had never imagined possible from a car stereo. But it kept Wayne awake, and that was a good thing.

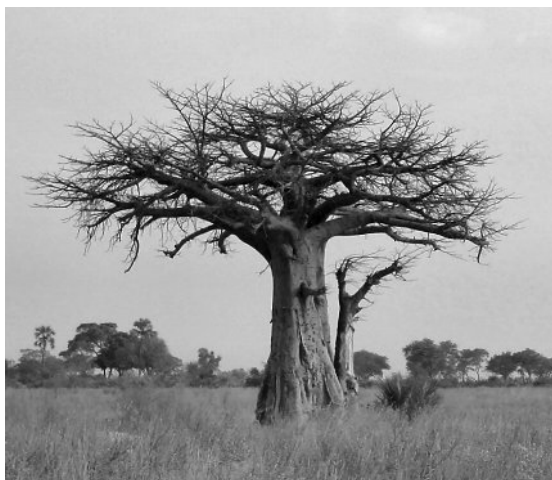
The vegetation along the road was just sad, scattered bushes, but as we moved north, gradually more and more baobab trees appeared. During the winter the giant trees can hardly be described better than by saying that they look like obese trees growing upside down, with what looks like roots pointing skywards. A stranger tree you will seldom see.

All around us and sometimes right in front of us on the road, goats, cows and donkeys in unbelievable numbers wandered and grazed. I bet Botswana is the only country in the world where *wild* donkeys outnumber humans more than two times over. In addition there are lots of domesticated donkeys used for transportation. You see Kalahari Ferraris all the time, plain carts pulled by four or six donkeys.

As if driving slalom between all this wasn't crazy enough, tens of thousands of wild elephants also roamed the country. The grey giants

ignore inferior beings like us, often with fatal results for both parties. Wayne, bless him, drove as fast as he could, in order to get to our destination in northern Botswana before dark.

Every now and then we had to stop at basic, mysterious roadblocks in the middle of nowhere. Wayne figured they were looking for stolen cars, but the signs claimed they were control posts for foot-and-mouth disease. At every roadblock a couple of men with impossibly tall hats came over to our car and stared intensely at us, as if concentrating hard on deciding whether we were sick cows or not. After a bit of discussion they let us pass. It didn't cost us a single bribery fuck. Sorry, pula.



A baobab tree

We did get to see police away from the roadblocks as well. After having whooshed through a small settlement, Wayne was beckoned to stop by a uniformed man on the road. He had just driven in 90 kilometres per hour in a 60 zone. "That will be three hundred pula, please", the officer said. Wayne explained that he simply didn't possess that amount of money at the time. The pragmatic policeman decided to reduce the fine to whatever Wayne had, which was a hundred pula, paid there and then and without a receipt. Everyone was happy, with the possible exception of the Botswana National Treasury.

Against all odds, at sunset we arrived in Nata as planned. Wayne was visibly relieved, and celebrated this great achievement by drinking two beers so quickly that his face turned a deep red. My guidebook told me that the place was a dust hole that received visitors only because the next petrol station was 150 kilometres to the west or 250 kilometres to the north. Fine by me. All I wanted to do there was to meet up with more people and get started on the real tour.

We were met by our new driver, guide and superhero, Brett. He downed a beer, burped loudly and prolonged. "Oh boooooooooy-ah, that one went down like a homesick badger!", he informed us. Our camp was just behind the roadside pub, so we set out on the last two hundred metres of our drive that day. Wayne tore down only a couple of fences on our way. Brett and Wayne spent a couple of hours cooking up a simple pasta dinner, while the rest of us experimented with assembling our new homes, some old tents that came without instructions.

Brett wasn't much like Wayne. Short, muscular and with beaming blue eyes. His head was clean-shaven and his mouth was as quick as it was coarse. Not the kind of guy African border guards or corrupt policemen would want to get on the wrong side of. He was a retired South African mercenary, having made good money abroad for a number of years. Now he got his excitement and fun from meeting foreigners in his own backyard by working as a guide on fairly rough tours. His ideas about black South Africans would have been less controversial a hundred years ago than they are in our time. Still, I felt that to herd a group of naive backpackers through an unstable region, you would have a hard time finding someone better for the job than Brett. But he wasn't a great cook.

The next morning Brett expertly took the minibus on the road and headed it north. Behind us I could see Wayne standing miserable with big eyes as he watched us leave, much like a dog left behind when the owners go on vacation. I don't know where he was heading next, but I bet he was thinking "Now, how on earth am I going to get there?"

The scenery north of Nata was as dreary as southern Botswana had been the day before. Mostly it was just grey, salty, infertile dirt. At least we saw a number of elephants doing their early morning exercises, often right next to the road. I don't think Brett saw them, or maybe he just thought they were a result of his heavy drinking the night before. It didn't matter. What counted was that we were driving fast towards the Victoria Falls. According to Brett it was the best place to be on the planet. The economy of Zimbabwe had completely collapsed, so for now this was where the cheapest beer in the world could be bought.

We reached the border after three hours of "Ice, Ice, Baby" on auto-repeat on the car stereo. Botswana smiled and laughed and was happy to let me go. Zimbabwe was decidedly truculent and demanded 250 rand to give me a visa, my ticket to a chaotic country.

The Victoria Falls are part of the river Zambezi, and the rapids zone and the waterfalls are split equally between Zimbabwe and Zambia. On the Zimbabwe side, right by the falls, there's a busy tourist town sharing its name with the main attraction itself. The place has several good hotels, but for people who only need basic facilities there are campsites available as well. As we rolled into one of them, Brett's cool signature tune still sounded from the loudspeakers, word to your mother. Eight buses, large and small, were already parked there.

As soon as we opened the doors, we were welcomed by a smiling man eager to sell t-shirts with our names and the route of our "expedition" on them. A similarly enthusiastic woman pitched kayaking and rafting tours on the Zambezi, waterfall fly-overs in small planes or helicopters, rock climbing, paragliding, rappelling, horse riding, bungee jumping and more. Victoria Falls has so many activities to offer that sometimes people go there and leave again without even having been to the actual famous waterfalls.

Brett certainly wasn't going to be seeing much of the waterfalls. The only natural wonder he would experience was a stunning beauty who immediately came over and handed him a bottle of beer. She knocked him unconscious by using only her eyes, before she dragged him into a tent by the hair he didn't have. I began to understand Brett's enthusiasm for the place.

I was on my own for the next couple of days, but Brett had given me a good start. He had introduced me to one of the locals. He lived in a dark alley and was an archvillain kind of guy, one you don't mess with. On his head he wore extensive dreadlocks, poorly concealed under a red, yellow and green knitted cap. Better hidden somewhere in there he had stashed away large supplies of alternative tobacco and cash. All his teeth were golden and the left side of his face lived a life on its own, communicating with the world through strange spasms. His eyes wandered nonstop, and

most important of all he offered the best exchange rates in Zimbabwe. While the hotels and the official currency exchange office claimed that one US dollar was worth fifty-six Zimbabwe dollars, Brett's friend figured that it was actually worth just over ten times that.

My stay in Zimbabwe was to last three days, so I decided to start out with exchanging just thirty dollars. Ticman Marley's eyes lit up in astonishment, and he had to dig deep in his hair to fulfil my order. I got my twenty thousand local dollars. When I later that day went to get something to eat, I discovered that everything cost close enough to nothing. I began to understand why the money guy had questioned my sanity.

So my big bag of money was a bit excessive, as all I could buy with it was a rather narrow range of barely edible food, peculiar soft drinks and the local newspaper. Anyone selling stuff or activities for tourists would accept payment in US dollars or South African rands only. In the shops the shelves were empty, with the exception of towers of beer, soft drinks and soap. At the petrol station even Wayne would have been safe. Nothing flammable had been sold or set fire to there lately. Still, that day a long line of waiting cars had formed. Rumours had it that a tank lorry loaded with petrol was on its way from somewhere. No one had jobs to tend to anyway, so they figured they might as well spend the day in line waiting for some Shell Super Formula Godot.

The atmosphere in the village was depressing, so I left it. I walked down to the river, a bit upstream from the falls. I sensed that something was wrong, and I soon knew what. Three guys were following me, and they didn't seem like the nicest kind of people. Many others were around, so I didn't really worry about it. Down by the river, a few hundred metres away from one of the greatest natural wonders on Earth, I found intense village life in a nudist camp sort of way.

The river is also the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, and a large number of signs forbade any crossing of the river, swimming, hunting, fishing and pretty much everything else you can do by and in a river. Still it seemed like half the population of Vic Falls were there to wash themselves, do their laundry or just sit around naked. Some

combined this with catching fish for dinner using fishing nets and fishing rods and even by throwing spears into the water. If there was no food in the shops, thank gods the river was full of it!

When I continued my walk up the river I noticed that my three new admirers still followed me. I started to walk faster. So did they. I was moving along at a good jog, when suddenly there was no one around other than me and them. I chose to throw myself in under some bushes next to the path. Like in a really bad movie the three men stopped just outside my hiding place. They argued loudly back and forth for a while. In the end they swore loudly goodbye to each other and disappeared. I was a bit more careful in Vic Falls after that.

By a stroke of luck, the moon was full and the skies were clear on my first night in Zimbabwe. When that happens, Victoria Falls is one of only a handful places on the planet where you can experience a bright moonbow. Yep. A moonbow. Neither had I heard of such a thing before, so I jumped on the possibility when I read about it on a billboard in the village.

A moonbow turned out to be a kind of rainbow, except it only exists at night, when three factors that rarely come together do so anyway; 1) a source of bright light, such as a full moon, 2) just the right density of water particles in the air, not too many and not too few, such as in the mist of a waterfall, and 3) yourself standing in the right position, meaning having the light source behind you, and the water drops in front of you. Just the concept of a rainbow in the dark was mind-boggling to me. What would it look like? Colours in the sky? Hardly. I was guessing it would have to be some kind of a greenish, ghostlike version of a rainbow.

The conditions were perfect, but half an hour's walk through a dark forest filled with the eternal spray of water from the invisible waterfalls didn't bring much promise. The only light I saw was from the flashlight my guide carried. He constantly turned around and shone it in my eyes to see if I had walked off a cliff yet. I was walking next to the largest and most impressive waterfalls in the world, yet I couldn't see them, only hear their mighty and unstoppable roaring. Only the certainty that I would return the next day and behold the spectacle kept me from screaming out

my frustration. Finally we made it to the lookout point. The guide turned off the light and leaned back to enjoy the incredulity of someone who sees a moonbow for the first time.

There it was! A proper rainbow in the dark! Not as clear and richly coloured as they can be in sunlight, but it was still full of colours. The view was simply absurd, even to me who many times have witnessed the northern lights playing on the black celestial canvas over Norway. I couldn't get enough of it, but in the end the guide decided enough was enough and took me back.

An hour later I was in Las Vegas. Although Zimbabwe had gone off the rails both economy-wise and politically, at least they still made sure that the luxury hotels could serve rich, foreign tourists in a most profitable way. "The Kingdom" was a money machine as good as any in all of the world's top tourist destinations. A large hallway full of dingy, buzzing and flashing slot machines bid me welcome inside the front doors and showed me the way to the restaurants. There was a steakhouse, a pizzeria and an enormous self-service buffet with anything you might want to gorge on. All made with ingredients that had been impossible to find in any nearby grocery store for the last few years. Only kilometres away people were starving, according to South African newspapers. There was nothing there to make you believe it.

The pizza left a bad taste in my mouth, even though I'm sure it had been carefully prepared in a stone oven the proper, Italian way by some superchef using only fresh ingredients. It didn't feel much better to return to the campsite. A large and loud open-air disco was going on, but on the pavement outside the fences poor people wanted me to pay close to nothing for handicraft items they had made from exactly nothing. What to do? I don't know.

I always try to avoid supporting governments that clearly aren't doing a decent job. Also, I try not to give money to anyone unless I know with some certainty that the money will go to people who really need it, whether I give directly on the street or through aid organizations. It can be difficult to know what you can do that *really* makes the world a better place, and not risk bringing harm to someone, maybe even to yourself.

Staying at home makes no difference in either direction, so if you want to help, you really should travel. Just make sure you do it right. Handing over cash to the wrong guy on the street may be to put money in the pockets of criminals, people who just act needy. Or even worse, you could play a part in an insane game where parents mutilate their own children in order to make them more efficient beggars. This happens, I'm sorry to say, so you really need to know what you're doing when confronted with beggars.

Sadly, another possible outcome of giving to beggars is violence. Be too generous, and the poor, desperate people may start a fight between themselves for your gift. It is also likely that by giving money, you encourage other beggars to hang on to you, because they know you will cave in eventually. Finally, if by giving money you also reveal where you keep your cash, you run a higher risk of becoming a victim of pick-pocketing or robbery.

Don't get me wrong. Of course you should help people who suffer. I'm just saying that you must think twice about exactly how you do it, and you should *never* let yourself be carried away by the pain you feel in your heart when you're faced with the cruel and complete lack of justice in this world. What may at first seem like the right thing to do, can quickly turn into a seriously bad situation for both yourself and those around you.

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Seeing Victoria Falls properly takes a while. I spent a full day exploring the waterfalls, from sunrise to sunset, and started out by crossing over to Zambia. Someone had told me that while the park in Zimbabwe was strictly controlled and cordoned off, on the Zambian side of the river I could go pretty much wherever I wanted to.

Crossing the border was easy. The border guards were used to thoughtless movements back and forth across the floating frontier. Ten dollars bought me a piece of paper that allowed me to leave Zimbabwe, as long as I didn't walk too far away and I promised to return before the evening. Equipped with that I walked into the no man's land between the countries.

No man's land was mainly a bridge suspended high above the river, and it was not at all as lacking in men as one might have thought. A guy with a rickshaw insisted that the bridge, which I by the way could see both ends of right behind him, was several kilometres long, so if I was even the tiniest bit intelligent, I should pay him to transport me across it instead of trying to walk it on my own. I politely declined the offer.

Several other men sat side by side along the pavement and tried to sell wooden statuettes. Halfway across the bridge an entrepreneur had put up a bungee jump business, but he had no customers. They tried hard to make me invest in a plunge, but I said no thanks, even when they called me a coward. On that day I would leave all the falling to the water.



Victoria Falls. Zimbabwe to the left, Zambia to the right

Paying for entrance to the national park in Zambia truly bought me much freedom. The only guard I saw was the one selling the tickets, and there was barely a fence or any other kind of barrier to be seen. The waterfalls, on the other hand, were both visible and audible. From a

viewpoint by the park entrance I saw the whole edge where the Zambezi river makes its dramatic fall of a hundred metres down from an edge two kilometres wide. Barely any water fell where I stood, but the rapids became gradually more agitated to the west. My view disappeared into a mist, a thick carpet of heavy water rising somewhere in Zimbabwe.

The might of the Victoria Falls varies widely from one season to the other. When I visited, there was relatively little water in the river. Instead of a continuous row of wild cascades, the water gathered in just a few decent waterfalls here and there along the wide edge. This gave me the opportunity to do something that most of the year is impossible, namely to walk on the edge of the waterfall almost the whole way back to where I had come from.

Freelance guides lurked in the grass. They jumped onto the path in front of me and offered to show me a safe way through the natural wonder. I chose to manage on my own, experienced from having spent a major part of my childhood balancing on slippery stones by the North Atlantic coastline.

Most of the time all I had to do was to jump comfortably from one stone to another through an almost dry river. The easiest and quickest way to do it was by staying as close to the edge of the waterfall as possible. There the water moved quickest, making the river divide into many small and narrow streams, each of them easy to cross.

The intensity factor of the experience was extremely high. I was almost alone on *The Victoria Falls*, and I could move freely on the edge of a sheer drop of about a hundred metres. On the other side of the gorge, in Zimbabwe, hundreds of people were fenced in like sheep, almost getting into fistfights for the best view.

I felt blessed. This was unreal, almost like being in a cartoon. You know, one of those in which if you walk off the cliff, you will not actually fall until you look down, and even then you will no doubt land safely on a boat loaded with eiderdown or something. I whistled a merry tune as I jumped from stone to stone.

My spinal cord vibrated with the thunder from the main waterfall, ever stronger as I came closer to the place where the onrush of water was heaviest. With the sun behind me, I was constantly surrounded by perfect single, double and triple rainbows. The complete lack of any safety measures made my subconscious relax a little. If this had been dangerous, surely they would have stopped me? On the other hand, this was Africa. Never mind. I was fine, and that was by far my best experience at the Victoria Falls.

If I thought I had been a bit of a daredevil walking *on* the waterfall, my madness was dwarfed by what met me when it wasn't possible to continue any further without first getting wet feet and then dying. At the Main Falls I met a father and his seven-year-old daughter. He had brought her there to teach her how to swim!

From Norway I know fathers who are so ambitious on behalf of their children that they give them instant swimming lessons simply by throwing their offspring into deep water. Usually with some sort of flotation device as part of the story, mind you. This father's plan was a bit more, well, shall we say challenging? Fifty metres upstream from a lethal plunge down the Victoria Falls, he released her into the water and made her swim as best she could. The water was more high than deep, so to speak, and with a good current, so she really had to struggle to stay in place. And that was the perfect thing, the father said. A bit of a current to fight against made it easier to learn how to stay afloat.

Incredibly, the daughter was smiling and laughing all along.

Deep pot-holes had formed in the rock several places at the edge of the waterfall. They functioned as perfectly good bathtubs. I watched the locals jump into them and play around. Since nobody died, I decided to give it a try myself. It was easy enough as soon as I forgot what I was doing. To lie in the water in the middle of the largest waterfall on the planet and look over the edge at water crashing against the rocks far below me was quite an experience. Not exactly what I had imagined I would be doing there.

The sun dried and warmed me, and then I walked back to Zimbabwe. I wanted to see the Falls from that side as well.

In contrast to the stimulating freedom to balance on the edge between life and death surrounded by rainbows and fantastic scenery, being rounded up as part of the tourist crowd on the other side was an anticlimax. Well away from the water and any danger, we just stood in the mist and got wet. It didn't help when a group of Americans surrounded me and blurted out their usual stream of "Oh my God!" and "Awesome!", while comparing the magnificence before their eyes with the Niagara Falls. Especially when they decided that Niagara was better, as there you could get a decent hamburger to go with the view.

But hey, the Victoria Falls *are* great also when viewed from Zimbabwe. It's just that compared to my adventure on the Zambian side, it seemed a bit tame that day. I'm sure that with high waters in the Zambezi, it can be more than thrilling enough to just stand on the Zimbabwean side and behold the water wonder.

The campsite entertainment that night brought even more tameness. "Authentic African culture – Singing and dancing!", the leaflet promised. What turned up was a group of young men who undeniably were talented, but who demonstrated it by reciting an a capella interpretation of the soundtrack from the Disney movie "The Lion King". I applauded politely, and I knew I was done with Vic Falls.

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Our scheduled departure back to Botswana was late in the morning, so I had decided that I would have a lazy day. It turned out to be an all too lazy day. On my way back from a preposterously huge and cheap luxury breakfast buffet at The Kingdom, I suddenly felt sick. A seasoned traveller, I immediately recognized the symptoms of food poisoning.

The Kingdom was probably not to blame. Spoilt food in their restaurants would quickly lead to bankruptcy. Instead, I had probably carried the latent poisoning for days, and now it bloomed, although that may not be an appropriate metaphor for the uncontrolled spewing I entertained myself with that morning. An exhausting day at the Victoria Falls and an insanely large meal were probably just triggering factors for something unavoidable.

I barely had the energy to pack my tent and my backpack, before I had to sit down with a cold sweat in the shadow of a tree. It was hardly malaria, as I had not yet suffered any mosquito bites, and my symptoms didn't fit any other likely diseases either. So all I could do was to wait for my body to cope with whatever was going on in there.

It certainly isn't a good feeling, but to be sick like that is unfortunately just part of the whole travel thing. Sooner or later it is bound to happen when you leave the familiar culture of bacteria surrounding you at home. Sometimes, of course not often, but *sometimes*, it's not even necessarily a bad thing when it happens. This turned out to be such a time. No, I didn't meet a beautiful nurse thanks to this, but my illness had a positive outcome. We'll get to that in a bit.

Slightly delayed we got going, and somehow I made it through both of the border controls. I don't remember the herd of eighteen elephants that at one stage allegedly crossed the road right in front of us. To me it was just an episode where all my fellow passengers screamed and babbled incomprehensibly somewhere far beyond my unusually heavy eyelids.

Our destination that day was Kasane, a small town fairly close to the border. When Brett stopped the car and "Ice, Ice, Baby" slowly died out, I had my only clear thought that day. In my condition there was no way I would have a good night inside a muggy tent. Most likely it would just make me feel even worse. The next activity on our itinerary was to spend several days in the remarkable Okavango Delta. I would do everything I could to get better rather than risk missing out on that.

I had Brett take me to a nice hotel. My only requirement for the place was that there had to be an infinite supply of ice cubes there. Ice cubes are underestimated as medicine. I don't know how or why it works, but every time I get food poisoning or something that feels like it, I always seek out places where I can have a soft, nice bed to lie down in and a steady supply of ice cubes. I'll stay in that bed and chew on those ice cubes until suddenly I'm all well again. Places like that usually come with daily cleaning of the room, so in the unlikely event that the cure doesn't work, someone will probably find me before I die. This way I have been able to recover from complete misery to being in good shape many times, and

rarely has it taken me more than twenty-four hours. I don't know what the secret is. Maybe it's the cooling of my intestines, or maybe it's the heat from my body's reaction to the ice cubes. I don't care, it just works. If I still don't feel better after a couple of days, I will of course see a doctor, but that has almost never been necessary.

Brett's choice was a nice safari lodge, although he almost dragged me out of there again when he heard what they charged for a room. But they guaranteed as many ice cubes as I could possibly want, so I was determined to stay. For 451 pula, of which one pula was the government tax, I got a superb room in delightful surroundings. Or at least that's what it said in the brochure on my bedside table. I never made it over to the windows to check out the view. I ordered two buckets of ice cubes, a selection of fresh fruit, some Coke and soda water, and then I started recovering.

After chewing on ice cubes for a few hours I felt strong enough to allow something more substantial to enter my digestive organs. My first attempt was a can of Coke. The results were disappointing. An explosion of sugar and caffeine escaped from my nostrils less than two minutes after my experiment commenced.

A new attempt a little bit later transformed half a pear into a massive number of fast-flying pear piece projectiles covering almost the entire surface of the bathroom mirror. You see, I made the tactical error of having a look in the mirror to see if I looked better or worse than I felt, when I really should have continued to keep my head inside the toilet bowl.

One thing was certain. A tent a hundred metres from the nearest toilet and water source would have been the wrong place to be for me right then.

All I was able to consume as the evening progressed were the ice cubes. I crunched my way through the two buckets and two more, all the while lying in bed watching CNN cover an election in Germany. Encouraged by the celebrations of the winning party I tried my luck with an orange. My body seemed to accept it. A number of ice cubes and another orange later I was fine again. And thank gods for that, it was now

past four o'clock in the morning. I had seen Germany's new chancellor give his victory speech at least fifteen times, and soon Brett would come and take me back to the others.

I showered and washed the bathroom mirror before I checked out. At six I was ready outside the hotel. No one came. Six thirty and seven passed. Still no Brett. I was beginning to worry. Had the others gone sick as well? If so, how would they cope without ice cubes? I had no way of getting hold of them, so I just had to stay put.

Close to eight o'clock the car finally came up the hotel driveway. I was slightly surprised to see that Brett was wearing only his underwear. There was something frantic about his eyes, and he was bleeding from slashes and wounds on his arms. Furious, he explained that during the night a gang of rogues had robbed him and the rest of the group. The bandits had silently come on rafts from across the river. On the other side of the water was Namibia's Caprivi Strip, an area known as a hiding place for ruthless Angolan guerrilla soldiers.

In the darkness they had taken all they could pile up on their rafts, and then disappeared out of the reach of Botswana's police. The loot was almost everything in "our" camp, except for the tents, the minibus and the clothes everyone had been wearing. Which wasn't much, as they had all been asleep when the thieves arrived.

Oh, and the robbers also left a Celine Dion cassette in the car. "So they can't have been all bad guys", Brett concluded. I wasn't sure what he meant. Were they good guys, since they let us keep the cassette, or were they just sensible guys with taste enough to leave it behind?

Only Brett had instinctively tried to resist the robbery. Fortunately he had surrendered after a few cuts from a big knife, so only his pride had been seriously wounded. All the others were unharmed, although they were of course quite distressed. No one had carried much cash or valuables, and they all had travel insurance. Still, that would not be of much use until we returned to South Africa, and now we suddenly lacked a great many things.

I almost felt bad for having gotten sick and staying the night in a luxury hotel. My gut feeling had saved me, so to speak. Fate wanted it that way. Now I could at least help the others out, by paying for everything we needed from shops in Kasane when they opened. Stuff like clean underwear and sedatives, among other things.

Everyone agreed that we should continue our trip more or less as planned. We found everything we needed to continue, except for a new music cassette with "Ice, Ice, Baby" on it. Our main challenge was to convince the local police that we deserved any help and understanding from them. Brett tried to get the necessary papers to allow us to continue through Botswana. All the police gave us was one day to get out of their country. Neither were they willing to send anyone into the bush to see if they could find the thieves. Fighting the Angolan guerrilla wasn't high on the police's agenda, understandably. Too bad for us, but there simply wasn't anything they could do, they said.

Brett called his boss in South Africa. The message was clear. We should proceed according to established routines for incidents like this one. I have to admit that I wasn't entirely happy to learn that they actually had a contingency plan for what to do when a tour group is robbed of all its possessions. How often did this happen? I still gave Brett money to buy enough petrol to take us to Maun, a town in the outskirts of the Okavango Delta. Our trip into the wilderness was already paid for, and all the stuff we needed to go was waiting for us in Maun. When we returned from the Okavango, Brett would again go to the police and claim as credibly as possible that we had been robbed of all our belongings while in the delta. The local police should give us a new 24 hour deadline for getting out of Botswana, and by then that would be exactly our plan anyway.

When you know the ways of Africa, there's always a pragmatic solution to any problem.

Despite Celine Dion being the only audio entertainment available, the eight hundred kilometres from Kasane to Maun passed by quickly. Even without official papers Brett talked us smoothly through the checkpoints along the way. All the roadblocks were manned by men with tall hats, but

in the presence of Brett they immediately lost every bit of authority and self-assurance that the hats had been designed to give them.

Maun is the only city I know of where wild donkeys actually have displaced the stray dogs from the streets. They were everywhere, nibbling on flowers, garden plants, litter and whatever else they could find that was even remotely edible. No one in Maun seemed to find this the least bit weird. The local campsite was the only place not plagued by donkeys, as it was located in the middle of a large crocodile farm. The only donkey I saw there was extremely bloody and distributed into five big buckets, waiting to be dinner for a group of big-mouthed reptiles.



Stray donkeys outside a business centre in Maun, Namibia

We had not come all this way to see Maun, but to experience the wetland area to the north of the city, the Okavango Delta. Where the river Okavango goes to die. The river has its source somewhere in Angola. Having flowed 1,500 kilometres or so through Angola and Namibia it reaches Botswana, where it encounters some serious trouble.

It's a large river when it leaves Namibia, carrying about a thousand cubic metres of water per second, enough to put it among the hundred largest rivers in the world. But then something happens. Once upon a time, tens of thousands of years ago, the river used to flow into a lake that

happily accepted any water it was offered. But as millions of tons of gravel and sand was brought with the water into the lake, the lake slowly dried up. So now the water desperately tries to find somewhere else to go. But there's only sand in every direction. The result is the Okavango Delta, a large wetland area. It's northern part is a labyrinth of rivers, marshes, lagoons and islands, wet and full of life, both above and below the surface of the water. The water gradually evaporates as the water streams south towards the Kalahari Desert. In the end even the toughest water molecules succumb to the desert heat, and from then on it's just sand and stones.

I had really looked forward to seeing this unique ecosystem with my own eyes. Finally it seemed as if I was actually going to make it there. Then we stopped at a car park in front of a pharmacy in Maun. Brett needed malaria medicine. Not as a sensible thing to bring on a journey into the heart of malaria-land, but because he was in the middle of a malaria outbreak. "No worries", he said, "this happens to me all the time", as if he had just not eaten enough oranges lately, and now he was going to get some vitamin C to remedy that.

Getting his medicine without a prescription turned out to be a bit of a battle with the chemist. The guy who was taking us to the delta shortened our wait by telling us about the city. Maun used to be a tiny flyspeck on the map, home to merely fifty souls. Then ecotourism arrived. In just a few years Maun grew to a population of some thirty thousand people (and countless donkeys), of which three thousand were whites. Pretty much everyone now worked in the tourist industry. (Not the donkeys.)

Thanks to this, the city had by African standards become rich. The majority of its citizens still lived in basic mud huts. The explanation was partially to be found around us, in the many furniture dealers in the city centre. They heavily advertised the option to buy furniture by paying for it in a number of small instalments. In much the same way that many Westerners don't realize that even when you pay with plastic, you still must have the money, people in Maun bought more expensive furniture than they really could afford. They ignored the important detail that even when you pay just a little bit at a time, it can still be expensive in the end. So even though they made relatively good money from their jobs, most of

it went straight to the furniture dealers and their debt-collecting partners. The result was a city where a few were wealthy, while the rest lived in houses built from empty beer cans and mud-based bricks.

The previous year Maun had for three consecutive days held the not so prestigious title of "Hottest inhabited place on Earth", with 52, 52 and 53 agonizing degrees Celsius. Not that the temperature itself was a major problem. But combine heat like that with the strong winds that often appear in Maun, and you will feel the problem. Whirling up dust and sand from the dry ground, the blowdryer wind can make life in Maun pretty miserable, both in- and outdoors.

Brett finally returned. He looked worse than ever, but it was impossible to persuade him to stay behind. He didn't trust our guides in the delta, he said, not exactly cheering me up. So we started on the last bit of the journey that could be done by car. We drove north through a flat and dry forest, bringing with us malaria, Celine Dion and the works.

At eleven o'clock we reached the end of the road, just as the heat from the sun became unbearable. From there on we had to become waterborne in order to go deeper into the wilderness. Our vessels would be mokoros. The mokoro is said to be Africa's answer to Venetian gondolas. If that's the case, my suspicion is that Africa didn't really understand the question. Okay, so mokoros do float, most of the time, and they are propelled by punting, but that's really all they have in common with gondolas.

A mokoro is a dugout canoe, carefully manufactured from a single sausage tree or ebony tree. At least that used to be the case. It takes a hundred years for those trees to become proper mokoro material, while a mokoro can only be used for five or six years before it rots away. To avoid cutting down all the trees, they're now sensibly building fibre glass mokoros as well.

In a mokoro you have to sit perfectly still, so as not to bring the mokoro punter out of his balance. He will usually be standing in the back of the boat, slowly and steadily navigating the mokoro through the shallow water. But he's unlikely to remind you of the well-fed, smiling gondoliers who sing "O sole mio!" while weaving through the waterways of Venice. Instead your captain will be sort of concave and silent, only

likely to yell “Mama mia!” if there's some rustling in the vegetation, a possible warning sign of incoming hot-headed hippos or crocodiles with a craving for meat.

In my head, going for a ride in a hollow tree trunk through a green jungle had seemed incredibly tempting. In reality, with the strong sun and the warm wind, it was difficult to enjoy having to sit still and watch a forest of reeds slowly glide by. What it was like to stand in the back and work hard to bring the boat forwards I do not know, but I doubt that he was having any more fun than me.

Most of the time all I could see was grass and sky. If I concentrated, I could also glimpse a wading bird here and there. I was dying. A rebuke hit me from behind every time I put my hand into the fresh and relatively cool water. The captain of the mokoro would not allow anything that could lead to us both becoming crocodile snacks.



Well-worn mokoro captain

It took a couple of hours to reach the islet that was to be our base for the next few days. The heat kept increasing. The conditions didn't encourage much activity, and having Brett lying unconscious on the ground didn't improve the situation either. All the cold drinks we had brought were gone after just an hour. We still had more than 48 hours to kill before our scheduled return.

We whined about the heat for a while, and then about how Brett could be so inconsiderate as to let himself get malaria. After enough whining we were allowed to walk a bit upstream to go for a swim. The permit came from the new guy in charge, a jungle guide who for some reason was named C Company. Maybe he used to be an officer in some army. I don't know. His clothes had definitely been at war with someone or something.

Before I left for Africa, I had solemnly sworn to myself that no matter what happened, under no circumstances would I allow my body to enter freshwater in the wild. The consequences of bathing in African lakes and rivers can be rather dire, both in the short and the long term. Crocodiles and diseases are potential threats almost anywhere.

In the Okavango Delta, it was simply impossible to keep that promise. The air was way too hot and the water way too refreshingly cool. Besides, according to, well, those in my group who wanted to go swimming, the water in the Okavango had been continuously on the move since it fell down as rain somewhere in Angola. So in theory the water should not contain any intestinal worms or bilharzia. I rationalized my swimming by saying to myself that in any case I would have to drink the water, as everything potable we had brought from Maun had already been consumed. And who knew for sure whether those purification tablets we put in the water actually worked? If I was going to get infected by worms anyway, I might as well get some pleasure from it.

After the swim we lay down to dry in the sun and the wind. It took almost thirty seconds. All dry, we were ready for our first safari walk. C Company and his assistant, Tommly, guided us. We saw giraffes, elephants and baobab trees within a few minutes walk from our camp. If only the sun would calm down a bit, this could be a very nice place to visit.

Evening came. It was still hot. Too hot for most activities, including eating a full meal. All I could manage was to nibble on an apple and slowly drink water. The night brought intense jungle sounds. Especially prominent in the evensong was the choir of amphibians, ranging from the squeaking of the smallest frogs, to the grunts and roars of large toads.

The sky never turned completely dark. Maun was close enough for its light pollution to reach us. Even though it had taken a long time to get there, we still had not moved that many kilometres away from civilization. It was difficult not to think about the cold drinks available at the source of those lights. So close, yet for all practical purposes so impossibly far away.

I had an interesting conversation with Tommly. He had no mosquito repellent and no t-shirt, so he desperately tried to make me provide him with both. It wasn't until the last night in the delta I realized that he had no tent, so he certainly had reason to worry about being bitten by mosquitos at night. I covered him in mosquito repellent, but my t-shirts I did not wish upon anyone. After repeatedly having been exposed to humidity in the shape of mist from Victoria Falls, sweat from me and water from the river without being laundered in between, they were now more hygiene hazards than garments.

Tommly was 23 years old, and his parents wouldn't let him marry until he turned 28. This caused Tommly much frustration. He released the energy from his pent-up lust and desire by erecting houses instead of something else. Now he owned two and a half houses, but only one t-shirt. It seemed a bit strange to me. In my country people in general have more t-shirts than homes.

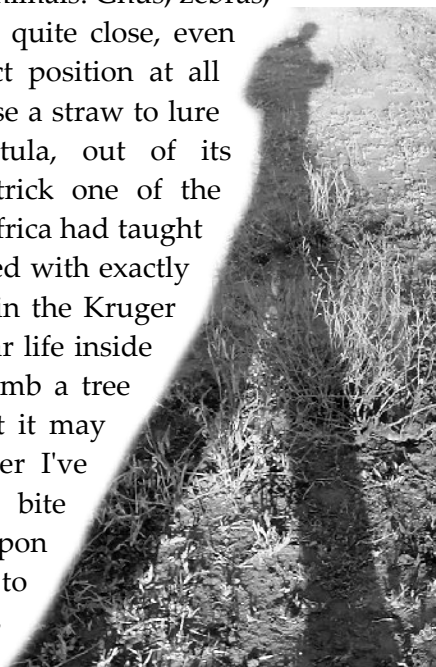
During day two in Okavango, Brett finally regained consciousness. "My mouth is so dry, I swear I could feel camels wandering on my tongue this morning", he said, and with that he was his old self again. This made it easier to relax and enjoy some good walks around the camp.

We didn't see many animals, however. I don't think the reason was a lack of animals around. A more likely explanation was the behaviour of a Czech couple in the group. They were unable to walk more than ten steps without having a proper meal first, so our morning walks had to wait until they officially had finished breakfast. By then most of the animals had left the open fields where we could have seen them, and spent the rest of the day hiding and resting in the dense vegetation.

Neither did it help much that when the Czechs finally were ready to go, they always wore matching sportswear in screaming pink, yellow and light blue colours. As camouflage I think the clothes would be more useful in the night clubs of Prague than in the Okavango Delta. Furthermore, the Czechs couldn't stop chatting to each other while we walked, except for those embarrassing moments when they decided that it was time to stop to fondle and kiss each other intensely. I suspect that beings of any species with a more developed sense of smell than us, in

other words every animal in the Okavango, could sense the scent of fresh Eastern European body fluids from miles away. I build this assumption on the way their tent shook and jumped whenever the Czechs were inside.

Little by little we still did get to see animals. Gnus, zebras, kudus and jackals allowed us to come quite close, even though they of course knew our exact position at all times. I was also given permission to use a straw to lure a baboon spider, an African tarantula, out of its subterranean hiding-place. It was a trick one of the Bruces on the walking safari in South Africa had taught me. The ground in Okavango was dotted with exactly the same kind of holes as the ground in the Kruger area, so I figured there had to be similar life inside them as well. C Company chose to climb a tree while I fished spiders, so in retrospect it may not have been a very good idea. Later I've learned that the baboon spider can bite through shoes and inflict paralysis upon people. I think I almost managed to demonstrate that in Botswana, but I was lucky and got away with it unharmed.



The most exciting walk we did was the one where we almost saw a lion. A herd of zebras we followed simply refused to move away from the plain and go into the forest, no matter how close we got to them. This could only mean one thing, C Company said, namely that inside the forest there was something that neither man nor zebra should approach too closely. Baboons in the trees were screaming as well, another telltale proof of a predator's presence.

We carefully made our way in silence, trying to locate the lion or lions. Suddenly Racheal from Australia realized what we were doing. Up until that moment she must have thought we were on a botanical excursion of some kind. "What the hell are we doing slinking through the bush with dangerous animals all around us?! We haven't even brought a weapon! I'm going back to the camp at once!", she howled hysterically. The nearest

lion was probably in a neighbouring country before the echo from that verbal volley died down.

On our last night in the delta, the rain that had been hiding in the hot and humid air finally came out, bringing violent winds with it. To avoid being blown away, I invited Tommly to sleep in my tent that night. Otherwise he would have slept under a mokoro. He was skinny, but it worked. The extra ballast ensured that next morning I woke up fairly close to where I had fallen asleep the night before.

The rain had cooled the air to an almost comfortable temperature. So when I returned to Maun and at last got the cold Coke I had been fantasizing about for the last couple of days, it tasted less heavenly than I had anticipated. Maybe I had just gotten accustomed to the additives in the water in the delta. Still, it was undeniably nice to be back in civilization and once more be able to shower in transparent water.

My clothes badly needed to be washed, so I brought all my mouldy socks, t-shirts, underwear and whatnots to a water post. A security guard came over to talk. He had only one arm, and over his only functional shoulder he carried something half gun, half cannon. I didn't ask about his arm. After all, we were in the middle of a crocodile farm, so it was much more fun to guess where his arm had gone.

He started talking about his missing limb anyway. About how it hurt all the time, and about how nice it would be if only he had some medicine to relieve him of the pain. Maybe I had some? Could I give it to him? No one in Maun talked to me unless they wanted me to give them something. My journey was close to its end, so I willingly parted with some of the medicine I carried. It makes no sense to return home with a backpack full of stuff that is needed immediately by someone right where you are.

In Pretoria I had heard about a tour of southern Namibia. It was to begin in the capital, Windhoek, in three days, and I wanted to be on it. I didn't feel like travelling more than a thousand kilometres in the wrong direction through the desert with a party of backpackers lacking backpacks as well as essential papers, just to catch a flight from Johannesburg to Windhoek.

Instead I decided to try finding a way to go there directly. Without a tent, my only option for accommodation in Maun was a fairly expensive hotel. After roughing it in Okavango, I didn't mind a bit of luxury. It would still cost less than the plane ticket I saved. Besides, I really felt like spending a couple of days being lazy and curious and wander up and down the peculiar streets of Maun. Windhoek was just 600 kilometres to the southwest, and there *was* a road through the desert. As long as there's a road, there's usually some kind of transportation on it as well.

My last minutes with Brett and the bunch were spent driving to the city centre. Less than nothing happened there that morning. Silence prevailed inside the car as well. Close to every man in Maun had left town for the weekend to participate in a river fishing festival somewhere else. So it had been exceptionally good conditions for hunting females in the city bars the previous night, and certain visitors to Maun had made sure to take advantage of the situation.

The only sound in the car was some sort of howling coming and going in sync with a blinking lamp on the dashboard. No one knew what the vehicle was trying to tell us. Since I was leaving the car anyway, I merrily suggested that maybe it was the donkey radar that suddenly had started working. An unusually grumpy Brett declared my theory baloney.

Then I was on my own again. Luck helped me find a way to get to Windhoek in time. It turned out that there was one and only one way to travel between the two cities, on a minibus leaving once every fortnight. The next one would leave in two days, which was perfect timing. I bought a ticket to Windhoek, and then I was ready to explore the mysterious Maun.

The most striking sights in town were the Herero women, or to be more exact, their clothes. In a hot and dry climate like Maun's, you would expect to find people wearing not much. Here the case was almost the opposite. They didn't dress like Eskimos, but that would be the next step up the ladder. Starting from the top, covering the head they wore huge, cow-inspired creations, distinctly horn-like. Body, arms and legs were covered in large dresses with crinolines beneath. Plain, one-coloured dresses were definitely out of fashion. It seemed like every woman had

her own pattern, with dress and headgear matching nicely. It must be a terribly hot way to spend life in the desert. Especially a desert that at times is the warmest place on Earth.

The background for the paradoxical way of dressing is a piece of German missionary history. When the missionaries arrived in Namibia during the Victorian age, they met the Herero people who walked around practically naked, both men and women. The missionaries saw that this was not good, scorching heat or not. The Germans immediately dressed the local women up in decent stuff from the wardrobes of their own wives, the hottest haute couture of Europe at the time.

Now, the strange thing is that the Hereros didn't mind this at all. Actually they loved the style, if not the colours and the patterns. Not completely satisfied, they augmented their new clothes with traditional colours and jewellery, and soon they had found a way to dress that was acceptable to both the Germans and to themselves.

That the Europeans since then have moved on to new fashions, many times, has not affected the Herero. The result is that when you visit certain towns and villages in northern Botswana and Namibia today, you may feel like you have entered a world that never recovered after the movie "Gone with the Wind".

Myself I had trouble with getting over a bakery with a large sign outside, reading "The Biggest Selection of Germ Specialities". Fortunately there was an explanation. An air vent had devoured two letters. It should have read "German Specialities". Which made *slightly* more sense.

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I've never been drunk, but in Botswana I found out what it must be like to pay through your nose for a drink in order to potentially have something else entirely come out through your nose later. Never have I paid so much to get as sick as I did one morning in Maun. Alcohol was supposedly not involved, but when I chartered a plane to see the Okavango Delta from above, some of the pilot's manoeuvres made me slightly uncertain about that.

Renting a plane wasn't as extravagant as it may sound. I split the bill with a French guy, Thierry, for an hour's flight in a small Cessna tin with propellers. Pilot student Sean wasn't exactly paid well to temporarily be responsible for our lives. The airport was crowded with future pilots, all of them close to graduation. Or to utter failure, of course. All they needed were more hours in the air to get their certifications. This made renting a plane there relatively cheap.

The flight started with a nice and easy take-off. Sean proudly turned around and looked at Thierry and me. In hindsight, I think it may have been a mistake to flash an acknowledging smile back at him. Encouraged by the smile, Sean proceeded to phase two in his campaign to impress us with his piloting skills. All of a sudden we witnessed a show of aerobatics. I usually enjoy those, but this time I was inside the aircraft, and that made a huge difference.

Outside the windows I could see giraffes and elephants, buffaloes and gnus, kudus and impalas, as well as a few eagles who seemed rather anxious to get out of our way. Every time I saw an interesting animal, I prayed that Sean wouldn't see it too. If he did, he would pull the plane through a madman's loop to get as close as possible to the poor creature. We would circle the animal's head a few times, like an annoying fly, making me feel five times heavier than usual. Then we would move on to the next animal.

I was mainly interested in seeing the big picture, how the Delta's different parts all fit together, something I had figured would be easiest to do from above. Sean, however, seemed to think that I was there to learn as much as possible about the length of the nostril hairs of the various species. At times we flew no more than four or five metres above the tree tops and the reeds growing in the water, and we made a sharp turn every twenty seconds or so. The fatiguing flight made sweaty summer vacations in the back seat of a car on endless roads through Swedish Lapland seem like a distant and beautiful dream.

My aerial ordeal finally ended. I staggered to the pilot school office where without a word I handed over the money for my flight. Quickly I found the nearest restroom. And sat down. For a long time. I moaned and

groaned as I sat there shaking. The vibrations from the engines on the plane wouldn't let go of me. When eventually I got rid of my double vision, I walked back to the hotel and went straight to bed. Late in the afternoon I woke up and realized that my stomach had started behaving as some kind of soup dispenser. There was only one thing to do. I immediately ordered two buckets of ice cubes and got ready for my cure against anything.

Obviously, the next morning I was fine again. The rest of my time in Maun I walked around and watched people and donkeys. I never got tired of that, but soon it was time to go to Namibia.

It was the 30th of September, Botswana's Independence Day, a national holiday. The only working man in the whole country was the driver of the minibus that I and two others were sitting in, bound for Windhoek. The streets of Maun were deserted. Most people in Botswana were still in bed, suffering from hangovers, the driver explained. And he was happy about it, as it meant he could drive as fast as he wanted without having to worry about killing anyone or being caught speeding. He just had to look out for the cows, donkeys, goats and horses that kept crossing the road in front of us.

We made a few short stops. The driver added to his income by taking on unofficial passengers, after having asked us whether we minded if he did. Of course we didn't mind, there was room for much more than three passengers.

The Namibian border officials gave me permission to stay in their country for fourteen days without even asking what I would do with them. At first sight Namibia seemed identical to Botswana. The border between the countries is a perfectly straight, vertical line on the map, at one point suddenly moving exactly one degree to the east.

There's nothing about the geography that separates the two countries, it's just the border the colonial powers decided on when Africa was dissected, historically speaking just a moment ago. The only noticeable difference from Botswana was that the ground slowly began to rise towards the west, and the signs along the road now hinted at a slight German influence. A war cemetery from a battle between the Herero and

German troops was signposted "Schutztruppe-graben". Later on we drove along the Bismarck River and passed Hotel Midgard.

We reached Windhoek after three hours of steady climbing. The capital of the country was so small and secluded that I didn't even see it before suddenly I was right in the middle of it. Even though there were a few tall buildings and wide streets, they were all concealed by the surrounding hillsides, at 1600 metres above sea level. Some buildings had German-like features, but it wasn't as striking as I had imagined it. Most of the city seemed well maintained and modern. It had American junk food outlets as well as local imitations of them. On our way through the centre, for the first time since leaving South Africa I saw a Chinese restaurant, a mini golf course and a bookstore. Between the buildings were well tended gardens and parks. There was even toilet paper in the public restrooms! I had safely returned from the third world.

The transition back to civilization wasn't too noticeable. At the hostel, appropriately named The Cardboard Box, all beds were taken. They offered me to stay in a tent in the backyard. I was happy to accept, since already the next morning I was leaving Windhoek to see southern Namibia, on a tour run by a company with offices next door. I walked over to them and handed over all my remaining cash to an enthusiastic blonde, who in return gave me a tour voucher. I was all set for the desert.

I had been lucky to get to Windhoek in time, and even luckier to actually get a ticket for the tour. With me, the tour was fully booked. My group included three Germans; a hyperactive girl who claimed her name was "Little Swan", a guy who had shaved off half of each of his eyebrows, and his girlfriend, who frankly was too fat to fit inside the car. We all had to push together to get her inside.

Then there were four Brits. "Thank God, we outnumber the Germans!", as they said. Two of them were cheerful bachelors who had travelled through Africa like this for months already. The two others were much older, a married couple who had never pitched a tent before in their lives, but who were open to experimenting with anything. Before we parted, I had learnt a great deal about how they spent life in retirement manufacturing LSD and explosives in their attic at home, using recipes

they found on the Internet. Our group of ten was completed by me and a Spanish couple, who weren't Spanish at all, but Catalanian, they insisted.

We had been given Elke to lead us through the desert. Moses himself couldn't have been a better fit for the job. Even though she was a she, you would have to search for a long time to find a more masculine man than her. A real toughie, she navigated gravel roads like a goddess, she scolded and swore like an old sailor and when she got agitated, she threw orders at us in German rather than in English. Which was a lot of the time. If at all possible, I felt even safer under her command than I had done with Brett.

It took us some time to reach the promised desert. Outside Windhoek the scenery was at first just your average dry mountains, soon followed by the kind of semi-arid land that had surrounded me all the way from Botswana. The ground was part sand, part stones and part severely dehydrated bushes. The plants led a tough life in the harsh climate, but they were able to survive thanks to the more or less annual green weeks held after short periods of intense rain.

After a long stretch of bumpy road we reached a mountain pass. Far in the distance we could finally see straight into a red desert, a land completely covered by the rounded forms of sand that for all practical purposes had been there forever.

We didn't reach the red sand that day. Instead we drove down from the pass to a grass-covered plateau and camped in Sesriem, the last populated place before the Namib Desert. "Namib" is a word borrowed from the language of the Nama people, and it means roughly "large, dry plains". That's a more than adequate description of most of Namibia in general and of the land around Sesriem in particular.

The landscape was simply gorgeous, with an unblocked view towards the horizon in every direction. Mountains in the distance were blushing red, apparently in the process of being conquered by even redder sand dunes. Above me the sky loomed a deep blue and was cloudless all over. The great plains around me were covered with bright yellow grass that waved in the wind. The grass hadn't showered for months, but it still smelled fresh as it turned into gold with the sun approaching the horizon.

The national tree of Namibia is the camel thorn tree, an acacia. With their yellow flowers and evergreen leaves they stood scattered across the plains. Each of them seemed lonely, surrounded by grass only, destined to never be part of a forest. They survive only because they have the ability to dig their roots up to sixty metres down, where they can find ground water. During the period when South Africa administered Namibia, the national anthem was a slightly rewritten old Nazi marching song, starting with the line "Our land is as tough as a camel thorn tree". The tree seems able to flourish in even the toughest surroundings, so it's a good and patriotic thing to sing. Still, it *can* be brought down.



A camel thorn tree in Sesriem

Surprisingly, the only real threat to the camel thorn tree is a tiny bird. Or rather a whole lot of tiny birds; the social weavers. These avian conquerors join forces and form large bird communities, and they build nests together in the trees. Actually, "nest" isn't the right word. What they build using only thin straws of grass eventually turns into giant tenement houses for birds, with room for hundreds of feathery families.

The construction is both a great place to hatch their eggs and to escape the midday heat. Despite their name, the birds do not weave the straws. They thatch, packing the straws tightly together into robust walls, exactly like people in Europe have done for centuries when building straw roofs on houses. A large communal nest can have a hundred entrances and exits, a volume of more than fifty cubical metres and a weight of more than a ton. Under that pressure even a camel thorn tree may collapse if it's old and tired.

Sesriem is the most popular base for trips to the country's main attraction, Sossusvlei, the very heart of the Namib Desert. We planned on being the first visitors to the national park that day, so that we could enjoy the sunrise from the top of a dune without too many others around. To do that, we should be on our way at half past five in the morning at the latest.

Unfortunately, when the rest of the group was ready to go, the elderly English couple was still inside their tent, performing loud and saucy experiments, presumably based on something they had found on the Internet. We were delayed, but Elke knew how to fix it. She just had to drive even crazier than she had done the day before. Instead of actually breaking when she should have, she just yelled "Bump!" whenever she saw an obstacle we would hit, whether it was a brand-new dune, a small to moderate sized animal or just a stretch of bad road.

After thirty minutes or so we arrived at Dune 45, named for its location forty-five kilometres from the entrance to the Namib-Naukluft National Park. Thanks to Elke's aggressive driving, we were there in time for the sunrise, although most of us left the car with our heads full of brand new bumps and dents. Elke pointed to the mother of all dunes and said "Climb that one, you pathetic group of puny, whimpering softies!" Most of that she said only through the tone of her voice, but I heard it.

I obeyed, of course, and soon I was almost two hundred metres closer to heaven. Behind the enormous dune there were numerous even taller pieces of sand art. The astronomer Carl Sagan used to say that there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on our planet. I seriously doubt that he ever visited Namibia.

It was a cold morning in the desert, but trudging up the loose megadune warmed me up. I was the first to reach the top, but when I turned around and saw fifty advanced apes with clothes on moving in on me, I decided to head for a peak another few hundred metres away. There I sat down, far enough from the others that the only sound I could hear was the gentle whistle of a lazy wind that wound its way up the sides of the dune I had climbed.

The sun also silently came up, and the sand soon changed from grey and cold to fiery red and more than warm enough. Bushes became intensely green and the sky infinitely blue. I felt small in a big world. Like in a children's book the colours were all vivid, and like a child I let myself be fascinated by them. For a long time I just sat there, admiring our planet for all it can do.



Ancient, gnarled trees in Sossusvlei

Although incredibly scenic, the dunes are only half the fuss about Sossusvlei. The vlei part is also interesting in all its extreme barrenness. A vlei is a South African notion, describing a lower-lying area which

through at least parts of the year is a marsh. Different from South Africa, in Namibia there can be decades or centuries between the wet periods. And when they occur, it usually doesn't take long before the water sinks through the sand into large underground lakes. In Sossusvlei I could see proof of the water's occasional visits in the shape of large, white, mud-like pools, all dried up and with decorative cracks all over. During short periods in the past this had been the bottom of rapidly dying rivers following short, intense rainfall in the desert.

Black, sandblasted tree trunks stood evenly scattered across the vlei surrounded by a red sea of wavy sand. The trees silently told the story of an age of longer-lasting wet periods, centuries ago. The ancient and extremely photogenic skeletons are often used in movies and commercials, valued for the way that just by looking at them, peace will come to your mind.

These were amazingly beautiful surroundings. Yet I politely, but firmly declined when later that day I was offered a chance to see the area at sunset from a small aeroplane. I had learnt my lesson in Okavango!

A long day in the minibus followed. Between Sesriem and Aus to the south there are only 250 kilometres as the crow flies, but the distance more than doubles when you must follow the road around the edge of the desert. The initially alluring mountains and golden plains transformed into a monotonous landscape. For excitement I had to resort to watching Elke fall asleep behind the steering wheel every now and then. Strangely that coincided with when the car hit the fewest bumps.

It was tempting to imagine that the name "Aus" had a German origin. Maybe once upon a time a group of immigrants came there and saw that the place was a true hell. Maybe they said to each other "We'd better name the place so that people understand that they are better off staying away from it", and then they chose the German word for "Get lost". But no, Elke offered a different explanation. "Aus" is a simplification of a word from the language of the natives, the Khoikhoi, meaning "Land full of snakes". I couldn't see much practical difference between my fiction and Elke's fact.

Aus was magnificent despite its alleged abundance of reptiles. For two nights we stayed in a small cabin in Geisterschlucht, which roughly translates to "Ghost Valley". Only a narrow opening between two mountainsides allowed passage from the cabin back to the real world. Outside the hidden valley lay a vast, open landscape dotted with dramatic mountains. The only trace of human activity there were some faint, straight lines across the plains, remains of old roads or railway tracks. An ageless Wild West kind of atmosphere prevailed.

I spent the afternoon exploring the nearby mountains. The view of the plains from the highest peak caused me even more respiratory trouble than the climb up there. "Almost better than DVD", as the Spaniard I dragged up there so poetically put it. The mountain was rounded and rust-coloured, as was the landscape below. In the clean and clear air I could see details in the scenery several kilometres away.

We continued our tour, and after a good month of deserts, dry season and eternal salt plains, it was thrilling to come to Lüderitz and see the ocean again. I had not noticed how much I missed it, but when we parked near the harbour, I simply had to walk down to the rocky beach and put my hands in the sea. The water was refrigerator cold. As was the air, which also carried exactly the same scents as the coastal air does in the part of the Atlantic where I usually spend my days. When I closed my eyes, tasted the salty air and heard the sounds of shrieking seagulls and swearing fishermen, I might as well have been in Norway.



A street in Lüderitz

The main attraction in Lüderitz was a boat trip to a bay that was home to colonies of penguins and seals. I suspected that the experience probably didn't exceed Antarctic standards, so I chose to stay on land and explore. Lüderitz was a small town of about ten thousand people. They seemed to lead good lives there, although many buildings showed signs of old age.

Most houses in the main street were built according to German building traditions. The town library was a "Lesehalle" and the school's gymnasium a "Turnhalle". If the locals had not favoured turquoise, pink and other pastels on their houses so much, and the locals themselves had not had faces of also, well, rather uncharacteristic German colours, Lüderitz could easily have passed as a town on the North Sea coast.

While the streets seemed safe enough, an apparently angry and voluminous man in front of the church stopped me from seeing the distinctly German building up close. The long line of black, scowling people in front of the liquor store waiting for it to open at nine in the morning was also disturbing. Something was rotten in the state of Namibia.

To avoid thinking more about that, I walked out of the town centre towards what had looked like an old cemetery from the minibus. On my way there I walked by the decidedly most well-kept building in town; the prison. Just past it I found the graveyard. It was an unusually sad version of the kind. At the entrance many small tombstones marked the resting places of numerous infants and children, their dates of death spread evenly throughout almost the entire twentieth century. Lüderitz has always been a tough place to live, and often to die.

There were no settlements in or near Lüderitz before the Europeans arrived in Namibia. Even after the Germans established their colony, South-West Africa, and constructed the harbour of Lüderitz, at first nothing much went on there. Sometimes the Germans would sell guns to the natives, at other times they used the guns to fight them.

In 1908 a railway line was built on the dry and useless land near Lüderitz. One day a man working on the railway found a stone that shone exceptionally bright in the sunlight. It was so beautiful that he

showed it to his boss. The manager quickly realized what the worker had found. He quickly acquired a licence to prospect for diamonds in the Lüderitz area.

Diamonds were simply lying around on the ground in the desert, waiting to be picked. Rumours about the phenomenon spread quickly, and a diamond rush began. Fortune hunters arrived from all over the world. Lüderitz became a big city for its time. As usual, the people who made fortunes were the ones who sold services and equipment to those trying their luck at finding diamonds. The prospectors had no money, just the diamonds they found, and the shopkeepers and the prostitutes were happy to accept them as payment. Harder a currency you will never find.

The search for diamonds was a chaotic business. Many were of course tempted to just "go for a walk" in the area and maybe accidentally happen upon a diamond or two on their way. Those who owned the rights to prospect were not too modest to tell others off and explain whose diamonds they were. If necessary, they didn't hesitate to fire guns at the intruders to make their point.

In the fall of 1908 the German authorities established a "Sperrgebiet", a forbidden area, of about twenty-six thousand square kilometres. No one was allowed to be there without explicit permission. Helped by the tumults caused by World War I, all the prospecting rights gradually came under the control of one company, the De Beers Group. Even today De Beers is the world's largest diamond mining and distribution company. Just outside Lüderitz the company set up diamond mining facilities and administration offices, and the company town Kolmanskop was built for the workers. It had its own school, police station, hospital, bakery, soft drinks factory and everything else the European mine administrators and their families needed.

Almost a hundred years later, the forbidden area continues to be off limits to the public, and large amounts of diamonds are still found in Namibia. These days most of the diamonds are not just picked up in the desert, but found in sand that is "vacuumed" from the sea floor just off the coast. Kolmanskop has turned into a ghost town and is not at all a diamond any more.

In 1956 Kolmanskop was closed down and left to itself and to the sand. A small museum had recently opened in the remains of the town. What was most interesting about it wasn't the history of the town itself, but that it offered a chance to see what will happen to a town if you put it in a desert, you stop sweeping the floors and you leave some openings in the roofs and walls to allow the sand to come and go as it pleases. Every room in every house contained sand, and lots of it. In some cases it filled the rooms completely, all the way up to the ceiling. Seeing this place made it easier to understand how so many grandiose cultural treasures have disappeared into the sand, like in Egypt.



A sandy toilet, for people or for cats?

It's unlikely that those who had to move away from Kolmanskop regretted it. The nearest source of fresh water was a hundred kilometres away. The people mostly drank treated sea water, which probably tasted at least slightly better after having gone through the soft drinks factory. The heat and barrenness of the desert couldn't be changed, but the households received a chunk of ice every day, just enough to keep a small old-fashioned refrigerator running at a suitable temperature.

To the miners it probably didn't matter much where the mine was located. They had a hard time anyway. The management did all it could

to stop the workers from stealing diamonds. One way they minimized theft was by letting every shift in the mines last for six months. The mineworkers had to stay either inside the mines or in the dormitories nearby during this whole period. Towards the end of the "shift" the workers spent a week in a special quarantine area. There they had to swallow engine oil every day. As you can imagine, that really got their digestive systems going. This way the mining company could rest assured that no worker's stomach contained any diamonds when he left the camp.

I rounded off my visit in Lüderitz by eating a pizza that was only slightly less oily than the quarantine meals served to the poor miners in the past. The pizza was ordered as lunch, but by the time it arrived at my table it had become dinner. Which was fine. Our guide, driver and cook Elke was sick. The evening meal back in Geisterschlucht was therefore limited to some bags of potato chips and lumps of cheese.



These two horses will never see a meadow

We ate while we watched some of the two hundred wild horses that live near Lüderitz. It seemed as if they based their survival in the semi-desert on standing as still as possible next to a water hole that some friends-of-the-animals organization had provided. Not that there was much else a horse could do there. Presumably the animals were still in shock after having become shipwrecked there a hundred years ago on their way from Europe to Australia.

Another long day on the road followed. We drove all the way down to the Orange River, which was just dirt brown, believe it or not. The river is also the border between South Africa and Namibia. To understand how dry Namibia is, you need to know that the next river that actually has water year-round is the Kunene, more than twelve hundred kilometres further north. Incidentally, that's where Namibia ends and Angola begins. Being a meteorologist in Namibia is the easiest job in the world. All you have to say is that it will be sunny and dry, every day.

The road along the river was good. This didn't improve Elke's mood, which already was bad because she was sick. She didn't brighten up until she discovered a sign that said "Ai-Ais 4WD", which indicated a short cut to Ai-Ais for four-wheel drive vehicles only. Since we were heading for the Ai-Ais, and our car only was a two-wheel drive with not particularly good tyres, this seemed to Elke like an excellent alternative. Soon she was driving like a savage up a dry riverbed through a valley that probably only saw people once a decade or so. This had better go well.

Of course it did, and we arrived at the Ai-Ais campsite long before dark. The place was called Ai-Ais because that's what the Damara people call hot springs. And the springs were indeed hot. Maybe it's an onomatopoeic word. The first thing that comes to your mind when you put your hand into the just short of boiling water is exactly a loud "Ai-ai!" I'll leave it to a greater expert on African tribal languages than myself to confirm this theory.

Nearby was the Fish River Canyon, a deep and narrow river valley. It was impressive, but unlike what most Namibians will have you believe, it isn't the second largest in the world after Grand Canyon. For that matter, Grand Canyon isn't even one of the top three deepest canyons in the world, although it is no doubt the most famous one. I had no problems with keeping my mouth shut and let Elke's national pride bloom. The view from the edge of the canyon was spectacular.

Typical of great canyons, Fish River Canyon suddenly just appeared in front of us, seemingly out of nothing. We had been driving across a completely flat plateau for quite a while, when suddenly this crack in the surface of the Earth blocked any further progress. Far below we could see

how it had been dug out, and how it still was made deeper. Water in motion is a mighty force.



A panorama view of the Fish River Canyon as seen from the east rim

We didn't get much time to admire the view. Elke planned on moving us quite a bit further north that day. Our last night on the tour was to be spent in Keetmanshoop, a town that at first glance seemed to have more petrol stations than people. When we stopped at one of them, the car was immediately surrounded by a group of begging Khoikhoi children. They pointed to their stomachs, made faces and said "Unnghry meee".

The strange thing was that it was only to us they declared their distress. They ignored five other cars with local drivers, even though the people in them certainly looked like they could spare some change. Maybe that's just the way it is. The retired couple from England gave them a bag of potato chips, which the children immediately started fighting each other for. They behaved like greedy seagulls, battling so intensely that they completely forgot to say thanks.

Our campsite was on a combined farm, botanical gardens and zoo. Wandering all over the place were a group of warthogs, three tame cheetahs who could safely be patted while they had a kudu for dinner, a pack of social meerkats, prancing peacocks, talking birds and a dog. The poor terrier desperately fought for attention in the large menagerie of exciting animals. He was doomed to lose, but he really tried everything; balancing on his rear legs, dribbling like a baby, jumping up and down on a trampoline he may very well have constructed himself. The dog even recited sonnets by Shakespeare, all in vain.

My last night in a tent I spent sleeping outside it. In the desert no bloodthirsty insects were on night patrol, and this was my last chance on this trip to enjoy a really bright, southern, starry sky. The end of several weeks of mainly camping outside was coming, and in just a few days I was flying home.

After having lived so long in tents and hostels, I had gradually stepped down the amount of time I spent on caring for my appearance and personal hygiene. I was starting to see how crocodiles, rhinos and various other inhabitants of Africa could be tempted to outsource certain cleaning tasks to willing birds and beetles. In the profusion of experiences, colours, tastes, sounds and to me new rules for how reality works in Africa, it had been all too easy to forget the incredible satisfaction that can be derived from having access to a hot shower every day or to be able to put on clothes that don't smell of *anything*. I don't mind civilized conditions, but I *do* appreciate being reminded that I'm not completely dependent on all the convenience that surrounds me at home.

Still, I started adapting to life in Norway that very evening. Mysteriously, a Norwegian bottle of soda pop appeared in a seldom visited corner of my backpack. When I finally finished it, it must have been one of the most well-travelled soft drinks ever to have fizzed.

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Five hundred kilometres later I was back in Windhoek. In the matter of a few hours I had cleaned my body as well as my clothes, and I had secured a seat on a bus to Cape Town leaving a couple of days later. Now the only thing left for me to do in Namibia was to explore its capital.

A museum would be a good place to begin, I thought, so I made my way to the National Museum. Originally the building had been used as headquarters for the German forces put in Africa to fight on behalf of Otto von Bismarck. This was sort of fitting, as getting through the building without falling asleep was quite the battle.

Maybe it's an extenuating circumstance for a national museum that the city it's located in is barely a century old, and that the nation itself formally hasn't even become a teenager. Still, I felt that for this museum

that was not excuse enough. Apart from some settler carts, old clothes and farming equipment, the whole place was an embarrassing praise of the president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma.

During his thirty years in exile, the man had led the political party SWAPO, previously as a liberation organisation in the struggle against South African control. When Namibia finally achieved independence, Nujoma was the obvious choice for president of the new republic. As was he in the election four years later, and, thanks to a last minute change made to the constitution, once again in the third presidential elections.

I suspected that unless he stepped down soon, another liberation organisation would have to be formed. Another change to the country's constitution was suggested ahead of the fourth elections, but in the autumn of 2004 it turned out that Nujoma instead chose to stay in control by ensuring that one of his own staff members became the next president. Anyway, in the long term we can only hope that someday the museum will offer a more varied display. At least *I* hope so.

Another branch of the National Museum was located nearby and was dedicated to the natural history of Namibia. Only the zoological department was open. In a country with an amazing biological diversity you would expect a fascinating display of the lives and behaviour of animals. But no. The section could only be categorized as "moth-eaten, stuffed animals", and was a depressing sight. All the animals were badly in need of maintenance, and most of the signs next to the animals said that in the year 1900 there were lots of species *x* in Namibia, in 1980 there weren't many of them left, and today they were pretty much all gone.

The National Gallery? No comment.

Giving up on the museums and galleries, I just walked around in the streets instead, marvelling at the ongoing flowering. Jacaranda trees dominated most streets, presenting a purple foliage I had never seen before. As I walked, I took note of the street names, trying to figure out what kind of heroes Namibia had. The streets were all well-kept, but I was a bit surprised to see "Fidel Castro Street", and I was simply astonished by "Robert Mugabe Avenue" and "Göring Straße". My thoughts from the National Museum returned.

A look in the leading local newspaper, Windhoek Observer, confirmed my impression of Nujoma being fully in charge of Namibia, down to the tiniest detail. In a letter to the editor a representative from an opposition party complained about Mister Two-In-One President and Minister of Broadcasting, Sam Nujoma. A few days earlier Sammy had forbidden NBC, the national TV station, to broadcast any foreign TV programs containing elements of sex, violence or anything else that could damage the morals and ethics of Namibians. Scheduled programs of that nature were immediately to be replaced by either programs about Namibian animals or, preferably, about SWAPO's history and fight for Namibia's independence.

The author of the letter didn't criticize Nujoma for stopping trashy TV programs. Her complaint was that the real reason for Nujoma's prohibition had been concealed. "To make NBC a boring channel to watch, will only make people want to buy satellite dishes and channel decoders. This they will have to buy from the only company with a permission to sell such items. And who owns this company? Exactly, that will be SWAPO, Nujoma's own party!", she whined.

The concept "democracy" can be difficult to explain.

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The bus ride to Cape Town would take twenty hours, my ticket said. Granted, there was some distance to cover, but I still thought it a rather pessimistic schedule. I gained more faith in it when after only an hour we made a meal stop. The passengers ate as if they had not seen food since Christmas, and then we continued. After sundown the air conditioning was turned on. We were in for a long and ice-cold night, as is usual in long distance buses in countries where the day temperatures can go really high. Being a seasoned traveller, I had of course put on almost all my clothes in anticipation of the big freeze.

Not only was I bus-smart, I was bus-lucky as well. In the seat lottery I had won big-time, as I shared a double seat with a tiny South African-Indian girl. For all practical purposes I had two seats to relax in. In my excitement about this I was unfortunate enough to spill a large cup of Coke on the poor girl. Fortunately, when her grandmother came over to

bash me for having ruined her grandchild's Sunday best, I managed to put the blame on the bus and its capricious movements.

When the sun returned in the morning, the desert had disappeared. We were in South Africa's Namaqualand, and I recognized several inhabitants of the Cape floral kingdom from my visit to the botanical gardens in Cape Town. After having been surrounded by monotonous desert for so long, it was tempting to spend a few days hiking in these mountains. They seemed to be having a fancy-dress ball, all covered in a wild, exploding flowering of yellow, red, purple and blue spots. Unfortunately all I had time to do was to enjoy the view from the bus.

There was only one thing of importance left to do in Cape Town before I was done with the place. Even before arriving in South Africa I had been uncertain about whether or not I should visit a township. My head was full of arguments both for and against doing it.

A township is what the South African government more neutrally calls "informal settlements", the shanty towns surrounding just about every city in the country. All over Africa slum areas are growing incredibly fast, attracting people from rural regions looking for jobs. Yet a township can under no circumstance be considered an attraction, neither for tourists nor for its inhabitants.

Actually, if I was to believe the white South Africans I discussed the matter with, visiting such a place was more likely to end in a tourist elimination than in a tourist attraction. No one could understand why I wanted to go there. They told me stories about white people who had lost their way and literally ended up in townships. In most cases the lost ones were never again seen or heard from. If the black people's accumulated hate against the white man has a centre, that'll be in the townships. The struggle against apartheid was organized and run from there, and it is there, more than ten years after apartheid was abolished, that the anger of still having to live in unworthy conditions remains strong. The general feeling among the people in the townships is that South Africa's new government has forgotten where it came from.

Even though it's not something you should do on your own, visiting a township does not at all have to be a reckless thing to do. Many more or

less ideal organisations offer safe, guided tours through the settlements. The proceeds from these tours often go directly to those who need it the most, which in itself is a good reason for going. I didn't doubt that visiting the poor people would be the right thing to do for *me*, but I was concerned about how the slum dwellers would feel about it. Would they think it was good that someone was interested in their lives? Or would it bother them to be seen in their poverty?

My nightmare was to visit a township with a group of obese Americans who thoughtlessly would point their expensive cameras at anything and anyone. Maybe they would say "Oh my God! How sad! How terrible!", oblivious to the fact that "the poor bastards" understood every word they said? Merely the thought had been enough to stop me from visiting a township until then.

In the end a visit to the South African National Gallery helped me decide to go. In my own country's national gallery most of the wall space is dedicated to paintings depicting national pride, beautified depictions of Norwegian scenery and glorified portrayals of pioneers, hard workers and religious personalities. Not so in South Africa. To me the whole museum looked like an endless row of desperate criticism of society through themes like poverty, misery, AIDS, violence, civil war, police brutality and pessimism. That's when I realized that if I was ever to even begin to understand what made a nation fill its gallery with stuff like that, there was no way I could avoid visiting a township.

I was picked up from the hostel by Karen. She was a classic, white through and through well-meaning hippie with a flower power minibus. Johanna from Scotland was already in the car, and that was it. We were the whole group going to the township that day. Johanna had no camera, and the questions she asked Karen showed that she too really cared about the impression we would make on the locals. I relaxed and actually started to look forward to the experience.

As we left Cape Town, Karen gave us a short history lecture. While the apartheid policy had been in the making for a long time, she said, it wasn't until after World War II it acquired the shape it then kept until the whole system broke down around 1990. The right to vote was taken away

from both black people and from coloured people, meaning mainly the descendants of Malaysians and Indians brought to South Africa to work for the Europeans. Large parts of the black population, those who weren't "useful" as cheap labour, were interned in a number of homelands, as described earlier. The intention was of course to efficiently keep them under tight control.

In the Cape Town area there were many coloured people, and they had obviously no homeland they could be sent to. The South Africans took advantage of this by increasing the antagonism between the black and the coloured populations. A law was introduced, saying that a black person could only be given a job if there were no coloured person available to do it. So just a few jobs were given to black people, and outside the homelands there was nowhere unemployed black people could legally live. Some jobs still went to the blacks, particularly in the case of tough and dangerous tasks in heavy industry, mining and fisheries. Barracks of a special kind were built to house those workers. Each had room for sixteen men, who had to share one shower, one toilet and a small kitchen.

For various reasons, many blacks didn't want to stay in their appointed homelands. Many of them chose to return to the "white" cities, either because it was easier to hide there, or simply because that was where they had always lived. Lacking places to stay legally, they built their own towns using tin plates, plastic sheets, rocks and branches. They had no access to clean water, firewood or electricity.

Every year the police arrested more than a million people for illegally residing outside their designated homelands. Over and over again the police demolished the townships using bulldozers. A few weeks later the shanty towns would be back in place. There were simply so many poor and desperate black people that the police could not stop them.

Towards the end of the apartheid regime, both to save money and to please USA and Europe, the government suspended the regulations that had prevented the blacks from moving freely around the country. The men, who until then had lived away from their families, brought their wives and children to live with them in the barracks. Instead of sixteen people in each barrack, now up to sixteen *families* shared the facilities.

Clearly this couldn't last. Many moved out of the barracks to build new homes in a township, triggering a tremendous growth of slum areas. Today nobody knows how many people live in townships in South Africa. The infamous Soweto township in Johannesburg is home to two, three or maybe four million people. In the Cape Town region the largest township is Khayelitsha with about a million inhabitants.

The township we were to visit was in Hout Bay, south of Cape Town. Most people there were unemployed, Karen said, so the money we paid for the tour made us popular guests. Besides, no one in the township felt anger towards white people in general, only towards white *South Africans*. Since everyone "knew" that a white South African would never go on a township tour, they also knew that we had to be foreigners. And foreigners were treated well, like honorary guests, Karen claimed. I still felt like an intruder and completely out of place when Karen turned off the highway and took us into the miserable township. My only comfort was that hopefully my money would contribute to improving the situation for the people there.

Hout Bay was South Africa in a nutshell. On the sunny side of the bay a large number of luxurious villas and multi-star hotels could be seen. Below them a marina was full of well-kept leisure boats, some large enough to be classified as small ships. In the shadow of the hill on the other side of the bay there was a different kind of ship, the township Imizamo Yethu. Karin introduced us to Siphiwe Cele, where the "Siphi" part was a click I could never reproduce properly. Siphiwe was too old to work. Instead he coached the African Brothers football team, who lost all their games. He was a Rastaman with thick dreadlocks, and his eyes muttered "Hello, I've just enjoyed some marijuana, peace on us." Actually, he said it with his mouth as well. As some sort of unofficial chieftain of the neighbourhood, he would follow us around to make sure nothing happened to us.

We started by having a look at his living room. It filled his entire house, and also functioned as a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, office and tool shed. He was privileged to have a communal toilet and a water source located right outside his house. Among his most precious belongings was a TV, but I never found out whether he was a chieftain

because he had a TV or if it was the other way around. He got electricity to operate it from a box on the wall. For a few rand he could buy a card with a code he entered into the box to give him electricity for a few days. The exact number of days depended on how many football matches were broadcasted during those days.

Norway was an unknown concept to him, but he knew everything about several Norwegians who had played for Manchester United.

A stroll through the neighbourhood was a mixed experience. People may have been unemployed, but they all seemed to be in activity. Some were doing the laundry, others extended their sheds. A fellow had his head deep inside a car engine, but he looked up and murdered me with his eyes when Siphiwe in a language I don't speak said to him "Oy! There's a tourist here, straighten up your back and greet him politely!"

Some kids took turns stretching their necks around a corner to look at us. They smiled, waved and laughed at Johanna and me when we looked in their direction. I walked over to them. They were busy working. It was sheep head day. Along the street a number of sheep heads were lined up. Old women burned off the wool using glowing hot iron rods. When the sheep heads were sufficiently bald the children cleaved them with large knives and put them on a barbecue-like contraption. A butcher had given them the heads for free, so this was cheap and good food. On the next corner some men brewed beer from corn meal in large oil drums. Not particularly tasty, I suspect, but very cheap and I'm sure drinking it resulted in much temporary happiness.

I felt more than just *slightly* uncomfortable when I saw how little the people there actually owned. My discomfort disappeared when we were taken inside a kindergarten. Like every child should, the children looked happy. They had not yet learned about everything they lacked, so they just ran around laughing and playing. For some reason almost all of them were boys. That's just the way it is, Karen said. I wasn't sure how I could make the day better for them, but pulling out fifty balloons turned out to be a nice try.

My camera was in my daypack, even though I had not planned on using it in the township. But when Karen said it was all right if I wanted

to take some photos in the kindergarten, I brought it out. It was a digital camera where you could see the photo immediately after taking it. The children went wild. The result was a number of photos of wide smiles and a promise to mail them paper copies of the photos as soon as I got home. Such promises are easy to fulfil.

We were also dragged along to a newly opened building that was part church, part library and part educational institution. On Sundays there was a service, and the rest of the week adults could come there to learn various handicrafts. They had yet to become skilled at making anything at all, but they still insisted we should buy their masterpieces. In the library the selection consisted mainly of brochures with information about AIDS and HIV. Unfortunately they didn't seem to have been opened at all.

Before we returned to Cape Town I chatted a little with Sipihiwe about other topics than football. His impression was that most people both in the townships and in the cities were pessimistic about the future. Of course he was glad that the former apartheid regime was gone, but he found that it had only been replaced by a new kind of divided society, a division between those who have and those who haven't, without regards to race or skin colour.

Several years had passed since Imizamo Yethu last saw a visit from a politician of any colour. The people in the township felt they had been forgotten. But Sipihiwe understood what had happened. More or less overnight, a large number of people had gone from being the radical opposition to suddenly being in power, for the first time ever. It was almost too good to be true, so "of course" they would take advantage of the situation, enriching themselves and forgetting about everyone else. After so many years of suppression it seemed unbelievable that the new situation could last. Sipihiwe just wished that soon someone would realize the responsibilities they had been given.

After the suspension of the strict apartheid travel regulations, the population growth in the slum areas led to increased violence, crime and starvation as well, Sipihiwe said. Yet he thought that the main problem was alcohol abuse and all its side effects. I couldn't help but ask whether smoking dagga was not a problem too? "No, not at all. It is our culture, no

one can take that away from us", he replied. Karen agreed intensely. I wasn't convinced. The cannabis plant is not native to southern Africa, it must be cultivated by people to thrive in the region. The custom of smoking marijuana came to that part of Africa fairly recently, brought either by Arab traders or by Europeans returning from Asia. To those alive today, dagga has of course "always" been there, but it doesn't have ancient roots in the area.

I didn't push the matter any further. Instead I thanked them for having me and told them that it had been a fantastic day. This was not entirely true. I now had even more questions and mixed feelings about it all than I did before the visit. At least I felt that I had learned something about what went on in South Africa. That can never hurt.

Half an hour later I was in a restaurant at the Waterfront shopping mall in downtown Cape Town. There I could pick from cuisines from all over the world. I couldn't eat much. It simply didn't feel right.

When I returned to the hostel it had been possessed by a French school class, apparently from a special institution for children with abnormally powerful vocal chords. The location of my room, next to the shared bathrooms, was no longer ideal. A long evening with the hallway outside full of jet-lagged French kids waiting in line to shower, singing both in and out of the shower, was closely followed by a morning with the hallway outside full of singing and yelling French brats.

So I got up unusually early on my last day in Africa. It was a Sunday, and I spent it walking through a city with few people and no cars in it. Cape Town's main roles are as a financial centre and a tourist destination. When the banks are closed and the tourists are still asleep, it's a pretty dead place.

I walked through Bo-Kaap, formerly called the Malay Quarter for all its Arab and Asian elements. There I found richly coloured mosque walls with minarets inside and veiled women outside them. To me this was yet another unexpected side to Africa, a continent where the series of surprises simply refused to end.

Down by the railway station the old city fortress lay dormant. In its 350 years it had never been challenged by an enemy. It was a quiet place, but the peace ended right outside the walls. A large colony of street kids had formed on the lawn there, using it as a base for bathing in the fortress moat and performing pickpocketing skills of the highest class on selected passers-by.

The fortress was still military ground, and after a while a group of soldiers came marching to expel the young occupants. The children knew how to handle the situation. The oldest girls, teenagers, went to the water and undressed. Naked they washed themselves and their clothes. The soldiers enjoyed the view for a while, and then just walked away. The children cheered and continued sniffing glue from their plastic bags early on a Sunday morning, well on their way to a correspondingly early death.

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Packing went quickly after I donated my hiking boots, medicines and what I had left of clean and whole clothes. The hostel would pass them on to organizations helping poor people in and around Cape Town. To bring all your stuff home and put it away into already packed drawers and closets makes no sense when you're leaving a place like Cape Town.

Delighted about having gotten through southern Africa without being robbed, I decided to treat myself to a taxi ride to the airport. The driver, Michael, asked me what I thought about his country. I answered honestly that I had been pleased to see many beautiful and impressive natural sights, but that I also was a bit put off by the social problems in the country. Abolishing apartheid had for a large part of the population not led to much improvement in their everyday lives, the way I saw it.

Michael agreed partially, but told me his story to show me that I might be judging things too quickly. Until 1992 he had worked for a family business. He would not tell me exactly what the business was, so maybe it was something you couldn't do without taking advantage of others a bit more than you should. Anyway, until the old regime fell, the business had been good, but with the apartheid government gone, the revenues quickly crumbled.

The company went bankrupt. Michael became depressed and started drinking too much. In rapid succession he lost his job, his house and his family. Soon he was a beggar on the streets of Cape Town. Never had he heard of something as absurd as a white beggar, until suddenly he was one himself. To him the world had become a true hell. He found himself at the very back of the line for any kind of help, and it cost him many a beating and much abuse to learn how to survive in his new life.

For several years he lived in parks and alleys, until one day he got the chance to work again. A relative who felt bad for him arranged a part-time job as a stevedore at the airport. Michael pulled himself together and managed to keep the job. Slowly he saved enough to buy a car, and he put money in the right pockets to get him a permit to work as a taxi driver. He figured it was the natural thing to do. After all, few people knew the streets of Cape Town better than him.

Michael had been driving the taxi for two years now, while still working many hours a week lifting luggage at the airport. He had bought a small apartment with an ocean view, where he lived with his girlfriend. The future looked good, and if *he* could pull himself out of the misery he had been in, well, then South Africa should be able to do the same.

"I really hope you're right", I said, and there and then I even thought it possible for the first time since I came to Africa. Maybe it was because he sounded so convincing, or maybe it was because I was going home, making South Africa none of my business again.

At the airport I weighed myself. The luggage scale revealed that some ten percent of me had chosen to stay in Africa. The eight kilograms that had disappeared were presumably mainly fat, sweat and to a certain extent tears and vomit. I had certainly not left my heart behind. To me, Africa was still very much a stranger.



Three African landscapes

Sand in Sossusvlei (Namibia), me in Aus (Namibia), Mbhektwa on Sibebe (Swaziland)

One More Thing...

This is a message to those of you who read the book without buying it.

Doing that is perfectly okay, and I thank you for it. I wanted people to read my book, so I made it available as a free download on the Internet, and I placed paper copies of it in book exchanges at various hostels and backpacker centrals so that people could pick it up, read it and pass it on to other travellers.

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