

# Africa on Four Toilet Rolls

## Encounter Overland "Africa A-Z"

October 1989 - March 1990

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Note: This is an edited version of the original manuscript with some personal stories and comments removed. Only first names of people are used throughout. Photographs have been added, mostly of campsites, the truck and the group.

## PROLOGUE

First, let me explain the title of this little epistle. I did, in fact, make it all the way through Africa, 22 weeks, without having to buy any extra rolls of toilet paper. The four excellent quality ones that I brought with me from Australia did me well. I'm not claiming any kind of record or anything like that, but I did notice other people going through seemingly masses of the stuff. Also, in fairness, I did always take advantage of places which supplied the stuff, like good hotels and restaurants in Niamey, Kampala and Harare, and even camping grounds in Botswana. But on the other hand, I did drop about a third of a roll down the pit toilet at Epulu in Zaire and I still had a third of a roll left over when I left the continent. So I think my claim to four rolls is reasonable. Besides, it's a catchy title for a book and an obvious dig at "Africa on a Shoestring", that wonderful travellers handbook full of many useful facts and a good deal of fiction as well. So, having set the appropriate tone for my account of my 22 week African expedition, let me begin back at the beginning.

The desire to travel to Africa had been in me for many years before I seriously planned this trip. I can recall perusing brochures from Encounter Overland at least 2 years earlier but a 5 month expedition incorporating such diverse places as the Sahara, Kilimanjaro and Victoria Falls seemed at best a remote possibility. I was caught up in the business of working, building houses and all the usual stuff that goes with a yuppie lifestyle. The turmoil that I went through during mid 1989 changed all that and by late August I just had to have a holiday. I initially tried to book a shorter 6 week Safari South but available dates didn't fit and I was eager to get going as soon as possible.

When Christine at Sundowners travel suggested the 22 week "Africa A to Z", I was stunned. Was this a serious possibility? Why couldn't I do this? It was time to stop wishing I could do things and to actually do them. I booked the trip on September 2nd, just 5 weeks from "blast off" from London, and only 4 weeks from my departure from Australia. Most people who are going on a 22 week holiday would plan it for months ahead, if not years! But I was committed and the feverish preparations began.

First I had to get a new passport, the old one not having quite enough pages for the numerous countries (17 actually) that I would be visiting. Eight countries would require full page visas and other countries not only stamp your passport at the entrance and exit, but also at major towns along the way. A French Visa had to be obtained in Melbourne so all this required time. While getting passport photos, I of course also obtained about 30 extras for use along the way in obtaining the various visas.

Lots of things needed to be bought. While I had done plenty of camping in my early days, I was still basically unequipped for such an adventure. I needed to get a good sleeping bag, daypack, boots and warm gear for Kilimanjaro and a variety of other odds and ends. A big cheap but hopefully durable bag was obtained - it gradually fell apart in the last six or so weeks of the trip and "just" made it home with the help of string and chewing gum. I also decided it was time to invest in a really good camera and chose a Nikon F-801 SLR with both 35-70mm and 70-210mm zoom lenses. This, together with a carry bag and a bundle of film, was purchased duty free. I also got the best possible maps (Michelin 1:4,000,000) and the good old "Africa on a Shoestring", a new edition of which had just been released.

Next were vaccinations and medical supplies. Comments from friends who had been to Africa combined with the comments in the health section of "Africa on a Shoestring" made me very cautious and conservative with regard to health matters. The Travellers Vaccination Clinic in

Melbourne was excellent both in administering the relevant vaccinations (Tetanus, Typhoid, Meningitis, Hepatitis A, Polio, Cholera - stamp only, the vaccine didn't work back then) and supplying a variety of medications. Fortunately I never needed to use any of these. I had already obtained a few other supplies from a Doctor friend - some syringes (if anyone wants to give you a vaccination, to avoid AIDS or Hepatitis B, always use your own) and Gatrolyte, the wonderful sachets of salt and glucose which when dissolved in water are so effective at keeping you alive when you get "the runs". Yellow Fever vaccination was via the Department of Health. And while malaria pills are supplied on the trip, I also took my own as the "once a week" Lariam were recommended over the "once a day" Paludrine and "twice a week" Chloroquine. In the end, I took the supplied ones until the end of 1989 and used the Lariam thereafter, since some authorities claim you shouldn't take Lariam for more than 3 months.

So after a busy four weeks, including nearly a week away in Sydney, I was organised and ready to leave. The British Airways flight to London was only the second or third to use the new Boeing 747-400 and thus non-stop Singapore to London, overflying Moscow. Through some local contacts, I secured a window seat upstairs, unquestionably the best place on the aircraft - good view, no wings in the way, lots of leg room and close to the cockpit for the odd visit!

I arrived at Heathrow at 6.30 on Monday morning, 5 days before the trip began. By 7.45 I was on the Underground heading for Earls Court where the station is handy to the accommodation that was booked for me and to the Encounter Overland office where the pre-departure meeting would be held and from where the trip would depart. After checking in at Hunter Lodge, I also checked in at the Encounter Overland office and got the form for an Algerian visa. I walked to the Algerian Embassy, depositing form and passport then basically did a walking tour taking in Harrods, Hyde Park, "the" Palace, St James Park, Trafalgar Square, Downing Street, Westminster Abbey, Houses of Parliament, Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus, eventually taking the Underground back to Earls Court by late afternoon.

Understandably, I was awake bright and early on Tuesday morning and partook of the rather dubious breakfast available at Hunter Lodge. After visiting Encounter Overland again to finalise checking of passport, vaccination certificate, insurance etc., I was off again into the city using the Underground to Covent Gardens. This day's walking tour took in Covent Gardens, the National Portrait Gallery, Cabinet War Rooms and the Tate Gallery. The weather hadn't improved either, but at least it wasn't raining. Dinner was at a local cafe.

Wednesday began similarly then I walked to the Algerian Embassy for their 9.30 opening time but the man hadn't signed the visa and wasn't there so they suggested I come back the next day. With my sights on eastern London I took the Underground from Gloucester Road to Tower Hill and then walked around the Tower Bridge and back to St Paul's Cathedral where I climbed to the very top - great view! I had previously been to the Tower of London so gave that a miss. In the afternoon I took the Underground to Baker Street and went to Madame Tussauds and the Planetarium before Undergrounding it again back to South Kensington and over 2 hours at the Science Museum which closed at 6 pm. The busy day was finished off by the 30 minute walk back to Earls Court, the purchasing of some fish and chips and bed by 9 pm.

On Thursday I met two quiet girls at breakfast, obviously Kiwis (strong South Island accents) and we soon started asking all those traveller type questions: Where are you from? Where are you going? We soon figured out that we were all going on the same EO trip. Of course I was to meet the majority of the group later that day but it was nevertheless interesting to make contact with some of these strangers who I'd be "living with" for the next fifteen weeks. After breakfast I went to get my Passport from the Algerian Embassy then went into Westminster on the Underground

to go for a boat ride up the Thames to Kew Gardens. I spent about three hours walking around the gardens, which are really lovely. After scones and tea, I returned back to Westminster on the boat, during which time the weather turned really awful - drizzle and wind and cold. I got to Westminster just after five o'clock and proceeded straight to Earls Court and to the EO office for the pre-departure meeting, scheduled for six o'clock.

I thought the group was rather quiet, the atmosphere a little tense, but I guess people were just going to take time to get to know one another. The drivers, both Mick and Roscoe, were as you'd expect - outgoing, friendly types. Warren, the operations manager, spoke at length on various topics, including health, the Algerian "fly in" for the British passport holders, other changes to the route etc. Of course everyone was surprised at this American guy who turned up in a suit - well done George, you really created a good first impression! I talked a bit to Steve from Luton, and Ann from Oxford, both being very friendly. I recall trying to talk with Gert the Swede, but he was finding the language difficult - he really did develop his English enormously during the trip. As people started to leave I tried to get a few of them together for a meal (since I had to eat) and eventually George, Dale, Ann and myself went and ate at the local Italian takeaway. Ann had to scurry back to Oxford on the train and the others seemed tired so when it got to 10.30, nobody wanted to rage any more.

My final day in London left me a little time to sightsee, which I did by walking to the Museum of Natural History and the Geological Museum, where I spent over four hours - great place. Prior to that I had done my laundry at the local laundromat and had been to EO to check out their bulletin on malaria pills (still trying to decide whether to take theirs or mine). Later in the day I did some last minute shopping and picked up my developed photographs which fortunately confirmed the new camera to be working "just fine".

I had planned for an early night with a 7 am scheduled arrival at EO on Saturday morning so I went to bed at eight o'clock. I was awoken at twenty past ten by a knock on the door from Dale, the American girl. She said we had to at least have "one last drink" in London so I dressed and went and had a drink at a local bar, mostly full of loud and drunk New Zealanders (as most local bars in Earls Court seem to be). I didn't mind - Dale was a lovely girl and I was pleased to be getting to know her, with the result that it seemed obvious we should be tent and cooking partners on the trip. Well it nearly worked out that way, but in any case, Dale and I did become close friends and spent a great deal of time together all the way through to Dar es Salaam.

So next morning dawned fine and dreary, Saturday October 7th, Day One of the great adventure. I was up at 6.15 and departed with Dale and George at seven o'clock for the short walk to the EO office. They must have some really unpunctual expedition members at times because it immediately became apparent that we really didn't need to be there until eight but they told us the earlier time "just to be sure". Thus we stood around for a while, then around eight, loaded our stuff into the truck trailer and took a tentative look inside the back which was to be my home for much of the next 22 weeks. The bright orange and blue truck looked clean and new, having just been fully reconditioned. There is a great advantage in doing a trip out of London in that you get a fresh vehicle, well stocked with provisions. Northbound trips, on the other hand, often limp back into London with the truck virtually falling apart!

Breakfast was supplied in the small cafe next door and we all departed for Dover at nine o'clock. We travelled in a normal Bus, the truck not being registered to carry passengers in England. Mick and Russell, the "visa wallah" who was accompanying us into France to get our Niger visas in Paris, were the only ones in the truck. We took a 40 minute stop at the Farthing Corner roadside stop



for eats and drinks and then continued to Dover. Mick was pulled over for a routine truck check by the police and we had to wait at the Dover Ferry Terminal for nearly an hour for him to catch up.



At one o'clock we were off to Immigration - everyone off the bus and back on again, then to line up to get on the ferry. At this stage we all transferred from the bus to the truck and drove onto the ferry, piled off again and up to the deck to sit and become bored. The ferry sailed sort of unexpectedly and I rushed out the back with a few others to grab a shot of the receding white cliffs of Dover. Aboard the ferry I changed some Pounds into Francs. The channel crossing took just over an hour and we were soon driving off the ferry into France amidst revolting drizzly weather that was to stick with us for quite a few days.

## FRANCE & SPAIN - Settling In

So we were away, all crowded in the back of the truck due to the extra person (Russell) and the fact that Mick's paraphernalia was spread throughout the cab. There were 19 official passengers, and the truck can hold up to 20 passengers, 18 in the back and 2 up front with the driver. EO will book a trip fully but fortunately this was the only occasion that we had that number, as it is pretty cramped. In this case it was especially cramped since we had to fit all 19 of us in the 18 seats in the back. The revolting rainy weather didn't help - it meant we had to have the back flap down and we thus felt somewhat claustrophobic. The cold weather also meant the vinyl windows were fogging up so we could see very little of the outside world.

There was no immigration check coming into France (gee, I could have saved all that trouble and money getting a French Visa!) so we just pressed on largely bypassing Calais and picking up the main road south towards Rouen. There may have been a motorway also but we generally avoided those since the truck isn't fast enough to get any great advantage from them, and besides, they almost all charge a toll. Thus we almost always followed the "original" main highways, often running parallel with the new motorways.

It was surprising that EO don't have any "well known" camping grounds in France, and instead we just pressed on until Mick saw a sign to a camping ground and then followed it. This took us to a campsite about 3 km off the main road about 40 km south of Calais. The weather was atrocious - cold, wet and windy, and the campsite was basic - in other words, no hot showers.

We stopped at four o'clock and proceeded to learn about putting up the cook tent, which always happens first, especially if it's raining, since you can then unload the baggage into it and keep it more or less dry. This involved deciding on the trailer packers, the two people who would unload and load the trailer twice a day for the rest of the trip, but to compensate, they never have to cook. The volunteers were Urs, the Swiss guy and Ian, the Australian doctor. The baggage has to come out of the trailer, not only so we can get our essentials (sleeping bag and toothbrush!) but also because the tents are in the bottom of the trailer under the baggage. The cook tent is a big vinyl contraption that lives in a bag in the back compartment of the trailer. It sits on an aluminium framework that is first constructed from the poles, which are strapped to the side of the truck, and joiners, which are in a bag in the back of the trailer. It always amused me that even towards the end of the trip there were some members of the group that would try to put the framework together in the wrong way - I won't mention names!

We then proceeded to learn how to pitch our own tents and to take them down again. Each tent has three poles - two uprights and a top rung, which sit in a tray compartment under the floor of the truck and are accessible through a small door at the back. After heavy braking they tend to disappear forward which was a source of constant annoyance throughout the trip. We also learned about beds - they are canvas with quarter inch rods along the sides with attachments for spring loaded legs. The beds are stored behind the truck seats and the legs in a compartment in the trailer. The beds so constructed were very comfortable and I never had any difficulty sleeping, although they were a touch short for some people. The final components of the setup included the cook tables which were bolted to the front of the truck passenger compartment, the lights - fluors which plug into the truck's battery system, and a set of camp stools stored in the back of the trailer. The gas cooker, pots and pans, plates, cutlery and food all live in the passenger compartment, either in the central set of drawers or under seats.

At this point, the cooks for this night, and their helpers, had to be chosen. Susan and Peter, volunteered, and the two New Zealand nurses, Megan and Jeanette were to help. All but the

cooks then had to pitch tents, erect beds and sort out luggage so that the trailer could be repacked. This involved getting into pairs, and Dale immediately accepted my offer to share. I didn't notice what other pairings had formed in that instant but was to find out within a few days that at least one of them wasn't going to work! Dale also learned that some of her baggage had been left behind in London. She had about three small bags rather than one big one and apparently someone thought it was hand luggage and didn't put it in the trailer, with the result that it was left in the EO office. Dale wasn't too concerned, as Mick said he'd make sure it was sent ahead for us to pick up somewhere soon. I gave or loaned her a few essentials like a toothbrush (of course I had a spare!) and toothpaste, so all was well. Mick loaned her his sleeping bag since he had enough blankets to survive, and with enough clothes to get by, all was under control.

Dinner that night was a typical vegetable and mincemeat mixture. People were generally subdued, perhaps due to the rotten weather, which was certainly a bit depressing. After dinner most of us who needed a Niger Visa filled out the forms and paid the estimated costs to Russell who would leave us next morning to travel by train to Paris with all our forms, passports and money, meeting up with us again in southern France. Most people were pretty tired and certainly I was in bed pretty early although I think Dale and I talked for quite a while. I remember it was terribly windy and the tent flapped away all night, although I had no trouble sleeping.

Sunday morning dawned very windy and quite cold, overcast and threatening but not actually raining. We awoke at a reasonably sane 7 am and immediately got into our morning routine - cooks cooking, the rest of us packing everything away. The trailer packers had the trailer unpacked onto the tarp and repacked about an hour later - we would get more efficient and this time would decrease to about 15 minutes! After a breakfast of mushroom omelette and the usual tea and coffee, we packed the cooking gear and then the cook tent. We finally got away at 8.50 am - not bad for the first morning but subsequently we would get it down to a standard 90 minutes from wakeup to departure.

It was drizzling and bleak as we made our way back to the main road and headed south to the small town of Boulogne-sur-Mer where we stopped for 45 minutes. Megan and Jeanette did shopping, others bought snacks at the roadhouse, and Mick went looking for a photocopier for some passenger lists. The cooks always shopped for their own food supplies and were responsible for dinner, breakfast and lunch. Then the cycle moved on to the next cook pair who had helped the night before. Thus, everyone, except the trailer packers, got to cook roughly every 8 days.

I walked right through the town and actually took the chance to phone home - French phone boxes have a phone number so it's easy to quickly call Australia for FF5 (about A\$1) and get them to call back. I was able to maintain almost daily contact with Australia until we reached Africa and then it kind of deteriorated to about once a month!



Once going again, we immediately drove to the railway station to drop off Russell, then carried on with just a short lunchbreak at midday. This was just on the side of the road and we quickly scoffed down some sandwiches since it was threatening to (and did) rain. About four o'clock Mick started looking for campsites, by this time about 40 km south of Rouen. The first one we found was a few kilometres off the road down some narrow country lanes but turned out to be closed. We continued back to the main road and found another lovely camping ground right on the main road in a small village. The site was neat and tidy and had hot showers in a quite modern amenities block.

We arrived at 5 pm and you guessed it - it was raining. To cap that off, Mick drove onto the grass and the truck immediately got bogged, so soft was the ground after this abominable weather. We quickly learned about getting the trailer off, which involves about 4 people standing on the back of it to counter balance it so as it can be lifted off the towing hook. Without the trailer and with the help of a sand mat, the truck easily reversed back out onto the solid sealed road around the campsite. The truck would stay there for the night and we pitched tents on the grass. After a dinner of spaghetti and vegetables, some of us wandered into town looking for a small bar but alas, it was closed. It was still raining and somewhat miserable, so most of us got to bed fairly early.





Our normal wakeup time was to be 5.30 am but we were aiming at 6 am on this cold and misty Monday morning. I was one of the first up at 6.10 and immediately took a lovely hot shower to get the circulation going. Breakfast was a typical one - porridge, bread and jam. We got away at 8.15 after a pretty leisurely start.

We would stock the bar today, so Noel and Jenny volunteered to run it, with Richard's assistance. Richard always helped with the bar since he was its biggest customer! We all contributed 40 Francs (US\$5) to the "float" and thereafter we noted down what we drank and we periodically paid for that, usually just before coming into a town where the bar could be restocked. The bar ran soft drinks (usually Coke and Fanta), beer and where we could get it, wine.

We stopped at a roadside cafe for morning coffee for about half an hour, just before passing through Alençon, then just before midday we went through the Le Mans area, actually driving down the long straight of the famous 24 hour racing circuit. Lunch of sandwiches followed - we usually managed lunch in about 40 minutes, although in Africa it sometimes stretched while we collected firewood. As we had been heading south, the weather was improving and it was now reasonably fine and warm. The day's shopping, both food and bar, was done at a big supermarket in Tours, where we stopped for an hour.



By five o'clock we were looking for a campsite. There was one in the village of Châtellerault but it was closed. The next town was Beaumont and we followed signs for about 5 km east of the town to a lovely camping ground on a lake. The facilities were quite good - hot showers, an opportunity to do some laundry, even a public phone. The only difficulty was that the ground was too hard and pitching tents was difficult, but at least that indicated that it hadn't been raining much here! I had a reasonable bottle of cheap (FF14 - about A\$3) Loire white wine with dinner. Jean-Paul and Ann were the cooks and we had chicken and Mexican rice followed by Crepe Suzette. Mick had phoned London since he was unhappy with the gearbox - it was jumping out of gear when going downhill and he had decided to change it. He had it pretty well removed by dinner time, the replacement being brought from the workshop by car and the midnight Dover to Calais ferry. After dinner there was much chatting and joke telling. The group was now more relaxed, the weather had improved, and due to the gearbox replacement, we didn't even need to get up early in the morning! Thus, most didn't get to bed until well after ten o'clock.

I was awoken at 6.30 next morning by the arrival of the guys from London with the gearbox. They had driven all night, but it does give you some idea of the relative speed of the truck which had taken two and a half days to do what they had done overnight! Certainly the truck was slow on the highways, maximum about 80 km/h, and terribly slow up hills, but this would not be a problem once in Africa. We had a leisurely start as the guys fitted the new gearbox and had a breakfast of grapefruit followed by French Bread. Still not being ready to depart at 9 am, I called Australia for a chat. Russell had also arrived, having called London and discovered where we were staying, he had caught the train to Beaumont and managed to get to the camping ground. Thus we got our passports back, complete with Niger visas and some change as well. Russell would of course return to London with the mechanics from the workshop.

We finally got away just before eleven, soon bypassing Poitiers and lunching near Tourriers. I was travelling in the cab this day and we aimed to get past Bordeaux if possible, but also needed to stop somewhere at a bank. We entered the surrounds of the large city of Bordeaux at about 3.30 in the afternoon, and tried to navigate into the city to find a bank. Jean-Paul rang the buzzer to

stop us and inform us that French banks close at 4 pm so we had better go to this one that he had spied so we parked somewhat illegally and all piled into the bank, much to the horror of the bank staff! We had all been processed by 4.30, and in retrospect, the efficiency of the bank was very reasonable compared with what we would see in Africa. I was not only converting my remaining pounds into Francs but also a reasonable quantity of US dollar Travellers Cheques into Francs, since French Francs are the preferred currency in much of west and central Africa. In fact you can use French Francs as legal tender in Niger, Cameroun and C.A.R., without the need to even convert to local currency.

Leaving Bordeaux at that time of day was horrendous and we had agreed to stop somewhere for a meal rather than cook. A roadhouse was located about an hour later and we had a most boring non-French meal, much as you would find at a roadhouse in most countries. We got away about seven o'clock and it being dark, Mick wanted to locate a campsite as soon as possible. We found a picnic area in a forest reserve just south of the small village of Berlin Beliet, and quickly set up camp there. People read and wrote, the American guys walked into the village looking for action and actually got a lift back from some locals some time later, and I went for a walk into the forest and found a lovely flowing river. It was a cold clear night and I was warm in bed by ten o'clock since we would be up at six.

I was first awake in the morning right on six - and I didn't have an alarm clock. I proceeded to setup the lights (it was still dark), tables and cooker. We hadn't bothered putting up the cook tent. Dale and I were helping Gert and Gerd cook - porridge of course. Gert had a thermometer and informed us it was 3°C. Many were complaining of being cold in bed which made me feel satisfied with my choice of sleeping bag since I was certainly very comfortable. We got away at 7.45 am, our earliest yet, perhaps helped by the fact that we didn't need to pack up the cook tent.

It was cold and clear but soon warmed into a lovely sunny day as we headed south to the town of Bayonne. Here we parked and Dale and I proceeded to do some shopping since we would be cooking that night. We wandered the narrow streets of this delightful French town, purchasing vegetables, eggs, mince, bacon and bread from various small shops. Thankfully Dale manages a bit of French and at least the butcher seemed to manage a bit of English. On the way back to the truck I got some postcards as I attempted to dispose of the last of my French coins. We weren't sure if the Niger/Cameroun/C.A.R. countries would take coins so I thought it best to get rid of most.

We left Bayonne at 11.30, got to the Spanish border just 45 minutes later and were through in 12 minutes. Exiting France was a non-event and into Spain, we Australian's and New Zealanders had to get a visitors pass, but this was just a stamp in the passport and cost nothing. Once through the border we stopped for just on 30 minutes at a bank to change some money into Spanish Pesetas. We then climbed into the coastal mountains that are effectively part of the Pyrennes Mountains and which offer good views of the coastline. Beyond San Sebastian we stopped for fuel and soon after we eventually stopped for a very late 45 minute lunch. It's a long slow climb through the Pyrénées and up onto the plateau on which much of inland Spain sits. We stopped for the night at a camping ground on the outskirts of the town of Vitoria.

Mick gave us a quick tour of the truck after we stopped, since it was the first real chance he had had, what with bad weather, gearbox problems or darkness. The truck (Q124MPP), we were told, is called Merv. Needless to say we all became quite attached to Merv by the end of the trip even though he had a few ills along the way. Merv is an ex-army Bedford, six cylinder diesel, 330 cubic inches, 5 gears plus high and low range. He has four wheel drive but the front drive shaft was only attached when we expected to need it and that wasn't for quite a few weeks and well into the

Sahara. It takes about 5 mph off the cruising speed so it's worth detaching. While we had already learned how slow Merv can be on the highway and how he hates hills, we were yet to witness his amazing abilities in rough, boggy or sandy terrain. Other than the goodies we had already used, we soon discovered all kinds of other stuff stowed all over Merv. There were shovels and a pick for the rubbish man, axes and a saw for the firewood collectors, a big cooking grate for the fire, plus the oven which we would learn how to use later. Then there are the two fuel tanks, holding about 140 gallons of diesel, a water tank holding about 150 litres, plus five jerry cans for water, 20 litres each. All water was treated with a "pinch" of chloramine-T and ensured that no-one developed any nasty diseases from the water. EO's hygiene procedures were all superb and made some others we saw along the way look pretty rough and ready.

Merv's travelling partner is BT the trailer, named after Sarah, a trainee in the EO workshop who had BTs. The trailer itself weighs a couple of tonnes when loaded and can be a bit of a handful. It makes it especially difficult to do a U-turn and at various times we wished the bloody trailer wasn't there. No other overland companies tow a trailer but the extra room that we get in the truck makes it well worth the hassles. As well as carrying a couple of the water jerry cans, the trailer also had two extra gas bottles for cooking in addition to the one stored in the passenger compartment with the gas cooker. Of course we tried to use firewood wherever possible. The trailer also holds the majority of the spare parts for the truck which are very heavy. After many years of experience, EO know exactly what is likely to fail on these trucks and thus exactly what spares to carry. They can rebuild an engine or a gearbox on the roadside if necessary!

After setting up, Dale and I proceeded to cook a dinner of pasta, mince and vegetables. After dinner I called home from the phone box at the nearby roadhouse, but this time I had to pay for the call since Spanish phone boxes don't have a phone number! Dale and I slept in the cook tent, of course, and I was asleep early, aiming to grab a hot shower in the morning. Most others had done so that evening but I missed out since I was cooking.

We were planned to awake at 6 am on this Thursday, but I arose at 5.30 hoping for a shower and was most disappointed to discover there was no water! It became commonplace to find the water being turned on at only certain times of the day. although I would not have expected it in Spain. I must say that Spain overall didn't impress me - it is not what you would expect of a "first world" country, and for the most part is pretty poor and grotty. It's a wonder they let them into the EEC!

The unavailability of the showers gave me a chance to make a start on breakfast and I proceeded to pre-cook fried eggs and bacon so I could serve them up as people were ready. We got away on schedule at 7.30 am on a cold but clear morning which would develop into a hot and sunny day. Enroute we discussed the need for a cassette player and agreed on roughly what was required. Jean-Paul and Richard would purchase it in Ceuta, the duty free port in Spanish North Africa, and we each contributed US\$10 or the equivalent in Francs or Pesetas. A 30 minute coffee stop at a roadside cafe broke up the long morning's drive which included many long slow hills, and after a quick 30 minute lunch just north of Villarejo, we continued on through Madrid. The passage through Spain's capital is painless since it is all freeways and you don't really get to see the city at all.

We had not shopped today so at around three o'clock and south of Madrid Mick tried to find some shops in a village just off the road but alas it was siesta time and everything was closed. Tonight's dinner, for which Noel and Jenny were responsible, would just have to make do with what was on the truck already. A little further on we stopped at a roadhouse for some drinks, but no food. This part of Spain is very barren and dry with relatively little population and it was clear we weren't going to find a campsite. Thus, at about 5 pm and 120 km south of Madrid, Mick just



drove off the dual carriageway highway onto a farm track, over the top of a big hill, and we camped out of sight of the road on a rocky slope - our first "rough" camp.



Dale had suggested to me that we should swap tent partners with Ann and George. The problem was that Ann was getting a hard time from George but I wasn't inclined to share with George. Realising that there were an odd number of people, someone else had to be alone and I soon figured out that this was Gert, the "oh so quiet" Swede. He readily agreed to me sharing his tent - after all it can be a real bind putting up a tent on your own (although I didn't mind it at all later in the trip). So Gert and I pitched our tent, with a little difficulty due to the rocky ground. Ann and Dale messed around for ages but eventually got their tent up. George was all alone and took even longer to get his tent up, being rather pissed off at not having a tent partner any more.

After setting up, I climbed the nearby hill for a photograph and then washed my hair in the bucket - most people had managed a shower the night before so I was feeling grotty - nothing compared to what we would feel later in the trip of course! Dinner was mostly out of tins but was good, and then Dale, Jean-Paul and myself walked down to some nearby fires where the farmer was burning off old wheat stubble. It was a lovely night, not much cloud and a light breeze, which would stop it being so cold. I was in bed by an early 9 pm.

Friday the 13th dawned fine and mild! We got away pretty much on time at 7.30 after a 6 am awakening. A one hour shopping stop was made in a small town 230 km south of Madrid and I tried to find some stamps but didn't succeed. It seems stamps are sold by the Tobacconist but he wasn't open. I eventually got the stamps (from a Tobacconist) in Ceuta. We continued into mountainous country around Bailén and stopped for lunch about 45 km south thereof. There were some very long, steep and slow hills from there through to the large town of Granada where we promptly got stuck in a traffic jam. From there it is mostly a long downhill run to the coast at Málaga. We stopped a little before there for a 30 minute drink and icecream break at a roadside cafe. It was about 6 pm as we hit the Spanish Riviera and proceed westwards along the coast through almost continuous towns and associated traffic. Mick was keen to get as close as possible

to Gibraltar that night so continued into the dark, finally stopping at 7.30 pm at a quite reasonable camping ground at San Pedro.

Here we got hot showers, and I phoned home from a public phone, getting them to call me back on the phone in the camping ground office. At about this time, the heavens opened and we were hit by a drenching thunderstorm. When I returned to the cook tent for dinner, it was awash and everyone was standing in several inches of water running through the tent. Our sleeping tents were still dry though - they always coped well with even the heaviest downpours! Thunderstorms and heavy rain continued through the night after I had gone to bed just prior to midnight.

Fortunately it was dry and reasonably warm when we awoke next morning aiming for a seven o'clock departure. We would have gotten away on time but George was missing, apparently having a long session in the toilets! We eventually left 20 minutes late and headed westward around the coast, past Gibraltar and to the port town of Algeciras. After avoiding the touts that attempt to sell ferry tickets on the street, Mick parked and went looking for real tickets in the ferry terminal. He returned about 15 minutes later with tickets duly purchased for the 10.30 ferry, so we had more than an hour to kill. I spent the time walking the streets looking for stamps, but despite not finding any, it was interesting to look around this quite pleasant seaside town.



We gathered in the ferry terminal at about 9.30 and moved through into the departure area where we could see the vessel, the Bahia de Malaga, and watched Mick driving the truck aboard. We then boarded ourselves and she finally sailed. The views of the Rock of Gibraltar were good although the weather was dull and drizzly. The crossing was reasonably rough and a few people felt a bit off colour. Gradually the coast of Africa became clear and we sailed into the port of Ceuta, berthing after a 1h13m crossing. Within a few minutes we were disembarking and at last, after weeks of preparations and over seven days "on the road", we were on the African continent!

## MOROCCO - Markets and Mountains

### Facts:

Nights in Country: 11.

Distance Travelled: 1956 km.

Morocco is one of the wealthier countries in Africa and has always been a trader, as is the style of the Berber people. They will sell you anything and indeed the whole country has been described as a high pressure sales zone. Geographically the country is full of contrasts - temperate Mediterranean coastline, forested areas, the arid and rocky Atlas Mountains, the snow capped peaks of the High Atlas, and the edges of the Sahara in the far south. The cities are bustling, crowded and very Arabic. The roads are all excellent, and generally the infra-structure and economy are sound.

Population: 22 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 110.

Main Exports: Phosphate (30% of GNP).

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$670.

Currency: 1 Dirham = 12 US cents, stable, no black market.

Languages: French, Arabic, Berber, some Spanish.

Independence: 1956 from France.

Government: Monarchy has much power, token democracy, right wing.

Climate: Varies enormously from Mediterranean in the north, hot desert in the south and snow covered peaks in the High Atlas Mountains.

The day was still dull and threatening to drizzle as we gathered around the truck adjacent to the ferry terminal in Ceuta. It was decided we would stay for much of the day allowing us all time to shop, principally for booze. Those responsible for cooking could shop for food, others for the cassette player and speakers. Lunch would be served on the kerbside for those that wanted it. I first walked through the main part of town with some of the others in search of stamps, which we found, and then to find a post box, which we also found. After a quick lunch I wandered around the shops on my own and got some Gordons Gin (about US\$7) and some other odds and ends.

We departed town at three o'clock for the short run out to the Moroccan border. Exiting Spain took a mere 7 minutes then to the Moroccan border post and we all had to get out, fill in forms, queue in a haphazard way and eventually get processed. There were people everywhere and the official behind the tiny barred window seemed uninterested in processing us very quickly. We all got back in the truck then customs wanted us all off the truck while they did a cursory search. All up we were there for 50 minutes, getting away at 3.10 pm, having gained an hour due to the time zone change (Morocco is all west of Greenwich and uses UTC or Greenwich Mean Time). It's a very busy border, and the officials are known to be a bit agro - they were. They were the only country to put a stamp in the back page of my passport - after all, they're Arabs and Arabic is reads from right to left.

So we meandered down the road south for a short distance before turning left onto the road through the Rif Mountains and the town of Tetouan. The whole appearance of the country was immediately in stark contrast to Spain. In the towns and the smaller villages, people, obviously Arabic, sat around seemingly doing nothing. Roadside stalls were selling local produce, mostly



fruit and vegetables. Numerous donkeys wandered the road, many carrying enormous loads and in some cases people also. The buildings were squat and white in the Arabic style.



After the town, the generally good tarmac road winds its way up into the mountains, and hence, progress was fairly slow. Up there we saw only the occasional small village or group of mud brick buildings. There was light drizzle and many buses, and no obvious place to camp. Eventually at about 5 o'clock and 25 km south of Tetouan, Mick spied an old alignment of the road on which we could camp. It was fairly quiet and we weren't bothered by any locals. Except for the gooey mud under foot, it was quite a nice campsite with a pleasant flowing river adjacent, and the Rif Mountains all around.

After dinner the skies cleared and we had our first camp fire, and quite a good one too. A gin squash before dinner and a bottle of wine during and after added to the relaxing nature of this place. The moon was full, the stars bright and all in all, we were feeling pretty good about the whole atmosphere.



Next morning we awoke at an unusually early 5 am since we had not actually yet changed our watches to Moroccan time - some people were not convinced of the change so we didn't change - it was always wise to keep all our watches the same even if it was wrong. We eventually adjusted them later that day in Rabat. It was an overcast and mild day, with patches of mist hanging around the Rif Mountains. We were away on schedule and headed south on the narrow tarmac road passing through the town of Ouezzane. From there we turned west towards Rabat, coming out of the mountains and eventually onto the coastal plains and joining the main road from Tangiers. The lunch stop was 54 km short of Rabat. Here we were amidst farming country, including sugar cane, very reminiscent of the coastal areas of parts of Queensland. George and Marshall were doing lunch and hadn't bought anything so it was out with the gas cooker and heat up a tin of hot dogs!

Following lunch we made our way into Rabat, Morocco's capital, where we were to camp for two nights in the campsite on the east side of the river in the town of Sale, the main city being on the west side. We arrived around one o'clock and I spent several hours doing chores - setup tent, washing, shower. Later in the afternoon I went for a walk with Gert into the main town, wandering around much of the Medina (old walled city) with its narrow streets. The souks (markets) were typical of much of Arab Africa, and we were to be used to such environs throughout Morocco and Algeria. The pressure sales techniques were also something we would become used to. Fortunately we had no money, and being a Sunday, there were no banks open to change any, although these people would obviously take any hard currency! However, even if I was going to buy anything, it would make more sense to wait until Fes or Marrakesh which have much bigger markets.

We returned to the campsite for a good dinner then sat around drinking and talking. At last the stereo was installed and working and it was oh so good to have some music. Bed was at just after ten o'clock for me, later for some of the others. A good night's sleep was interrupted at five in the



morning when we had a shower of rain, which for some reason I heard, and rushed outside the tent to rescue my mostly dry laundry!

The real wakeup was 7 am and after breakfast, we packed most things away since you can never be sure what the security is like in these campsites. The day was fine and warm with no suggestion of further rain. We set off as a group towards the Central African Republic (C.A.R.) embassy to obtain visas - in fact this was the main reason we were in Rabat. We were there for about an hour, filling out the forms which were, of course, in French - we would become used to filling in French forms, and needless to say, they don't usually put English as well. We were about to leave the embassy when Roscoe turned up - he was the other EO driver who would be driving us through the Algerian border - more of that later. However, since he was in town, it meant we would be able to leave Rabat sooner and let him pick-up our passports, rejoining us in Marrakesh.

After the embassy, the day was free for us all and people dispersed in all directions in various groups. I wandered off with one group to a nearby bank to change money and thence to a street side cafe to sit and relax over a glass of mint tea, which is the local popular drink. This was in the "business" or modern part of the city. The walled "old" city was across the road. From there we meandered around the Medina, taking a few shots, finally emerging at the other end and walking over to the Kasbah (the old palace). Here you can wander around the internal gardens or sit and have a drink and some cakes, which of course, we did. This is overlooking the river and is a very pleasant spot.



After what was an excuse for lunch some of us wandered off to the Post Office to buy stamps and postcards. We had some difficulty reaching it because some of the roads were blocked off pending the arrival of the German President who was visiting the city that day. I left there on my own and wandered down to the old Roman city of Chella, which dates from Roman times, and thence in a big arc back to the campsite via the main highway bridge. Back at the campsite I and

many of the others relaxed and wrote postcards, listened to music and had a pleasant drink or two.

Dinner was late, since the Kiwi girls had some difficulty shopping when the markets all closed down for the visit of the German President. Thus, we didn't eat until eight o'clock and then, knowing we would not be leaving too early the next day, many of us got stuck into some serious drinking. I abandoned this party around ten o'clock but it continued very late, certainly well after midnight. I didn't sleep too much as the debates going on outside my tent were far too amusing. Dale was being given a particularly hard time - she just loves an argument and takes the bait so well! Several serious hangovers resulted, principally Jean-Paul and Doc Ian.

Tuesday dawned fine and warm, and after breakfast we set about our first truck cleanout. Generally we tried to clean the truck out about once a month which involved emptying EVERYTHING and sweeping and then washing the floors, canopy etc. It was also an opportunity for a stock take, and at this stage, Robbie had been appointed Quartermaster, although this would later be taken over by Dale and subsequently by myself after Dar es Salaam. We did truck cleanouts in Rabat, Kano, Kampala, Kibo Hotel, Victoria Falls and Francistown. It was certainly a surprise to many of us on this first cleanout just how much food was crammed under those seats - dozens of packets of dehydrated casseroles, sugar, tea, coffee, milk powder, cereals, porridge and tinned meats, hot dogs, corn, baked beans and more.



The cleanout was completed by about ten o'clock and we were hoping to leave but Jean-Paul and Ann had gone shopping as well as calling into the C.A.R. embassy to check on the visas. They ended up not returning until midday, presumably because J-P was intent on making an authentic Moroccan meal that night and had to make sure he had every ingredient just right. His hangover was presumably not helping matters. Thus, we grabbed some lunch and then departed. Doc Ian was in bad shape also and managed to drop his money belt on the ground, but Mick saw it and put it in the cab, not telling him about it until he admitted losing it once we got to Fes.



The drive to Fes was relatively boring, the terrain being rather like the central west of New South Wales - dry grasslands, a bit of scrub and low hills. Once in Fes we meandered around the outskirts finally locating the campsite at five o'clock. It was a pleasant enough spot with quite a few other tourists, including an Australian couple driving around Morocco with whom I chatted for a while. The showers were cold but welcome all the same. J-P and Ann were working on their masterpiece of Moroccan curried lamb and cuscus which was finally ready by 7.30, together with a somewhat frazzled Ann. Few realised at this stage how difficult it was to get on with J-P!

Once again, after our 7 am awakening and breakfast, we packed most stuff up but left our tents standing in the camping ground. It was overcast and a bit drizzly but soon cleared into a fine sunny day. We got away in the truck, together with our local guide, Sahli, towards town. The guide was like a tape recorder and reeled off the history of Fes, the 17 square mile Medina, the 400,000 people who live there, and many other fascinating bits of information. First stop was the business centre of town to allow us to collect mail from the post office and to change money, if required. From there it was to the Palace with its gold plated entrance gates and numerous touts selling postcards. We then travelled up to the top of the hill where you can get a panoramic view of the Medina, thence down to the northern gate where we began our walking tour.

The Fes Medina is the old walled city. It dates from the ninth century and is a fascinating network of tiny streets and alleys. It is unwise to wander in on your own since you may have trouble finding your way out, although it is easy to find guides, at a price of course. We had our own guide which means you don't get pestered by the other touts. The Medina has a population of around 400,000, numerous of which have probably never ventured beyond the walls; quite simply, this is their entire world. There is, of course, no vehicular traffic, but there are numerous donkeys and horses. The terrain is very steep and there are lots of steps. I vividly recall a horse with a refrigerator on its back clambering up some steps of the alleyway we were walking down. Sometimes the donkeys are so heavily laden with produce and their master as well that you have to duck into a shop to make room for them to pass.



Our meanderings took us past one of the thirty odd Mosques within the Medina, through food areas, fabrics, bronze, artisans, literally anything you could want you would probably find somewhere. Of great interest, although quite smelly, was the tannery and associated dye pits where fabrics and hides are dyed. We were then taken to the carpet making co-operative and given the hard sell on some carpets, some Berber style, others supposedly Arabian/Persian look-a-



likes. I eventually bought a couple, a smaller cream Berber and a much larger brightly coloured Arabian. It was probably not a really sensible thing to do, given that Moroccan carpets are considered a bit of a novelty, but the price was pretty reasonable. They were promised to be shipped home - and they did arrive! Postscript: And the brightly coloured one is still on our floor almost thirty years later!

After a small quantity of lunch (flat bread, tomato, lettuce, egg and cheese) and mint tea, we went in next door to the rug factory and the hard sell was on again, and from there to the clothing store for Djellaba's and such like, one of which I bought. We eventually emerged, seemingly into the outside world again, and proceeded back into the business part of town to do a bit of shopping, principally for booze. There was no need to do much food shopping since we were being taken out to a Moroccan restaurant tonight. There were two other trucks "in town" - a Dragoman Trans-Africa and a Guerba Moroccan short trip, and they would all be joining us at the same restaurant that night. We were back at the campsite by five o'clock, with time to cleanup and relax before departing for dinner at a fairly late 8.30.

The dinner was good - more cus cus with beef and vegies, preceded by a good soup. The wine was extra, so we purchased a few bottles of reasonable Moroccan wine between a few of us. The entertainment included the usual belly dancers, acrobats and fire eaters after which we eventually returned to the campsite after midnight. We were having some fun with the Dragoman people who followed us back to the campsite in their truck, having swapped some of the passengers with some of ours. They partied on well into the early hours of the morning but most of us were pretty tired and intended to get an early start the next morning. They ended up leaving very late the next day and they would never have caught us again if it wasn't for the fact that we broke down a day later.

On the morning of October 19th we pulled down our tent for what was to be the last time for about 6 weeks (actually we pitched it briefly a few days later to let it dry out but didn't actually sleep in it again until Bangui). The day was fine, clear and warming up quickly. We got away at 8 am but had to go via town to pickup the spare trailer tyre which had gone flat back in Rabat and had been fixed in Fes. We finally got out of Fes just before nine and headed south west through the Middle Atlas Mountains towards the Berber town of Azgou.

The road is good albeit rather hilly in places, and thus we weren't going all that quickly. You could theoretically make Marrakesh in a day, but given our late start and the need to stop to shop in Azgou, we clearly wouldn't make it. In any case, the scenery is very pleasant, gradually transforming from the pine tree covered slopes to barren rocky hills as we travelled through the Middle Atlas Mountains from north to south. Given enough time we would like to go to Chutes du Ouzad, some spectacular waterfalls, but the road is reportedly very bad and would add the better part of a day to our journey.

We stopped in Azgou prior to lunch for just under an hour while Dale and I did some shopping. I had decided that roast chicken would be the go so set out to purchase them, dead or alive! We got four relatively scrawny looking birds plus some fruit, vegies, bread and flour (for apple fritters). We stopped a little further on for lunch on a rocky hillside. It was here that Steve managed to cut his arm badly on a rock and had to be bandaged up by one of the nurses.

The road continued through many barren rolling hills and some quite rugged ones before passing through the town of Kasba-Tadla after which it flattens out substantially with the mountains away to the south. We just pressed on, hour after hour, eventually passing through the quite large town of Beni Mellal around five o'clock. We were now in irrigated farming country, although still quite barren, and it was starting to get dark. It was obvious that there were very few spots where we

could camp. Eventually Mick took a side track which ran down alongside some above ground irrigation channels and we camped in what amounted to a rocky paddock about 2 kilometres off the road, just after crossing a big (like 4 metres wide) irrigation channel.



There was nothing really wrong with this campsite, except for the hard ground and the lack of cover for the ladies, and that was not really a problem, since it was fast becoming very dark. The view across to the mountains was very pleasant indeed. Despite this, there was an element of discontent among the troops, perhaps being driven by Robbie who presumably expected a camping ground every night.

In any case, we had the cook tent up fairly briskly before it got dark, and Dale and I set about preparing dinner. It was very windy and Richard was preparing a fire for the oven around the other side of the truck. The oven is a 44 gallon drum cut into pieces and sat over a fire - it works exceptionally well although it doesn't quite achieve that nice even temperature that one is used to with a fan forced electric oven! We prepared some stuffing of breadcrumbs, apple and herbs and I got the chooks all ready to go, four of the scrawny little buggers in one big baking tray that would fit inside the oven. We also did potatoes in alfoil and some other vegies, beans and carrots I think. It was a late dinner, due to us waiting for the fire to be hot enough and then to make sure the chooks were well done. They cooked for nearly an hour and a half but they were worth it and everyone enjoyed them, except Marshall who seemed to be sick and not eating.

Of course with such a good fire, many of us then wanted to sit around and socialise, although what transpired was somewhat unexpected. The unrest about the choice of campsites lead into a fully fledged debate over campsites and subsequently the running of the trip generally! This was fuelled by some comments that Mick had made earlier about our options for the next week. These depended on such things as the arrival of Roscoe in Marrakesh and the time available to get the British over to Algeria by air and the rest of us through the border. We needed to decide how

much time to spend in Marrakesh as against time at Todra Gorge, the latter being of more interest to me.

Initially, Mick wasn't present and the debate was being lead by Jean-Paul with active participation by me, Richard, Doc Ian and others. The attitude of Jean-Paul was just a touch unrealistic, with suggestions that almost everything we did should be subject to debate and "democratic" resolution. Can you imagine having a group meeting to choose a campsite, and even trying to decide how much time to spend in Marrakesh versus Todra Gorge was going to be difficult!? In any case, this was just one of many such debates that seemed to take place during the trip and they gradually got more and more silly. Mick came in on this one late and tried to diplomatically point out the realities of life, and that while discussion of what we did was a good thing, more often than not decisions needed to be made quickly and that meant that he had to make them. The debate must have gone on a while, since when I went to bed, in the cook tent of course, after midnight, the arguments were still going.

The next day dawned fine and mild with a light breeze and the campsite looked really nice against the background of the Atlas Mountains. It was to be a long hot day, and it started out with me helping Dale to cook her apple fritters which seemed to go down well. We departed just after eight o'clock and were soon out to the main road and heading towards Marrakesh again. I was trying to resolve this Marrakesh versus Todra debate and had carefully written up the two alternatives so that people could simply vote one way or the other.



After about 20 kilometres we descended to cross a reasonable sized river with a small village beyond and as we started up the incline there was a strange noise and Mick stopped the truck. About five minutes was spent looking for the problem but all seemed well so we set off again. About 2 kilometres later at the top of the hill beyond the village the noise returned in earnest - a



rattling sound apparently from the engine. People were still debating the schedule when we stopped and this time the engine was cut and I suggested that the debate might have suddenly become superfluous since I had this awful feeling that the noise was a serious one. I turned out to be correct!

We had soon all piled out and, can you believe it, they were still arguing over what we should do. I was more interested in the truck's problems and hovered around as Mick began to pull the rocker cover off, suspecting something wrong with the head gear. It was 8.35 when we stopped and about 20 minutes before Mick declared that we had a dropped valve. We then proceeded to push the truck down off the road onto a flat area where we could safely camp and work on the truck. The tables were set up, one for Mick to use for all the engine parts, the other for food and drink. Fairly soon others had set up beds and were relaxing. The trailer was detached and opened so people could easily get their gear out.

People were immediately told that we would be there at least all that day and probably some of the next so they were given the option of bussing it into Marrakesh, finding their own accommodation and meeting up with the truck "whenever". At ten o'clock, Jean-Paul, George, Robbie and Peter all caught the bus for the 2 hour unpleasantly crowded journey into Marrakesh. By this time, Mick had identified the problem as a failed collet which holds the valve at the top, and gave one to J-P so he could pass it on to Roscoe who would obtain spares and bring them back to the truck.

I decided to stay around, perhaps being less than thrilled about spending more time in a Moroccan market town. Instead, I went for a long walk, figuring that some exercise would not do me any harm. I walked down to the town, up a large hill on the other side via the road bridge and back down through the back of the town over a dubious foot bridge and back to the truck. On the way up the hill I met up with Andrew who was talking (or trying to) with some teenage guys who were on their way home from school. They were examining a map of the world in one of their schoolbooks. I joined in and we took some photographs of each other with the group. Andrew was one of the most pleasant and friendly people I can imagine and was always ready to help out throughout the trip. He was always talking to the local kids of any age and had trinkets of all kinds to keep them amused, including the famous yo-yo that so often got a great reaction. He also had a French phrase book, which I borrowed on occasions to learn a few vital words!

By midday it was very hot and definitely time to take a rest in what little shade was being cast by the truck and the trailer. There was barely a tree to be seen in any direction! Dale and I got lunch prepared - basically self serve sandwiches. Mick had the head fully disassembled and was starting to run out of things to do until he had the spares. He realised he would need a valve compressor also, so after lunch Richard and Dale set off towards Marrakesh with a French couple in a Renault who were touring the country - no doubt they had a more pleasant journey than those who went by bus! The remainder of the afternoon was spent relaxing, reading and writing letters, with some brief entertainment offered by a herd of camels with their master who gleefully offered people rides at a suitable price. The Dragoman truck passed by late in the afternoon.



Gert and Gerd had procured some dubious looking meat, probably goat, during the day from the butcher in the village, and this was barbecued on the hot plate over the fire for dinner. We were getting seriously stuck into this Moroccan wine and I recall giving myself a fairly nasty burn on the hand from a piece of sizzling meat. Just as we were eating, a bus pulled up and Roscoe appeared out of the darkness with the spares. After dinner they were checked and found to be not quite correct so Roscoe set off for Marrakesh on the next available bus to try to procure more. Of course he wouldn't be back until the next day!

The rest of the evening becomes something of a blur! It was one of the three occasions during the trip when I drank too much but we must have had a good night sitting around the fire. We hadn't pitched tents of course, simply sleeping out in the open, although I don't actually recall going to bed!

I awoke next morning at 6.30 am in a rather dazed state. Not only was I laying on my bed in my clothes, but my bed was definitely not where I had put it and this was confirmed by the fact that my daypack, which would normally be beside my bed, was 3 or 4 metres away! I was confused - where was I anyway? Oh yes, I recall - Africa, hmmm, Morocco, hmmm, ah yes - the truck broke down, but still, why had my bed moved during the night? It was later revealed to me that I had passed out on my bed which apparently looked somewhat unstable on an uneven piece of ground, so a group of them moved the bed, with me on it, to a better spot.

It was fairly warm already and would be a pretty hot day - certainly over 30°C as the previous day had been. I lay in bed, as did quite a few others, until 8.30, feeling less than well, in fact, very badly hungover. A cup of tea was all I could manage for breakfast and subsequently continued to laze about in the ever decreasing areas of shade. Doc Ian and Urs abandoned us at about ten

o'clock for Marrakesh by bus. A group of school kids visited at one stage and provided a good deal of entertainment for us, and us for them - after all, it was Saturday.



Roscoe arrived back with the correct parts just as we were having a late lunch. Mick and Roscoe proceeded to get the engine back together but it would be dinner time before it would be complete so it was decided that we would eat dinner and then depart for Marrakesh. Andrew was cooking with help from various people and had some meat which was minced and a meal of sweet and sour meat balls was prepared as the afternoon wore on. We ate at six and finally departed just before eight o'clock after packing everything up and reattaching the trailer.

The road into Marrakesh is very good and relatively flat so we made good time, stopping briefly at a road house for coffee. We hit town at 10.30 pm and went straight to the hotel to leave a message for the others, thence to the campsite. I showered and did some laundry before hitting my bed at 1 am, sleeping out of course, as almost everyone did, since it was quite a warm night. We didn't see the others that night, and apparently they had moved hotels but we hadn't been given the message.

We arose and departed latish for the centre of town. The day was clear and hot and we spent quite some time wandering around town while others did shopping, both for food and for the bar. I tried to make a phone call home, but this was barely successful since I didn't have enough 5 Dirham coins, and it ate the 1 Dirhams so fast you got cut off. I had a quick look at Marrakesh's famous square, the Djemaa el Fna. It can reportedly be a hive of activity at times, especially in the evening, but was relatively quiet on this sleepy Sunday morning. I wandered back to where the truck had been parked to find it missing, presumably off getting diesel, and sat with some of the others for a while outside a cafe. Those who had bussed in from the breakdown had still not been seen, but were on board the truck when it returned, having been located and picked up from their hotel.





It was here that Mick was leaving us, handing over to Roscoe, although the other British were going to Todra and would bus back to Marrakesh to join Mick for their air trip to Algeria. All of this was necessitated by the fact that the Algerians were not allowing British subjects to enter through land borders, as a tit-for-tat action against the British who had been regularly returning Algerians from Heathrow when they turned up without proper visas. Thus, we set off at 10.15 am with Roscoe driving and me in the front together with Gert.

It was fascinating talking to Roscoe since he had done this trip previously, and thus he knows all the subtleties, even though I have no criticism of Mick who was learning it all for the first time. EO have very good notes and thus an experienced driver can easily do a trip "sight unseen", although it sometimes takes a bit longer to find certain things, but that is all part of the fun. We meandered out of Marrakesh heading towards the High Atlas Mountains. These rugged mountains rise to over 4000 metres (Mount Toubkal - 4167 metres or 13,670 feet) and often have snow on them - quite a contrast to the Sahara Desert, which technically begins on the other side of the range.

The road is good tarmac and climbs only gradually at first, then really gets into the mountains about 50 km from Marrakesh. We stopped for lunch at one of the few reasonable pull off areas then pressed on into the mountains. The terrain is incredibly rugged and barren, yet people live in small villages all along the road and in mud huts seemingly built into the side of the hills. Many run herds of goats while others collect various semi-precious stones and sell them to passing tourists at roadside stalls.

The final ascent to the pass, Col du Tichka, (2260 metres or 7415 feet) is a spectacular series of switchbacks extending over about 10 kilometres, and we crawled up it mostly in first and second gears. We took about 20 minutes break at the top where some curio shops are set up. The relatively low temperature was a sharp reminder of the altitude.



The descent is somewhat more gradual, but is just as spectacular as the vastness of the Sahara spreads out to the south. We stopped at one curio shop where Roscoe wanted to get something - he had previously had a geologist on the trip and had found this particular place to be very interesting. On the edge of the mountains we followed a swiftly running river for some time. Once clear of the mountains the country is very desolate with sandy plains broken by spectacular mesas (those flat topped mountains typical of the northern Sahara) and many oasis settlements with their characteristic palm groves.

We reached the large township of Ouarzazate at five o'clock and stopped for half an hour while people shopped for a few extra provisions and the odd refreshing drink or snack. Although it was getting dark we pressed on, hoping to get as close to Todra Gorge as possible so as to arrive early the next morning and have nearly a full day there. Just after six, 30 kilometres from Ouarzazate, we were forced to stop when Roscoe ran the fuel tank dry. This is not a big drama, since there are two tanks, but running one dry means the fuel system has to be re-bled which can take about 15 minutes.

Thus, we would camp here, and despite the fact that it was a lovely night with just a few patches of cloud around, most of us only pitched tents so that they could dry out. Our's hadn't been used since Fes and had been stored away somewhat damp, but it wouldn't be unpacked again until Bangui on December 4th, it now being October 22nd. Dinner was late and bed early, since we had decided to get going early next morning without breakfast and to have brunch at Todra, an estimated 3 hours away.

The silence of the desert was magnificent as we were awoken in complete darkness - just the sound of a stiff cool breeze blowing. Unfortunately it was only 4.45 am when Urs decided to wake us - he had set his alarm incorrectly. I quickly checked my watch by torchlight before even



contemplating emerging from my warm sleeping bag and immediately told him and others that we had another hour until we were due to be woken! I was quickly back to sleep and we arose at 5.45 am and quickly packed and were away by 6.30 Most of us continued to sleep as the road was mostly good and fast. It developed into a hot and clear day. The colours of the desert are amazing, and vividly contrast the dark greenness of the oasis towns and date palmeries.

We arrived at the town of Tinerhir at nine o'clock and continued up the road towards Todra Gorge. It is still tarmac but climbs steeply into the mountains and winds its way through the valley which is filled with palmeries. We first stopped to talk with the Guerba truck that was coming out of Todra and then stopped at an obvious spot for picture taking of the vast palmeries in the valley below. It is about 14 km from Tinerhir that the road enters the incredible Todra Gorge. The tarmac finishes and it is about 500 metres through the narrows of the gorge, across rocky fords to the hotel where we would camp. Roscoe immediately found the owner and negotiated that we would sleep in one of the two big Berber tents erected out the front of the hotel. This is an amazing place, situated right in the middle of the gorge, with the flowing stream just at the bottom of the steps - when it floods the hotel must surely be inundated!

We soon set up the tables right next to the stream and the cooks proceeded to get brunch, which was ready about an hour later. By this time, the rest of us had explored the immediate surrounds, including our tent, hotel and hot showers! Our gear was unloaded and stored in a room in the hotel for security. We also passed time with some other tourists staying in the other tent. By midday I was ready to go for a long walk, and had donned my good boots for the first time since the start of the trip. I walked through the gorge and climbed the mountain opposite, giving me a superb view back through the gorge to the camp. It is a truly magnificent piece of scenery and I just sat almost at the top of this mountain for nearly an hour writing postcards and just taking in the view. It was reasonably hot of course, and I had consumed most of my litre of water by the time I returned three hours later.



The rest of the afternoon was spent relaxing over a few gin and tonics. I then did some laundry in the stream and had a nice hot shower before dinner, which was a great chicken curry courtesy of Robbie and Peter. We all then gathered around a map covered table to hear Roscoe give us a rundown on many aspects of the rest of the trip. We also discussed the exact details of the next few days during which the British passport holders, Steve, Ann and Peter, would return by bus to Marrakesh to meet Mick and fly into Algeria and then bus it to Bechar to rejoin us. The immediate problem was Robbie who had just discovered that her Algerian visa expired the next day, whereas we wouldn't be going through the border until the day after. Thus it was decided that she would go by bus and/or taxi immediately to the border the next day and make sure she was through by the end of the day. Jean-Paul would accompany her for "language support". We were also fully briefed on what to expect at the Algerian border and most of us counted our money carefully, since an incorrect declaration could be costly! We got to bed around ten and it felt quite strange all sleeping in the one big tent!



It became overcast with some slight drizzle during the night and was almost foggy when we arose, but it was to clear into yet another fine and hot day. The Brits, J-P and Robbie all got away by taxi into town at 7.40 am and the rest of us eventually departed nearly an hour later. It took Roscoe quite a while to extricate the truck from where he had parked it - sometimes the trailer could be a real pain! Myself and a few other walked ahead to get a photo of the truck coming through the ford. We were in no hurry since we would have to wait the better part of a day in Bechar for the Brits to arrive, so all that was important was that we get through the border the next day. In Tinerhir we did a brief pass through the town just to check that the others had all caught their buses, then headed eastwards on the good tarmac road. We reached the quite large town of Er Rachidia late in the morning and stopped for two hours, allowing plenty of time to shop for food and booze. It was necessary to fully stock the bar since it is very difficult to get drinks of any

kind in Algeria. Unfortunately the fully stocked bar would only last three or four days and we would be in Algeria for 14 days!

We stopped for lunch just outside of Er Rachidia, and then continued eastward through quite flat and featureless country. Some hills could always be seen to the north and occasionally we would pass a group of Bedouin tents, but there was basically no civilisation. Doc Ian had a drive of the truck somewhere here, not that we knew until later - he is quite experienced with Bedfords. The truck would be marked against his passport at the Algerian border since Roscoe would obviously not be taking it out of the country! Thus, it seemed preferable that Doc Ian actually drive the truck to the Algerian border. They even had special passenger lists printed showing Doc Ian as an EO driver instead of a passenger.

We eventually pulled off on a side track about 35 km east of the village of Air Chair at 5.30 pm, and found a pleasant campsite hidden behind a hill. This was still about 125 km from the border

but we would easily get to the border before lunch and through it, one way or another, by the end of the next day. It was the first absolutely crystal clear desert night (we all slept out of course) and the stars were really magnificent as we bedded down around a reasonable fire.

October 25th would be our last day in Morocco and we awoke at 6 am to a typically cold desert morning which would develop into a clear and hot day. We reached the town of Bouarfa at eight o'clock where we stopped for fuel. We expected to cover the remaining 100 km to the border town of Fuigig in less than 2 hours but at 9.30 we were stopped at a police or army (it's hard to tell the difference most of the time) road block. These guys were really thick and we had to fill out all kinds of ridiculous details on the back of the passenger list. It was clear that they simply wanted to inconvenience us, but we had plenty of patience! We were there for 30 minutes and eventually pulled into Fuigig at 10.30. Here you must first get your passport stamped by the police before going to the border, which is just a few kilometres out of town. Thus, we stopped at the police station while Roscoe took all the passports in. However, we had to collect them individually and eventually left town nearly an hour later.

The Moroccan border post is set in a pleasant little pass between two low hills and despite there being quite a few trees around, there was relatively little shade where they made us park the truck. The post is makeshift at best, with army style tents housing the various police and border officials. The passport stamping formalities were reasonably straightforward but then the customs guys wanted to check everything so we all had to get out of the truck and the trailer has to be almost fully unloaded. This was not really impressing us, first because it was nearly midday and it was getting bloody hot and second, because we expected to be at the Algerian border a LONG time and were not expecting a delay getting out of Morocco. Then the official got distracted by Gert who was making a few notes in his diary and the guy wanted to know what he was writing! Did he seriously think he was a spy? In any case, we were treated to the bizarre sight of Gert translating Swedish into English and Urs translating this into French for the official who, after about 5 minutes, was satisfied that Gert's diary didn't contain any national secrets! We eventually left this less than friendly border post right on midday after a total of 37 minutes - not all that bad in comparison with some later border crossings!

## **ALGERIA - The Sahara Desert**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 14.

Distance Travelled: 2653 km.

Algeria is a huge country, Africa's second largest only to the Sudan. The north is fertile Mediterranean but the south, where we were, is entirely the Sahara Desert with its diverse terrain ranging from flat featureless plains, through massive sand dunes to the spectacular Hoggar Mountains which reach almost 10,000 feet in elevation. Other than the terrain, the overriding impression of Algeria is that the people are kind of lifeless - unmotivated, unhelpful, lethargic - supposedly a product of the repressive socialist regime. Despite being one of the wealthiest countries in Africa, there is relatively little difference in the apparent "standard of living" of ordinary people from almost any of the countries we visited.

Population: 22 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 20.

Main Exports: Oil.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$1,260.

Currency: 1 Dinar = 12 US cents, controlled, black market almost halves its value, compulsory exchange of 1000 Dinar on entry to country.

Languages: French, Arabic, Berber.

Independence: 1962 from France.

Government: Socialist, token democracy.

Climate: Varies enormously from Mediterranean in the north and hot desert in the south where temperatures above 30°C all year round and virtually no rain at all.

It's only a few hundred metres to the Algerian border post, which has absolutely no shade whatsoever, except that cast by the seemingly temporary buildings. We arrived at just after one o'clock Algerian time as we changed there to UTC+1. Roscoe quickly proceeded to find out the procedures. It was a long and involved border crossing, and when things seemed to be "stalled", we decided to have lunch beside the truck. There was relatively little other traffic, perhaps three other cars during the whole time we were there. We eventually got to the currency declaration part and we all piled into this room and filled out our forms, then in turn, one of the officials counted our money and checked that it agreed with the declaration. There was little point in smuggling currency since the next step was to go in to the next hut to change 1000 Dinars, which at the official rate was US\$125, which would be more than enough to meet foreseeable expenses in Algeria. What Roscoe was doing was, as they say, "his business", but we all knew that there would be a reasonable sum of hard currency hidden somewhere on the truck. Once we were all duly processed, they got us to unpack the whole trailer and much of the truck, and they went through everyone's bag, albeit fairly superficially. It certainly would have been straightforward, with some prior knowledge, to have hidden money. I guess they were also looking for drugs. Overall, I would have to say the officials were friendly and courteous, although not exactly efficient! The total time at the border was 3 hours and 35 minutes.

It was a short ten minute drive into the border town of Beni Ounif where we expected to find Jean-Paul and Robbie. We pulled up outside the only decent bar in town and piled out to buy



some cold soft drink. A bottle cost 2 Dinar (about 12 cents), but was not even worth that! Algeria was the only country on the whole trip that doesn't sell the usual Coca Cola and Fanta. In fact it is very hard to buy anything in Algeria, and certainly very little is imported. As a socialist republic, the country would have to be described as a failure, with people generally unmotivated, shops not well stocked, hotels run down and poorly run, etc. Only when we got a long way south around Tamanrasset was there some sense of purpose in the people and businesses.

Someone had discovered that J-P and Robbie had headed off to Bechar, having decided (correctly) that Beni Ounif had nothing to offer. Thus, we too headed south west into the relatively featureless wasteland, picking up some gas on the outskirts of town, and stopped to camp some way off the road about 5 km out of town. It was only later that we realised that we had camped on or near an old mine field, but nobody got blown up! Dale and I helped Gert and Gerd with dinner, which was pretty late. Bed was also relatively late, after a few bottles of Moroccan wine.



The desert was lovely to sleep in (on?) and we awoke to a cool easterly wind, but it would soon get quite hot. We didn't really arise until eight o'clock, since there was no hurry to go anywhere except Bechar where we would have to wait about a day for the Brits to arrive. After a very leisurely breakfast we were finally on the road after ten and headed down the good straight tarmac road. There are a lot of Algerian trucks on the road and they tend to travel quite quickly. We stopped at a spring to fill up with water, about 20 km short of Bechar, and finally pulled into town just after midday.



Bechar is a quite large bustling city, whose purpose still eludes me. It is set in largely featureless country near the Moroccan border and I can only surmise that there is an element of military activity in the region since Algeria and Morocco are periodically at each other's throats! We were meant to be in town until about 4 pm with lunch being available on the truck. We had already located J-P and Robbie who were "wandering the streets". I wandered around to the Hotel Atar, the only vaguely decent establishment in town, with the hope of making a phone call, but after some efforts, the man behind the counter gave up and claimed there were not enough lines out of town. I think he was right since I then went to the Post Office for stamps so I booked a phone call and got through after waiting about 40 minutes. It was slightly unnerving standing around in the Post Office with all variety of strange characters, but I guess to them I was the strange one! The phone call to Australia was really quite cheap being 66 Dinar (about US\$8) for about 15 minutes - certainly the cheapest phone charges I encountered anywhere in Africa.

I went back to the truck for some quick lunch and then it was off to the local shower house for a nice steaming hot shower. This is an amazing establishment where you can get a shower for Dr 10, although it is so humid that you don't feel all that much better when you emerge! Then it was shopping with Dale, since it was our turn to cook. Back at the truck by 4 pm, but the booze hadn't been purchased. The bar people were discovering how hard it can be to buy alcohol in Algeria. The number of outlets is extremely limited, and in almost all cases they will only exchange bottles - if you have no bottles you can't buy anything. And it seems you can't buy bottles - Catch 22! This was becoming frustrating, but finally someone suggested we try a club of some kind where they might loan us some bottles. This was a few blocks away so we took the truck and got a dozen or so bottles of red wine to keep us going, but we had to return the bottles the next day. We got out of town about 5.30.

The campsite chosen was perhaps 5 km out of town to the south, amongst a group of low hills. We were set up by six, no tents of course, and in fact, not even a cook tent. Dale and I cooked some meat with mushroom sauce, carrots, potatoes, zucchini and eggplant. Having eaten, we settled in for a good night of social drinking. We had a good fire and all was well. Some additional entertainment was provided at about ten o'clock when a sudden dust storm covered quite a few things with sand and blew Marshall's mosquito "canopy" a hundred metres away into the night! I'm not sure why he was using it - there aren't any mosquitoes in the desert and in fact I didn't see any until Niamey more than two weeks later.

I slept well after bedding down at 10.30 but was awoken briefly around 3 am with Urs, Roscoe and Richard getting rather carried away with their partying. There were some very sore heads the next morning. I arose around nine o'clock and no-one else was really stirring much until it threatened to rain. It was overcast and windy with just the hint of a few spots of rain. I got most of breakfast cooked (omelettes) before we had a quite substantial shower of rain. We packed up and got out of the place by 11 am and found the Brits in town. They had arrived on a bus at about four in the morning and had grabbed some sleep on the ground or benches at the bus station! Lunch was once again served from the truck. The shopping was duly done, the wine bottles returned, and since we couldn't get any more bottled wine, we filled the shower units with red wine! We still had a couple of empty wine bottles to use for "serving". We filled with fuel and water at a service station on the outskirts of town and eventually headed off, Mick back in the driver's seat of course, and Roscoe farewelled to return to London by bus and air. The day was still overcast and hazy, although quite hot.

The drive down to the small village of Taghit was relatively boring except for the occasional sand drift across the relatively narrow tarmac road. We would become used to these drifts which sometimes cover the entire width of the road and can obviously be a major hazard at any speed. Elsewhere the road was generally covered with a layer of sand which would swirl in the wake of the truck and get sucked into the back. A sharp rainshower settled the sand somewhat. The weather was indeed peculiar for a desert - humid, overcast and very unstable. Just prior to Taghit we came over a crest and there ahead of us were the famous huge sand dunes of the Grand Erg Occidental. The sight was remarkable with the green oasis village in the foreground and the orange dunes spreading seemingly for ever in several directions. We immediately stopped for photos although my camera had been locked in the trailer in the flurry of the morning pickup. Never mind - I got a plenty of similar shots during the next few days.

We soon proceeded down through Taghit where the road twists among the date palmeries and mud huts and then down a palm lined valley with the dunes to the south and a rocky escarpment to the north. A campsite was chosen about 15 km beyond the town, just over the road from the dunes which, needless to say, we were going to climb! Myself and Gert were quickly unpacked, having assisted with the erection of the cook tent, which we thought would be required more for protection from the wind than anything else. Several people erected tents, although many, including me, didn't.

Gert and I were first to the top of the nearby sand dune. It is just like a beach dune (except much bigger) and quite hard work to climb. If you climb up the ridge and tread carefully on the hard edge formed there by the wind, you can mostly avoid sinking knee deep into the sand with every step. The view beyond was equally fantastic - dunes as far as you can see to the south and the east. The wind was strong from the south east and sand was getting in everything. I had brought my camera up in a plastic bag and only opened the bag enough to expose the lens to take a photograph. Fairly soon quite a few others had arrived at the "summit" and group photos and



"roll down the dune" antics were underway. I wandered back to camp, perhaps 300 feet below as dusk was setting in.



As it became dark the instability of the weather became obvious with lightning visible in the distance and swirling clouds above. Just before dinner a brief rain shower had us all running to get our gear under cover. It was a bad sign - but it was too late to get a tent out now - besides, it can't really rain much in the Sahara, can it? After dinner, Mick talked through our schedule for the next week or so through to Tamanrasset. The weather seemed quite fine and relatively calm after that and I eventually bedded down adjacent to the cook tent with many others.

I wasn't in bed long before a violent wind storm sprang up. There was sand everywhere. I just closed off my sleeping bag and ignored it for a while - perhaps 5 minutes, but then, you guessed it - down came the rain. What a disaster! There were people running for cover anywhere. I piled everything on my bed and managed to sneak in the side of the cook tent and gain some cover. In the cook tent was bedlam. The wind was so strong that it was threatening to take off. Several people were busy holding it down while others were reorganising the tables and other stuff to make as much room as possible for the uninvited guests. All the while the tent was flapping like an out of control yacht. The rain was teeming down by now, although little got into the tent. Outside we could hear others having difficulties - it seems Marshall's tent had blown over and Megan was under the truck but can't find her bed legs! Amidst this, Steve was screaming (jokingly) that he is having fun and that this is what he paid his money for! Noel asked Jenny, in a tent by now holding about 10 people, "I suppose sex is out of the question tonight?"

After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably about 30 minutes, the weather seemed to moderate and we were able to settle down. The rest of the night was still pretty unsettled with lots of wind and more rain. So ended October 27th, our first real day in the Sahara and one we would remember forever more.



We arose at 5.30 in the morning to darkness, and continuing drizzle and a moderating wind. Everything was putrid - a messy mixture of sand and mud over beds and sleeping bags. Breakfast was just cereal, no-one having the energy to cook anything else. We got away just prior to dawn and went down the road further to examine some rock paintings and watch the sunrise over the dunes. The sunrise was relatively late as this was our furthest point west in this time zone (we were actually about 2° west of Greenwich but on UTC + 1, rather like being on Daylight Savings Time in England). The weather was clearing now and it would soon be a fine hot day.

The road to the paintings is a dead end, and thus we retraced our route back through Taghit and picked up the road to the south west which then joins the main road from Bechar to Reggane. We followed this south to Beni Abbes, an oasis town located about 15 km off the main road. We were there mid morning, principally to shop and possibly get a shower at one of the hotels. Some went walking into the nearby dunes and found a film crew who were doing some skiing down the dunes. Apparently this town is a popular location for movie production teams looking for desert settings. I wandered around the town and then guarded the truck for the second half of our stay. We left just after midday but stopped for water and lunch at a service station on the outskirts of town. The water turned out to be polluted with a small amount of petrol and thus had to be dumped although I grabbed some in a bowl and washed some clothes - first chance since Todra!

After leaving Beni Abbes it was a long hot afternoon's drive southwards, constantly among the huge dunes. The road is very good tarmac, being the main supply route to the largish settlements of Adrar, Timimoun and Reggane, as well as the main road through to Mali (although the tarmac stops at Reggane). We stopped for water at the small village of Guerzim and having filled up, continued south to camp about 20 km south of Kerzaz. Mick found a spot a few kms off the road right next to some huge dunes - this was one of my favourite campsites of the trip. The weather was stable now - not that nasty overcast look of the previous day, and I was confident of no further rain, although many tents went up that night! Several of us climbed the dunes, even bigger than the previous day's.



After dinner it was an early night, many of us feeling just a bit tired after the previous night's adventures. The wind did get up and there was some cloud about, but thankfully, there was no rain. We awoke next morning at a relatively late 5.50 and it was clear and still. Dawn would not be until about 7.15 since we had not really moved much in longitude since the previous day. Following breakfast, some of us climbed to the top of the sand dune to watch and photograph the sunrise. It was an eerie site seeing the dunes in the pre dawn twilight. There was a thick dust haze and some thought the sun had risen but was just not visible but Gert and I stayed and saw it "on schedule". There is something magical about a sunrise, seeing that first tiny prick of light and then the seemingly huge orange disc appearing over the horizon and growing brighter as it fights its way up through the haze. We then descended and were away at eight o'clock.

It would be a relaxing day with just the morning to reach Timimoun, a distance of about 180 km. We arrived there at eleven and went straight to the Hotel where we would camp in the grounds quite comfortably and securely. After an early lunch I strolled around the town, then relaxed, did some washing and read a bit. The town is quite interesting, typically Arabic but with some fascinating mud buildings. It is one of the tourist towns of the Sahara and we saw groups of tourists who had flown into nearby Adrar and we doing sightseeing tours of the local palmeries and dunes. The hotel even had a hot shower although I had to figure out how to hook up and start the gas heater myself! Steve, George and Marshall did the honours for dinner. We had mini pizzas (vegies on bread cooked in the oven) followed by barbecued camel meat. Some walked to a nearby pub that they thought might have something drinkable but they returned relatively unsatisfied. I went to bed early under a clear sky, although with the lights of the town there was not much point trying to admire the stars.



We were booked to do a land cruiser tour next morning so arose relatively late with the tour off at eight o'clock from the front of the hotel. We piled into three land cruisers and were taken through palmeries, dunes, old villages and to see the desert roses, naturally forming sand crystals that look

like flowers. The tour concluded after nearly three hours after which I bought some postcards and we packed up, ready to leave straight after an early lunch. During the afternoon we headed initially west, retracing our steps to the Reggane road, then south. We passed through Adrar and finally camped off the road in the desert at five o'clock, getting bogged in the process. No great drama - just a practice for the next day! The night was crystal clear and I once again took the opportunity to get some rest, going to bed at nine o'clock.

It was again typically cold and windy as we arose on this, the last day of October. Everything was dusty due to the wind during the night but it shakes or brushes off very easily, yet gets into everything. We were on the road south to Reggane soon after seven and reached there at 8.15 with a view to shopping, since we would be turning eastwards onto our first main stretch of non tarmac road. I was really looking forward to this and made sure I was up in the cab with Mick and needless to say, Gert was there too. I sat in the cab while in town reading the books about this road to In Salah and comparing them with the EO notes. There seemed to be a major discrepancy as to how much tarmac there was out of Reggane. The EO notes seemed to suggest that the tarmac went all the way to a place called Tit, which was over half way to In Salah, yet the books (admittedly older) talked in terms of turning onto sand just a few kilometres out of town off a tarmac road that actually leads to a military base. I was further confused by a junction that we had passed coming into town which indicated In Salah to the left but I had assumed this was just to bypass the main part of this small town.

As we departed town I followed the town map to pick up the road towards the military base. The turn left was where it should be but the road looked very disused - sandy and rocky. Mick pressed on down the tarmac for about 2 km until the base was in sight then turned around, presumably out of firing range! We then took this disused road to the east. It certainly was rough and sandy and Mick was having trouble with the High-Low ratio selector and we stopped for about 10 minutes while he adjusted the linkages. Off again and we made slow progress for about 5 or 6 kilometres before I spied a truck moving quite quickly some distance in front of us. What's more, there was no dust! "Whoops, I think we're on the old road and there is a new tarmac road to our left." We could see the two roads were converging and about a kilometre ahead we were able to join the new tarmac road.

It was now very hot and a very strong north easterly wind was blowing with a constant blast of sand coming almost straight at us. We pressed on barely doing 50 km/h. The road was indeed relatively new and had regular kilometre posts indicating the distance to the next town of Aoulef, some 98 km from Reggane. It was almost midday and 81 km from Reggane when all three of us caught sight of this tiny oasis to our right, just off the road - "a good spot for lunch" we all said almost instantaneously. We stopped there for 45 minutes, slightly down from the raised road and thus slightly protected from the blasting hot sand filled wind. The water was slightly saline but crystal clear and very cold. Another tourist was there in a Peugeot 504 partaking of the refreshing water. A few of the guys went skinny dipping, others just waded in to cool off. I guess it would have been about 40°C.





After Aoulef the tarmac continued, as the EO notes said, to the turnoff to the small village of Tit. From there the road is initially gravel but quickly deteriorates into sand and subsequently becomes a largely unmarked track across quite featureless terrain. The variation in terrain from there to In Salah, a distance of about 120 kilometres, was quite interesting. There were some villages nestled among small white sand dunes, and others around natural oases. Some country was undulating and some totally flat and somewhat rocky. We did manage to get bogged several times in short but deep sand patches and soon got into the swing of sand matting. After several of these Mick let the tyres down to about half their usual pressure and we didn't get stuck again.



About mid way to In Salah we came into the small town of In Ghar - I really wonder what those people do out there. The town was quite confusing and we had to seek directions several times before taking what we hoped was the correct road out of town. Some time after that, just after four o'clock, we stopped at a natural bore where a pipe was gushing water out of the ground like a fire hydrant - this was in the EO notes as a possibly good place to camp. There was a discussion in the back of the truck which I didn't really get involved in, but the upshot was that about half the people wanted to continue the extra hour or so into In Salah. Mick was pissed off because he hates staying in towns if he can avoid it and certainly a lot of us agreed with his sentiments. So we pressed on, finally pulling into In Salah just before six as it was becoming reasonably dark.

Some of the books tell you about the Arab guy who owns the camping ground and hangs out at the Restaurant Carrefour in the centre of town. He is very friendly and apparently quite famous for his ability to ski down the sand dunes that are gradually cutting the town in half. We immediately located him and he jumped into his little utility and guided us to the campsite on the southern outskirts of town. Robbie, Peter and J-P immediately returned to town to stay in the only reasonable hotel. The rest of us partook of the one cold showers (not all at once!) and ate dinner under the "shelter shed" like structure constructed largely of palm leaves. We also slept under this. We had a raging fire that night with Richard wildly throwing palm leaves onto the fire - he, like Mick, was particularly pissed off that we were in town rather than camped out at the bore, so was letting out his frustration through the fire. Bed was late - midnight - while Mick and Richard got stuck into the remaining red wine and played loud music until all kinds of ridiculous hours of the morning - not that it worried me - if I want to sleep, I sleep regardless of any distractions.

So a new month dawned, with the usual cold and clear desert climate, which would develop into the usual stinking hot but very dry heat of the day. We arose late with Mick and Rich showing signs of their hard night at the fire! Then it was into town at eight o'clock to shop and then head southwards towards Tamanrasset ("Tam"). The town, while small, was chaotic due to the independence day activities and when we eventually stopped on one of the sandy back streets, there were school children marching in procession. I stayed on the truck while others shopped. From there it was to the hotel to pickup the "city slickers". The bar people were also trying to obtain some wine and this ended up taking a long time. In the end, I think they gave up and we eventually got away just after ten. I wandered into a hotel, which was fairly basic and like most of Algeria, the staff were unhelpful and unenthusiastic about everything. The hotels are mostly government owned and the staff just don't care.

The tarmac road to the south is excellent for several hundred kilometres and we motored steadily through the flat and featureless terrain. Not a rise, let alone a tree or any sign of civilisation could be seen in all directions. By lunchtime we had entered a patch of slight undulations and stopped on a new alignment where the new road was being built but not yet sealed. It was searingly hot but nevertheless quite comfortable for those of us who are used to hot dry climates. Provided you keep drinking lots of water you don't suffer, and we all kept our drink containers filled and downed several cup fulls of water during lunch.

The tarmac continued for a little way after lunch and then we encountered the first long stretch of "piste" where the new road was blocked off and we had to drive for maybe 40 kilometres on sandy tracks beside the road. In places these became a veritable maze of deep sandy tracks wandering literally a kilometre or more from the tarmac. There was quite a lot of other traffic, including Peugeots and trucks. The dust was very thick so you could only pass someone or be passed by being on a different track. The hardest part was the corrugations, which shake everything apart.



A little further south and after a short stretch of tarmac we could see the mountain range ahead and to the east, through which runs the road at Arak Gorge. Then we encountered a stretch of about 10 kilometres of the roughest corrugations and rocks I have ever seen - a new piece of road still being constructed. The tarmac resumed just before Arak Gorge and it being almost five o'clock, we stopped, about 500 metres off the road. It was a beautiful setting with the rugged mountains almost all around. After setting up I went for a walk along the road into the Gorge, figuring it would be too dark in the morning for photographs. It was a worthwhile stroll and I returned just as the sun was setting.

The sight of the new moon and Venus in the twilight completed the wonderful scene. Doc Ian was considering taking a photograph of the moon, Venus, mountains and twilight so I joined in too, borrowing his tiny tripod. He had an identical camera to mine and it was now working fine although its shutter had jammed a few days earlier when he took it up the sand dune without proper protection. Ian was a really nice guy, always ready to help and offer sensible comment and advice. He never made a big thing of the fact that he was a doctor, although whenever Mick asked for advice on medical matter he would always oblige. Later in the trip when George developed a tropical ulcer, Doc Ian was in there doing whatever he could. It was always comforting to know that we had a doctor and two nurses in the group!



It was clear and still and I, once again, had an early night. I think the reason some people were able to stay up later was that they slept on the truck during the day (actually the cause and effect are perhaps the reverse of that!). I, on the other hand, refused to sleep during the day, wanting to take in every sight there was to be had, and to achieve this, I refused to stay up late on most occasions. The next morning was still and there was a slight mist hanging as we passed through the gorge. Once through the gorge, which is uneventful but quite picturesque, we stopped at the small village of Arak for 20 minutes to get water. The good tarmac didn't last much further and we



were soon into a stretch of very bad washouts amidst quite pretty country with rugged hills all around us. A long stretch of piste followed as the new road was unavailable for use.

By 10.30 we reached the turnoff to the tomb of Moulay Hassan, some Arab guy who walked to Mecca and is buried here. The story goes that if you don't drive around his tomb three times you will be befallen by some great ill, and thus we did the right thing. After the usual photographs it was back to the main road (which was no different from the side track) and continued south.

A bit after eleven we entered a valley of sorts which continued for about 20 kilometres, the road being a mixture of reasonable tarmac and rough corrugated washed away sections. Then we were stopped by an army post and these guys were just not letting anyone through. We all stayed on the truck, except Mick and J-P who was offering his usual French linguistic skills, no doubt tempered with his French diplomacy. Several other vehicles arrived on the scene as well, including some guys in a Peugeot 504 and some other tourists in a 4WD of some sort. Eventually, after 20 minutes, we were convinced we would have to go back. They had told us there was a bypass track about 20 kilometres back. The excuse was supposedly military exercises. I believe the guys in the 504 were eventually let through, no doubt after the exchange of some money or goods.



We were back at the bypass at 12.30 and had gone only a couple of kilometres when we saw an oncoming overland truck. It was a big open cabin German MAN ex-army truck run by a company called Okapi. The driver was a British girl and in fact I think there were only 2 guys and about 6 girls on the truck. We had lunch with them and exchanged stories. The driver had had some difficulties getting into Algeria at In Guezzam, but eventually succeeded after persevering. It can be very risky trying that caper, since if you don't have a visa to get back into the previous country (in her case, the Niger visa would probably have been single entry) and they won't let you into the next country, you can literally be stuck in no man's land! Others told stories of Zaire and the mud and insects which all seemed rather a long way off as we sat here in 40° dry heat with nothing but

sand and rock all around. We got away from lunch after an hour, Steve having had one of the girls give him a "Mohican" hair cut of sorts with clippers she had.

The next hour and a half were on this bypass which was sandy and meandering but the scenery was superb. We then rejoined the main road and continued south on good tarmac to the small village of In Ecker, adjacent to the mountain of the same name (2051 metres or 6730 feet high). We were still 166 kilometres from Tam, which we would be able to reach with ease the next day provided the tarmac continued and there were no other unforeseen problems. There we refuelled and bought drinks. The stop stretched to an hour and once we finally got away it was time to camp, which Mick did just a few kilometres south where he took a track westward into a rocky area about 2 kilometres from the road. It was once again a delightful desert campsite.

After setting up, George and Marshall went for a walk into the desert, or perhaps back into the village, since they were supposedly into fraternising with the locals. Dinner was at seven o'clock but they hadn't returned and indeed when I went to bed under the stars at 9.30, they had still not returned. It was clear and cold and some people were becoming genuinely concerned for their safety. By now the moon had set and it was so dark that even if they had a torch they would be hard pressed to locate us with the campsite set down among some rocky hills. After I was in bed, Steve claimed to hear shouts "in the night" and a few of them decided to start shouting back and banging saucepans. This went on seemingly for hours and I went to sleep. George and Marshall did find us in the end, but I have no idea what time it was. They were a bit cold but otherwise OK.

It was a quick getaway the next morning after arising after 6 am. We were looking forward to reaching Tamanrasset by lunchtime and organising the Hoggar Mountains trip. Alas it was not to be! A mere 30 minutes down the good tarmac road, just at the turnoff to Hirharfok, the engine rattle reappeared - another dropped valve. Mick very quickly had the rocker cover off and by eight o'clock it was confirmed. It looked like a long hot day with almost no shade to be found. This time I decided that hitching into town was the best course of action. I had intended to take a night in a Tam hotel anyway - it's one of the few ways to get rid of some of the Algerian money that we were compelled to change at the border. The trailer was already open and I quickly gathered together a few essentials and was ready to go. Figuring that French language would help I "teamed up" with J-P.

It was just a few minutes before two Peugeot 504's appeared and we got in the back of one. Robbie and Peter got into the other. These French guys were taking these cars to Niger from France to sell them. They can apparently buy them quite cheaply second hand in France and get a good enough price in Niamey to well and truly cover air fares and other expenses. The cheap fuel in Algeria would help, plus the fact that French people can travel through these countries very easily without any visas or other hassles. So the trip into Tam was filled with French conversation, but I enjoyed the scenery even though the road had some bad stretches and the 504's back suspension was shot!

They dropped us off and we walked through much of Tam, which is about 2 km from one end to the other. There is a fascinating mixture of tribes and races in Tam as it is a kind of halfway point between the Arabic north and the black sub Sahara. The majority are Berbers from the north with a minority of Fulani and Hausa from the south, with the Tuareg, the real desert people as well. We inspected one hotel which was pretty awful and proceeded to the "best hotel in town", picking up some morning tea along the way. The Hotel Tahat is typical of Algeria - basic and run down but clean, staff incredibly unhelpful, and relatively expensive - our twin share room would cost us 240 Dinar, or about US\$30. The place was crawling with French tourists who fly into Tam to "see the Sahara", usually doing an overnight trip out to the Hoggars, as we would be doing. When we got

into our room we found there was no water, but this is quite normal - it only gets turned on at certain times of the day. There was no HOT water at any stage and the cold water was very cold!

J-P and I walked back into the centre of town just after midday and picked up some lunch in a little cafe - some cus cus and lamb, plus tea for 20 Dinars - US\$2.50. Most of the other shops were closed as is their habit in the hot middle part of the day, so we then went back to the hotel and the water was on, so it was time for showers and laundry. We subsequently went back into town after four to get postcards and go to the Post Office where the Poste Restante was open despite it being Friday, which is the sabbath for Moslems. I picked up a letter from home. Thence we went to the office of one of the tour operators that Mick had told us about to try to organise the Hoggar trip. The guy there was very friendly and helpful, speaking mostly to J-P in French, but also to me in very good English. The trip was booked, subject to availability of vehicles, and would cost each of us 325 Dinars or about US\$40 for the 4WD trip, overnight accommodation, dinner and breakfast. EO ended up refunding this to us as it was meant to be included in the whole trip, but Mick wasn't sure at that stage. This worked to our advantage since we paid for it with our Algerian compulsory exchange money but got it back in US dollars!

After a stroll through the souk and some afternoon tea, we wandered back past the hotel to the camping ground, which is on the outskirts of town to the south. There was no sign of the truck yet, although we figured they must be due soon. We left a message for them regarding the Hoggar trip then wandered back to a restaurant on the eastern side of town that had been recommended to us by the tour operator. Only a few hundred metres from the camping ground we saw Merv coming towards us and flagged them down. I felt bad that it was my turn to cook but Dale would have to manage on her own.

This restaurant was really superb. The guy running it was so friendly and helpful, and it was clean and well decorated. The food was excellent - green wheat soup, macaroni and stew, then custard and coffee, all for 60 Dinars or about US\$7.50. We got back to the hotel after nine o'clock and partook of a glass of Muscat, which seemed to be about the only alcohol they had. All in all, it had been a good day in Tam, although I couldn't think of much else to do in this basic tourist town, yet we would have to kill another day since we couldn't all go to the Hoggars on the one night.

I awoke at seven the next morning - fine and warm of course - what else slap bang in the middle of the Sahara?! Breakfast was the best Algeria had to offer - not much! Bread, jam and coffee. Oh well, it was included in the room price! We checked out and walked to the camping ground where the others were still finishing off breakfast, then went into town on the truck. I helped with the shopping, walking out to the bakery which is on the north east side of town and very hard to find. After all it was still my turn to cook and I organised lunch once we got back just before midday.





The first load to the Hoggars - one 4WD Toyota with 6 on board - left just after one and the rest of us basically relaxed for the hotter part of the afternoon, reading books or writing postcards. The campsite was quite crowded with many tourists of all varieties and in all manner of vehicles. Tam is literally the crossroads of the Sahara. Later in the day we went back into town on the truck with Mick dropping us off and going to fill up with diesel - basically our last chance before leaving Algeria although he was able to top up in In Guezzam just prior to the border. Fuel is so cheap in Algeria that it is worth being full up when you leave. I bought, wrote and posted some more postcards. Some went to the hotel for drinks after dinner but I relaxed and went to bed relatively early again. It was a typically cold and clear night and, needless to say, most of us were sleeping out.

We arose next morning at a leisurely hour and had a slow and quiet breakfast. The others returned just before eleven o'clock from the Hoggars, reporting a good sunrise and Gert was able to tell us it was just a couple of degrees above freezing. I was preparing to go, complete with thermal underwear, gloves and beanie. After lunch we departed for the Hoggars, two Toyotas with 6 in each. I think our driver was a Toureg, and we were expecting him to stop and pray as Gert had reported their driver had done several times on the journey. Ours didn't although we stopped him a couple of times for photographs. The scenery is strikingly beautiful, reminiscent of Australia's Flinders Ranges, although the peaks are more upright and narrow. The road was terrible, although you could have done it in a 2WD with care - it was just very rough and rocky in places, not to mention narrow and tight - it would have been an even slower journey in the truck. We climbed from Tam's 1390 metre elevation to 2780 metres (9120 ft) at Assekram where we would spend the night. The trip took 3h 20m for 82 km, an average speed of 25 km/h!

Upon arrival at Assekram and dumping our gear into the room where we would all sleep on foam mattresses, we immediately walked up to the Hermitage. This is the building where Father Charles de Foucauld, a dedicated Christian, built a small stone building early this century. From here you get a clear view all around of the magnificent mountains. We waited here until sunset, just after six, although cloud and haze made it disappointing. Perhaps sunrise would be better! Back at the basic stone accommodation the locals were preparing dinner - cus cus and stew of course! I don't think Algerians ever eat anything else! It took ages to arrive and we eventually didn't eat until about eight o'clock. Bed was early in preparation for the early rise for dawn, and it was surprisingly hot - the stone structure really holds the heat and it was actually too hot to be in the sleeping bag!



Someone's alarm went off at 5.30 - "geez some of these people are keen" I thought to myself. I knew that dawn would be just before seven and it would only take about 15 minutes to climb up to the Hermitage. Still, everyone decided to arise at 5.50 so I too got dressed for the cold. It was chilly outside, perhaps 3°C, but not too bad. We were at the top fairly soon and watched the gradually increasing glow in the east. There were a lot of people there, perhaps 30, from many countries - quite amazing when you contemplate the location! Dawn was superb - definitely got some great photographs. We descended as the warmth of the day took over from the cool of the night, departed by 8 am and were back in Tam at 11 am - a rough but enjoyable drive.

We planned to get out of Tam as far as possible, certainly beyond the tarmac, which goes about 70 km, before the day was done. So after a quick lunch we packed and departed, picking up Robbie and Peter at the hotel on the way - where else would they be? Comments were being passed about our intrepid travelling companions as we waited for them to emerge from the "luxurious" Algerian hotel! In town we needed to pick up some supplies, then Mick had to visit the police before departing town. The tarmac south was really bad in places and it was a joy when it ended and we got onto the "unimproved" piste. The majority of this road to Niger is just "drive where you like", typically several kilometres wide. There are BIG kilometre posts (about 2 m high!) so it's difficult to get lost. We camped on the side of the road (or was it on the road?) just past the 120 km post with 280 km left to In Guezzam. This was about five o'clock and it was becoming overcast and hazy as the sun went down. We were right beside a low rocky hill and some people erected their beds on the hill. In fact the campsite was one of the most pleasant I can recall.





The next day would see us to the Niger border although we would not traverse it that day since it is unwise to hit a border late in the day lest you get delayed for many hours and end up either having to camp there or leave well after dark. Thus, we would head south to In Guezzam, top up with fuel and water, camp nearby and go through the border the following day.





The journey south was interrupted many times by either short sandy stretches that demanded sand matting, or someone needing to squat behind a passing sand dune. I was one of those in need with some nasty stomach cramps and associated explosive bowel movements - must have been something we ate at Assekram. Fortunately it didn't last more than a few hours although I ate relatively little for lunch just in case it was going to get worse. Lunch was literally "on the road" which was probably 3 km wide at that point and I recall there being a lovely mirage lake behind us - I even took a photograph of it! And yes, you can photograph mirages! After lunch Mick got bored and gave Noel a drive - he faired OK in the sandy conditions although the gear changes were a bit rough!

We pulled into In Guezzam, a nondescript Arabic town with sand streets and low mud brick buildings. This has to be one of the loneliest towns I can recall, and I guess it basically exists to support the nearby border post. I bought some coffee with the last few Dinar I had as the truck was refuelled. We had arrived just after four o'clock, a total of a bit over 8 hours to do 280 km - not exactly a quick average speed - about 35 km/h! We pulled out and headed to a well just south of the town. Here we filled up with water, keeping this water separate and for emergency use only, since it was very sulphurous. In fact I washed up in it later and it was damned near sulphuric acid! Most people grabbed a wash of some kind as they hauled bucket after bucket of water out of this well and tossed it over people. We then headed back through the town to a spot about 5 km north of the town, preferring not to camp too close to the border. Even then, the local customs man came and visited us during the evening, probably seeing the glow of our campfire, but he found nothing of interest.



After dinner there was a fair bit of frivolity, mostly because Robbie put some "yukky" music on the stereo so Mick put some of his music, probably Led Zeppelin or Jethro Tull, on his system in the cab and kept turning it up louder and louder. Soon Robbie had been blasted away but there was a "cab party" going on with people piling into the cab through the doors and turret. Mick was letting

off steam, obviously unhappy with the situation with Robbie and Peter. Later in the evening as most of us had gone to bed I could hear Mick and Urs going on and on about Robbie. I could tell something had to give - there was no way we were all going to let Robbie and Peter spoil our trip, although I hoped Mick wouldn't do anything drastic as it would probably cost him his job and that would spoil our trip too!

Next morning we were away a bit late at 7.30, stopping again at the well to top up the water, and arriving at the border post about 5 km out of town. The exit formalities were far less tedious than entering, although we each had to file through the customs office individually and hand over our currency declaration form but no-one had their money counted. Even the search of the truck and baggage was very cursory. In all, we were there for 1h 51m. Then they opened this big wire gate - bizarre really considering you could drive around it (and be used for target practice) - and we headed off into the 17 km wide "no mans land" to the Niger border post.



## **NIGER - Into Black Africa**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 8.

Distance Travelled: 2149 km.

Niger is a totally landlocked country, inhabited mainly by the Hausa and Fulani, both of which are Muslim, like their Arabic neighbours to the north. It is one of the poorest countries in Africa, with an economy substantially supported by France through Uranium sales. The officialdom can be stifling, with police checks and passport stamps required by all travellers.

Population: 7 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 10.

Main Exports: Uranium (93% of GNP).

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$220.

Currency: Central African Franc (CFA) shared by many countries in the region and guaranteed by the French, thus no black market. French currency can be used in lieu. FF1 = CFA50 (fixed) which makes about CFA300 = US\$1.

Languages: French, Hausa, Fulani.

Independence: 1960 from France.

Government: Military dictatorship.

Climate: Varies from dry to very dry! Maximum daily temperatures rarely below 30°C.

As we arrived at the Niger border post it was an apparent hive of activity with lots of trucks spread across a wide open area. Unlike the Algerian post, this one had no pretence of fences and gates - just a seemingly random assortment of maybe 5 buildings scattered across this long sand hill. A small clump of trees gave some shade to the main building from where the officials operated. Most trucks were fully unloaded, their contents strewn across the sand like they had been accidentally overturned. Small groups of blacks squatted in the shade beside most vehicles. Apparently they were the truck top passengers waiting for their transport to be cleared by customs. There were some ordinary vehicles too - mostly Peugeot 504s or 505s, plus a Renault 4WD with some middle aged Italian tourists that we would encounter a few times in our travels.

We were hopeful of a quick passage and Mick quickly had the bundle of passports into the officials. Some of us were out lazing about in the shade of the truck, since there was precious little wind and it was quickly becoming hot in the truck. There were of course no amenities - just the back wall of a nearby derelict building, and you had to be careful where you stood! J-P had located the supply of coca-cola, a commodity that we had not seen since Morocco. A 300 ml bottle cost 5 French Francs or about one Australian dollar - it seemed expensive at the time and it was considering in Niamey we could buy them for CFA 65 or about 25 Australian cents!

The black soldiers came and searched our luggage around 11.30 - we had been forewarned and had the trailer fully unpacked. They checked everyone's bag, but only casually, looking mostly for things of amusement like tampons (no, I didn't have any)! With that step completed we thought we must be nearly off, but alas, it seemed the man with the stamp had decided he had done enough for the day and wouldn't stamp our passports - no reason - we just had to wait. J-P had been pleading with him in French but it only seemed to make him more adamant that it was



lunchtime and we'd have to wait. We decided to have lunch ourselves and Gert proclaimed it to be 38°C in the shade. We waited and waited. Eventually the passports were returned at 3 pm and we were off. The border crossing had taken 4h 21m, even longer than Algeria, and here we hadn't needed to fill out any currency declarations.

From the border post at Assamakka the road heads almost due east and continues through very flat country with just a few low sand dunes and balisages or markers, usually forty-four gallon drums full of rocks, marking the track. The track can be a kilometre or more wide but with a reasonable amount of traffic (at least a few vehicles a day) there are usually pretty clear wheel tracks. Still, I wouldn't like to drive it during or immediately after a sand storm. The map shows a junction just east of Assamakka and I didn't really notice it, but we went the wrong way, picking up a track south that goes direct to Agadez bypassing Arlit. Mick realised this after a while, when it became obvious that we were heading south and not east, and we retraced our steps having entered some quite pretty sand dune country. We wasted about 45 minutes there, but it didn't really matter, and we pressed on until dusk when we stopped a bit off the track nestled nicely between a couple of low sand dunes, actually hidden from the road. The road east was quite undulating and uncomfortable, and we had been bogged once, albeit briefly, so we were pleased to stop after a tiring day of mostly border waiting.

It had been decided that I would swap cooking partners with Ann so as to team up with J-P, who Ann was no longer able to tolerate. I considered it a good exercise in tolerance and patience although I think I regretted it a month or more later. Still, we cooked up ratatouille and fried rice. Dinner was quite late after the late stop. It was a clear night and was becoming crisply cold. I relaxed a bit after dinner and had a good chat to Mick about Robbie and how we felt about her disruption.

I was starting to understand a little more of what Mick was about - the overland driver is a strange breed and we saw a lot of them during the trip. Some are hopeless cases - crude, vulgar and incompetent - just drifters having a good time travelling the world for free. The EO drivers, and I saw a total of seven of them counting Mick, fall into a different category. The company trains them well - not only as mechanics but also with a lot of common sense. At 29, Mick was close to becoming their longest serving driver - three years after stints in South America and on the London - Kathmandu runs. Three years is a long time - most drivers move on after a couple of years. Yet Mick loves the job - if you can call it a job. But it is a job - it can be a big responsibility and certainly EO drivers accept that responsibility. Mick's strengths other than straight mechanical and driving skills include an ability to get on with almost anyone, and what's more, to "sum them up" pretty quickly and get the most out of them. He accepts people for what they are and doesn't try to push them into roles that they would not enjoy or be good at. With me, Mick had soon figured out that I was the careful methodical type, one who had a keen interest in maps and schedules, and he used me when and if he could. Towards the end of the trip he damn near relied on me in cases to decide what we should do next. On the other hand he would never criticise me for not chopping wood or other such tasks since he could tell I would be no good at it and wouldn't enjoy it. Above all, Mick loves life and enjoys every moment of it - simple enough for any of us to say but do we really achieve it? He simply "belongs" on the road - he loves it and feels that it is his life. It's not a lifestyle I would want on a long term basis - six months maximum, but he simply loves the day to day challenges, the uncertainties, the unexpected, the new people and places and, of course, the booze. What overland driver doesn't love his beer?

We were away just after seven the next morning after I had arisen first and had breakfast going well and truly before dawn. The track continued in its sandy vein. We managed to not get bogged until 8.30, Mick having completely mastered sand driving and the lightening changes into low ratio

on the move. I recall seeing a "blue man" wandering the desert somewhere on this section - its incredible to contemplate where he was coming from or going to - there simply is NOTHING out there. We stopped for a piss break just prior to Arlit, in fact just after passing the Uranium mine that is located about 5 kilometres north of the town. The road is then properly made and we were in the relatively small town by mid morning. The plan was to go to the bank, do food shopping and then keep going south, but we first had to get our passports stamped by the police - this applies at every town in Niger! I changed some French Francs into CFAs at the bank which is done routinely at the fixed exchange rate, not requiring a passport or any real paperwork. In fact, you can use French currency on the streets and get change in CFAs, although some shop keepers don't like you giving them a 100 Francs or 5000 CFAs note.

It turned out the police wouldn't let us proceed - something about the President being in town, so they wouldn't stamp our passports until the next day. So we completed our shopping and headed back out to the north and went straight to this place that Mick had in his notes, out past the Uranium mine, where the Government is sponsoring an irrigation project and they grow fruit and vegies. The place was a bit run down but it provided shade and water so was a pleasant spot to stop for a few hours. We had a leisurely lunch and a few of us took a wash of sorts in the nearby irrigation channel - there was certainly plenty of nice fresh cool water. There were few other people around but someone told us we had to leave by three o'clock, which we did. We then just headed out maybe another 5 km north into the desert and found a camp site beside a small lonesome tree - not for its shade, which was minimal, but just because it was there. It was completely flat with just the odd low tree visible in all directions.



By the time we had set up, it was starting to cool down. We lazed about, had a beer, etc. Dale decided she must have a "call of nature" - she headed off into the desert - there was no cover but if you went far enough you just disappeared into the haze! The sunset was superb - I have a great photograph of the campsite silhouetted against it. We had a good dinner - we were able to buy meat at the market in Arlit, even though it looked worse than ever, but once well cooked it was

OK. I drank a fair bit of wine. Some of the guys burnt a tyre - it was a great show, but it upset some of the group who thought it was environmentally unsound - maybe they were right, but it was not worth making a fuss over. The desert is covered with discarded tyres and that isn't too environmentally great either. I retired to bed under a sky that was becoming more hazy as we headed south due to the Harmattan, the wind that blows off the desert at that time of the year. It steadily worsened as we headed south.

We arose latish next morning and it was clear and hotting up by the time we got away. We were in town just after eight and had no trouble getting the police stamps in our passports straight away. We also had to do shopping and I helped Ann, Jenny and Gert, as Dale was not feeling too well. We picked up some firewood in one of the back streets before leaving town - it costs a fair bit and in any case, I wonder where they get it from. It was all tied up in bundles, and was so dry it burned really well. We were eventually on the good tarmac road south after a brief police check on the outskirts of town. The road was indeed excellent virtually the whole way to Niamey, save for some roadworks. The roads have been built by the French to support the Uranium mine.



The country gradually changed - ever so slightly - there was more and more green as we went from desert to savannah. We took a long leisurely lunch and Ann took the opportunity to marinate the meat that she intended to cook up into a stew that night. Others cut up the firewood - mostly Gert of course, who had a seemingly endless supply of energy. And all this was in about 38°C heat. We pulled into Agadez at just after two o'clock and went straight to the police station for another set of passport stamps. We aimed to stop for two hours so that people could have a look around town, do some shopping, others look for a hotel (yes, Robbie, Peter and Jean-Paul!). I wandered into the market area, generally taking in this fascinating mixture of cultures - mostly Muslims, but a variety of tribes - Fulani, Tuareg, Hausa. I found a lovely clean icecream shop and it looked so good I couldn't resist and sat and ate one with a few of the others. I wasn't sick, but Doc Ian had one too and was. You win some and you lose some!



I returned to the truck after an hour, having promised to takeover guard duties. We always have at least two people on the truck - one sitting at the back and one in the cab. I sat in the cab, but it was very hot as it was parked facing into the western sun. I was continually pestered by small black children wanting gifts - "cadeau" they kept saying - "piss off" I kept saying. We got away just before five and headed to the campsite on the outskirts of town, just a few minutes away. It was a pleasant spot and had plenty of water. I got some laundry done and we all got to have a shower, - cold, but not bad - in fact a very pleasant temperature. By dinner time Doc Ian was very unwell, vomiting and bad stomach pains. I fixed him a cup of tea. Dale was also pretty bad but was able to sleep. I helped Ann with the meal, doing the fireside cooking, stirring etc. She makes a lovely stew. We had a good night beside the fire and I didn't get to bed until eleven since we were planning on a late start next morning. I used my mozzie net for the first time as we were just getting into mozzie territory, although I don't believe I actually saw any until Niamey - there simply wasn't enough surface water around Agadez to sustain them in any numbers.

It was a lovely cool morning as we arose late - November 11. We got into town just after eight and planned to stay most of the morning. I wandered town with the intention of buying some of the silver jewellery for which Agadez is famous. I checked out one shop but it looked too expensive. In next door I saw some things at a better price and ended up with a large Agadez cross and a pair of small Agadez cross earrings. These cost me, together, CFA3000 or about US\$10. You always feel like you've been ripped off in these situations because everything else is SO cheap, you think that these must be high prices. Yet, in our terms they are unquestionably very cheap. I walked out of the shop and was immediately surrounded by street salesmen - teenagers mostly, and an older Fulani guy. One guy had a really nice looking necklace with an Agadez cross - he was wearing it! I offered him CFA750 (about US\$2.50) and he took it - geez, I was ripped off back in the shop. The Fulani guy followed me even after the others had lost interest. I eventually bought the silver bracelet off his wrist for CFA750 also. On the way back to the truck I stopped in a stationery shop to get some postcards, 10 for CFA1500 - it made the jewellery look cheap! Unfortunately the post office wasn't open - it was Saturday, so I'd have to wait until Niamey to post them - probably quicker and more reliable anyway and we'd be there in two days.

We left town just before midday and headed southwest along the good tarmac. Lunch was after we'd covered about 110 km. It was flat and straight so we were making pretty good time - averaging a bit above 70 km/h. It was also the usual hot dry climate, although the haze was increasing noticeably. We pressed on all afternoon, entering more inhabited and cultivated country. There were many villages, people on the roads, carts towed by donkeys and buffaloes, herds of cattle and goats. We crossed a large river near Abalak, where there was a dam, presumably for irrigation. We camped off the road in low scrub at 5.30 pm, getting bogged initially in the very soft sand.

We were about 40 km short of the town of Tahoua which meant we would make Niamey comfortably the next day. The sunset was superb - the haze intensifies the colour. The full moon came up opposite it and filled the lovely night sky and with some breeze getting up, the haze dissipated so we got a nice starry sky. With the breeze there would be no mozzies but most of us used nets just in case. Bed was early after a reasonably long and tiring day.

It was another lovely morning as we arose before dawn with none of us suspecting that that day would be the most famous day of the trip! We were away at seven o'clock sharp and reached the Tahoua police check soon after. Passports were stamped although we bypassed this town which even the books recommend that you don't enter - must be something unpleasant about it! We continued south to Birnin Konni and then west towards Niamey on the highway that more or less

follows the Nigerian border. We would later retrace our steps to Birnin Konni before taking the road to Maradi and thence into Nigeria.

Things had been tense with Peter and Robbie, that was clear. Peter seemed to be in a bad mood most of the time. At the morning piss stop he made a remark to me about the amount of driving we were doing and that he wasn't enjoying it. "If this is what overlanding is all about, you can stuff it!" he said. I had had enough of this and told him squarely that if he was going to continue with these remarks he should get off the trip and let the rest of us enjoy it! Little did I know that he would - later that day.

Certainly the day was mostly about driving and we would cover the greatest distance in one day for the entire trip, almost 600 km. After a short lunch stop just past Dogondoutchi, all seemed quiet, especially down the back of the truck where I was, alternately sitting down and kneeling to look out at the passing scenery, villages and people going about their everyday activities. At about 2.30 pm as we were passing through the medium sized town of Dosso all hell broke loose up the front of the truck. It seems that Robbie had asked J-P to turn down the stereo and since his response was inadequate she had cut the wire to the speaker! He was then repairing the connection, using his pen knife to strip the wire. She somehow interfered again and he became aggressive, threatening her with his knife. A scuffle ensued with Peter and J-P grabbing each other. Robbie's hand was cut in a very minor way. I didn't witness much of this, although I certainly saw that aggressive look in J-P's face, which I was to fully appreciate before the trip was over. The "stop button" was soon pressed by someone and we pulled up. Mick immediately sensed trouble and we were all ordered off, except Dale who remained "on guard", and gathered outside the truck while Mick asked "ok, so what happened?!" I, quite frankly, was laughing to myself at the stupidity and childish nature of the situation. These are supposedly grown adult people.

We were soon away again, Robbie and Peter down the back opposite me, and everyone understandably quiet. We arrived on the outskirts of Niamey a couple of hours later and stopped briefly at the Police Check. Here kids sell bottle of coke at CFA150 or about 70 cents. They wait patiently while you drink, since the bottle is worth a lot and must be returned to them. They make their money out of the fact that you buy coke elsewhere for as little at CFA65 or about 25 cents.

Niamey is a fairly large sprawling city, perhaps 10 kilometres in diameter and with a population of around half a million. Many of its streets are tree lined and overall it has a pleasant enough atmosphere. We proceeded directly to what Mick thought was the police station but we had to move to another place around the corner. Here he was to get the passports stamped, but it seemed they wanted to keep them, but we needed them to put into the Nigerian embassy next morning to get visas, so he held onto them with the intention of getting them stamped after they came back from the embassy. Robbie and Peter left us at that point, with Urs and Doc Ian having to once again half unpack the trailer to locate their bags. It would be almost the last time we would see them and I think we all knew it at that point as they walked off in search of a hotel without even looking back.

We proceeded out to the west side of town where the camping ground is located, perhaps 3 km from the centre of town. It was a very sandy area and we duly got bogged, albeit not seriously. Before we left the truck we discussed the day's event and Mick expressed his grave concern at the likely repercussions. While he had no involvement, if the pair did leave the trip, his leadership would fall into question from London. Robbie would likely complain and demand a refund and we would be asked to provide our versions of the incident. Mick asked for any further input and despite the fact that J-P was there, I stated that I thought that in any confrontation on this trip

there was no excuse for violence in any form and that you simply have to back off if it is developing.

The camping ground was comfortable, with good showers, cold of course, a bar selling beer and coke, and resident frogs milling around the taps. Despite being in semi desert savannah country, Niamey lies on the large Niger River which flows from Timbuktu in Mali out to a massive delta in southern Nigeria. The city has no shortage of water. Mosquitoes, however, could now be a real hazard and we all used nets. Richard and Andrew were cooking and we had spaghetti bolognaise and garlic bread. We discussed the prospects for the next night and we all agreed to make our own plans, some of us planning to investigate dinner and a movie at a place called Marine House described in Africa on a Shoestring.

We awoke next morning just after six to a warm and hazy morning. Mozzies were visible on the mosquito net. I became used to seeing them first thing in the morning although they usually disappeared as soon as the sun was up. The few we saw here were of interest, but nothing like what we would see in the depths of the Zaire jungle a month or so later. We departed for town on the truck just before eight, aiming for banks and the Nigerian embassy. Some people needed to change money - I didn't since French Francs work fine. The forms for the Nigerian visas were duly completed (in English for a change!) and we left the truck with the rest of the day to ourselves.

I wandered town, mostly with Gert, going to the post office, market and other shops. Morning tea was a nice creamy cake from a Patisserie - if the French did nothing else to these countries it at least taught them to produce good bread and pastries. We then decided to become really decadent and went to the French supermarket where we saw everything you would see in any western supermarket - cheeses, French wines, etc. Unfortunately it was all horrifically expensive, at least in African terms. Later that day I returned to purchase a Brie and some water biscuits for CFA2280 or about US\$7.60. I guess it's not all that much cheaper in Australia but in any case, it was worth it. We hadn't seen produce like this for over a month. The contrast between the supermarket and the open African market across the street was unbelievable. There we could see butchers operating on smelly fly ridden carcasses in the open, bare breasted women selling their fruit and vegetables, not to mention the dried insects, which seem to be a delicacy to many Africans.

We lunched at a Cafe called Damsi's down near the river. It was recommended as being cheap, clean and reasonably good, and that was correct. It even had a clean toilet with toilet paper! The environment was pleasant as we could sit outside, in the shade. From the other patrons it was obviously a popular spot for expatriates as well as native locals. I sat there after lunch, admiring the scenery (which included lots of lizards running around on the rock garden), writing postcards and passing the time of day with quite a few others from the trip who had gathered there.

As the afternoon wore on, Gert and I returned to the post office to send more cards and then to the supermarket, which didn't reopen until after four o'clock. Odd hours they have in Africa - things basically shut down in the heat of the day. We then wandered back to the campsite, perhaps 3 kilometres, through pleasant tree lined streets and also through a small market area near the campsite. Mick, Richard and others were there when we arrived and we all quickly devoured the Brie that I had purchased!

Some of us had planned to go to this Marine House for dinner and a movie so we set off for the short walk at 6.30 pm. Alas, it wasn't to be found. The Shoestring was completely wrong and nobody had ever heard of this place. It certainly wasn't to be found next to the Tunisian embassy, which we did find, even though that's where the map said it should be. We wandered for a bit longer through many dark back streets - I never felt threatened at any time in this city - and we



eventually located an open air bar and stayed there for a while drinking beer or coke and eating some kebabs that a guy was cooking on a small barbecue.

By eight o'clock we were getting peckish so we wandered in search of a restaurant. Instead we found 2 taxis (there were six of us - Mick, Richard, Steve, J-P, myself and I think, Gert). Finding a taxi can be a challenge when you're a large group since they are mostly Sunny's or Corollas, and clapped out as well! They took us to a fish restaurant, which seemed a bit unusual this far from the sea, but what the heck. The meal was interesting and quite filling. The place seemed clean enough and I enjoyed the night. We eventually got ONE taxi back to the campsite via a strange back streets route, since the driver said he didn't want to get caught carrying more than his permitted four passengers!

We aimed to be at the Nigerian Embassy at eight the next morning but after a late awakening to a very hot day we only managed to get there by 8.30. The prices for the Nigerian visas varied considerably, depending on your nationality, Australian being roughly in the middle at CFA6050 or about US\$20. It was my turn to shop so I wandered off with J-P who bought up big, spending all the money rather quickly on extravagances. We were meant to share the money with Megan and Jeanette but there was little left. I abandoned J-P in the end and helped the girls buy their stuff, including some meat from the bustling market. We were finally finished by eleven, but we didn't get the visas until nearly midday and then they had to get stamped by the police which was fortunately right next door. Unfortunately the police stuffed Mick around for nearly an hour and he eventually returned with them stamped, but in a foul mood from an apparent argument with the policeman who was delaying in search of a bribe. We were immediately off out of town. I was in the cab and immediately navigated us up a blocked off street and we had to negotiate a few narrow lanes to get back onto the correct route out of town. Once past the police check we stopped for lunch.

For the rest of the day we motored steadily eastwards, retracing our steps through Dosso and Dogondoutchi, stopping just after that town. It was a long hot afternoon and matters weren't helped by the choice of campsite, which was in a sandy field full of corn stubble which is unpleasant to walk on. We soon had an area cleared and the girls had dinner underway with my and J-P's assistance. A man with a heard of goats passed by, stopping for a while to stare in amazement at our antics. It was a good meal of meat, vegies and then apple crumble and I stayed up quite late eventually retiring after eleven in a warm hazy night.

I awoke unexpectedly early just after five. The cause was a gut ache - I had been having a very good run, so to speak, and had not really had the slightest sign of sickness other than a few cramps just after Tam. That was about to change. I climbed out of bed and quickly did the proverbial "shitting through the eye of a needle" trick not far from camp. It was just starting to get light as I returned to lay on my bed and groan. Others were starting to stir as we were scheduled to arise at 5.30. I immediately apologised that I would not be assisting with breakfast - not only did I not feel up to it but the rules were clear that if you were sick you did not cook, lest it spread to everyone!

Needless to say I didn't eat anything. I had seen others get sick and in some cases it had dragged on for days, but I knew the procedures well - eat nothing, drink lots, preferably with "Gastrolyte", the wonderful mixture of glucose, salt, sodium bicarb and potassium chloride. I tentatively sipped at a cup of tea - I certainly needed to get down my malaria pills and keep them down, but alas I immediately vomited the remnants of my stomach. At least everyone now knew I was sick! I hung onto my malaria pills, charged my water bottle for the long hot day ahead, and took one more

visit to the bushes before we set off just after seven. I sat at the back, claiming two seats so I could lay down, legs dangling out the back.

I dozed for a while, not feeling too bad, although my stomach was churning. After about an hour we stopped - it was another overland truck coming the other way - from a small English company - "Discovery" - we had seen them in Tam and had shared dinner with some of them at Assekram. They were headed for Benin. I took the opportunity to disappear behind a nearby bush but it seemed my system had pretty much emptied itself already. I drank a cup full of water with a gastrolyte and felt a bit better, except that it was becoming very hot and you really feel the heat when you're not well.



We stopped at 9.30 for about an hour to shop in a small town. I stayed on the truck with a few of the others, mostly lying down. I was feeling thirsty so bought a Fanta from one of the throng of kids outside the truck who were selling all kinds of things. The Fanta tasted good, but alas, it was only minutes later that I leapt from the truck and vomited it out again, nearly collecting a few of the peering black kids in the process. They stood around staring as if they had never seen anyone vomit before - I'm sure they had but perhaps not a white person!

After we got going again the road deteriorated - actually they were rebuilding the road east of Birnin Konin and we spent a lot of time on dusty, rough side tracks. It was terribly hot and the dust was getting sucked in the back of the truck. I felt pretty awful and at lunch time I just laid in the back of the truck sipping at my water. It was nice to not be moving, although the high temperatures were still very uncomfortable. All too soon we were away again and it was a very long and unpleasant afternoon for me as we bounced along mostly terrible roads heading east towards Nigeria. The torture eventually stopped, earlier than expected since we were quite close to the border and Mick didn't want to try to get through that day, preferring to do it first thing the next morning.

The chosen campsite was in pleasant scrub country and I quickly set up my bed in the shade of the cook tent, got a drink with gastrolyte, my malaria pills and some panadiene to stay down, and tried to sleep. It was still quite warm as the sun was only just setting. Some locals appeared and were helping chop firewood. Later they were singing songs with the rest of the group as I relaxed, feeling much better. Dale brought me a cup of tea and I even ate a little plain pasta. Later that night I counted my money in preparation for the border since Nigeria has currency control, although it turned out to be a bit of a joke. There were certainly a lot of natives around the camp that night but I was not terribly interested and dozed off to sleep at a relatively early hour.

The treatment of my gastric upset, the cause of which will never be known (the fish restaurant is the prime suspect), was successful and less than 24 hours after the onset I could say I was fully recovered, albeit a little weak. The next morning I ate some breakfast of cereal and tea. We departed soon after seven and arrived at the border at 7.30. The formalities of leaving Niger were straightforward and we were away after only 40 minutes with no customs search. It is over 5 km to the Nigerian border post where we arrived at 8.20.



## **NIGERIA - Some English Influence At Last!**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 8.

Distance Travelled: 1885 km.

Nigeria is one of the wealthiest countries in Africa, due to its oil resources, mostly in the south. It is also the most populace country in Africa and not surprisingly, it appears to be just as poor as any of its neighbours. We only visited the relatively dry north where agriculture is the only income. The country has a chequered history with much political instability, including that which caused the incredible Biafran famine of the late 60's. For many years after that the country was closed to foreigners and overland tours had to travel through Chad. The route we were taking had only been available since the latest military coup in 1985. The country remains in political and economic turmoil with much corruption and a thriving black market.

Population: 80 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 202.

Main Exports: Oil.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$560.

Currency: Naira, 100 Kobos to the Naira. Official rate is N7 = US\$1. On the back market you readily obtain N10 to the dollar. The largest note is N20 or about US\$3 so money in any quantity is bulky. Money counting is a universal occupation.

Languages: English, Hausa.

Independence: 1960 from England.

Government: Military dictatorship.

Climate: Varies from dry in the north to tropical in the south. The long dry season is from November to March and is only moderated by the cooling Harmattan wind which blows off the desert, bring dust and very hazy conditions.

It seemed unusual to see signs in English, yet we knew it would be that way. And of course, everyone was speaking English. The border was set up in an orderly "British" colonial style and seemed to run quite efficiently. Mick first took the passports and they were stamped by immigration, then our health certificates to the Health people for checking and finally we all had to file through the customs room and fill out the currency declaration. They didn't count the money and there was no real search of the truck. We were off just before ten o'clock after 1h 34m.

All was well as we motored southeast on a good tarmac road. We were looking forward to reaching Kano for a late lunch as it is only 216 km, but we were to encounter some more African delays that would make that hope quickly fade. First there were two roadblocks within the first 10 km. The police had to check everyone's passport and at least one of them was particularly officious. Then we pulled into Katsina, the first big town. Figuring that the banks probably close at around midday, we thought we had better change some money. We all piled into the 1st Bank of Nigeria, Katsina Branch, and lined up to change some travellers cheques. Well, would you believe we finally emerged with our money 2 hours and 20 minutes later! The bureaucracy was phenomenal. By then the bank had closed, most of us had eaten some bread, ferried from the truck into the bank, for lunch, and we were significantly annoyed.

We eventually left the otherwise pleasant town of Katsina at nearly two o'clock and stopped only briefly to pick up firewood enroute to the huge metropolis of Kano. We reached the outskirts at 4.30 where there was a police check then into the dense traffic and masses of people. Mick got lost briefly, as the map in the Shoestring was relatively useless unless you knew the scale and where to start. We eventually located the camping ground, which is actually quite centrally located within walking distance of the Post Office and many of the main shops. It is also next door to a large hotel, which has a bar and a restaurant!

It was five o'clock by the time we pulled in, and Mohammed quickly showed us where to camp and told Mick of the news that another EO truck had left just that morning, headed northwards through Zinder. We had hoped to meet up with them, just to exchange stories, but had missed them by a matter of hours. Mohammed seems to run the campsite and has a number of "hangers on" who act as guards or will do laundry for you. The site is reasonable except that the plumbing seemed to be having all kinds of difficulties and the showers seemed to work unpredictably. Whenever they were found to be working many of us would rush to have a shower, often to only find the water would stop a few minutes later. Most frustrating!

Mohammed offered to change money for us all on the black market, which would give us about 40% more than the official rate. To save him the trouble, I acted as a banker and gathered everyone's money together, noting down each person's request. He would take travellers cheques, francs or pounds, but obviously preferred the good old greenback. I tallied each kind up and he told me the rate that applied for each so I could calculate each person's return. He also got people's currency declarations stamped, at a small fee, so it looked like they had changed money at the bank! He disappeared with all our money, probably US\$500 worth, since we all had to pay for Cameroun visas which were very expensive. Mohammed returned after an hour or so, after dinner, with all the pockets of his Moslem caftan bulging with notes. Nigerian money is so bulky! It took me about an hour to count the money and sort it into each person's pile, most being at least 4 or 5 inches thick of notes. For instance, I changed US\$75, which gave me N750, mostly as N10 notes, ie. 75 notes.

Urs had by now found a place to make phone calls. It was adjacent to a nearby hotel and was like a commercial arm of the local telephone company. Here you could buy any specified number of minutes to an overseas number. Mick, J-P and myself took a cab to this hotel. The cabs don't have meters and when you ask how much, they say "whatever you think is fair". He seemed pleased with the N5 (about 50 US cents) we offered for the 5 minute ride but we later discovered you could get a cab for as little as 2 Naira! I called Australia for 5 minutes costing me N125 or US\$12.50 which is certainly significantly cheaper than it had been in Niger. J-P and I walked most of the way back but took a wrong turn and ended up catching a taxi just so we could find the campsite. The city has a different feeling from previous areas - a kind of western roughness - prostitutes were evident on the streets, advertising hoardings were everywhere, and above all, the place was pretty run down.

I was back at the camp at 10.30 pm and most had gone to the bar next door. Then George romps in with a black woman on his arm. I was sitting in the back of the truck and witnessed the proceedings. Jenny soon appeared in the truck - she had been in bed close to George's bed and when she realised what was happening she had to evacuate the area! As you can imagine, George was given a very hard time the next day, and indeed I think it was final confirmation in many people's minds of just what kind of person he was! I was in bed around eleven as the night was turning decidedly cool, perhaps as low as 13°C, although the mozzies were still around. The others returned from the bar well after midnight.

We awoke quite late next morning, about 7.30 am, to a hot and hazy day. I managed to snatch a shower while there was water and then we prepared for a tour of the city. I left a bundle of dirty laundry with one of the black guys who Mohammed assured us would do a wonderful and cheap job. We left just after nine crammed into a Toyota HiAce which was in pretty bad condition. First stop was the dye pits, still in use, and famous for the striking indigo fabrics they produce. These are supposedly the oldest dye pits in Africa and are inside the old walled city, although most of the wall has fallen down and is barely visible. From there it was to the Emir's Palace, an outstanding example of Hausa architecture. Then across the road to a very interesting museum which has many displays explaining the history of this interesting city which has been an important trading centre for over a thousand years.



We then travelled to a high spot where we could walk up to a lookout, but the view was mostly obscured by the thick haze caused by the Harmattan. Still, you could get some idea of the dense population of this incredibly busy city, supposedly with a population of several million. We were about to leave there when it was discovered our van had a flat tyre. Not surprisingly, there was no jack, so most of the able bodied men lifted one side of the van while the driver constructed a pile of rocks under it. Then there was some other problem - no spanner for the wheel nuts I think, or it may have been that the spare tyre was flat. In any case, the guide decided that we should walk the kilometre or so to the central market which was the next and last stop on the city tour.

The walk was most interesting, as we meandered through back streets, watching the people go about their normal business. Men were herding cattle and goats through tiny alleyways, children were playing in the dust and mud, and women were doing their work of weaving, etc. It was filthy and squalid, but the people seemed happy. Once at the main market we entered a huge area of stalls, many under makeshift canopies of corrugated iron or canvas. All variety of goods were on sale from fresh produce to fabrics and carvings. In an open area, women had set up stalls of fruit on the ground, and would sit on a rug surrounded by their produce. I recall one old woman who



seemed to be selling only tiny red chillies and was literally surrounded in a sea of redness - no doubt enough to make thousands of hot chilli dishes!



We wandered out towards a main road, which was to be the end of the tour and here the guide lead us to a coca cola stall where we bought bottles for 1 Naira (10 US cents). We were to wait here for the van and while we did so, groups of kids gathered around to stare at us and us at them. Andrew was in his usual form, entertaining them with some gadget, probably his yo-yo! Cars, trucks and non motorised vehicles, often pulled by donkeys, filled the street, People were everywhere, most purposefully enroute with a load of goods on their heads. Eventually the guide had organised another van but we could barely fit. Then as we had all crammed in, an extra black guy wanted to get in and Dale was yelling at him that he can't fit. But he can - their idea of how many bodies you can fit in an eight seater van is a long way from ours! Anyway, just then our original van arrived and we changed over and headed for the campsite.

Back at the campsite it was time for lunch. I collected my washing, which was mostly dry and neatly folded, the remainder on a clothes line. The cost for maybe 20 items was N30 or US\$3 - very cheap considering how filthy they were and the guy did a really good job. The rest of the afternoon was spent wandering round the nearby shops and to the post office - closed of course, it was Friday and it is a Muslim country. I managed to find a few grotty postcards in a shop at the hotel and reception sold me some stamps. I could hardly believe it when they said that postage on a postcard, airmail to Australia, would be just 40 Kobos (US 4 cents).

About six o'clock we all gathered so that Mick could give us the run down on the plans, as he had been in touch with London during the day. It seemed they were intent on sending another driver out but that would take a few days. His job was ostensibly to assist Mick in rebuilding the top end

of the engine, but we all knew it was also to check up on Mick and the group. A lot of us were rather annoyed about this because it was delaying our schedule for no good reason. We knew Mick was fully in control, Merv was going well now and the group, except for J-P, was pretty much working coherently. Still, if that was the decision, we would have to live with it. Despite this, some people started to get into discussions with Mick, bordering on arguments, about what would happen to these few days - would we lose out? Really, I thought - who cares? In Zaire we could easily lose a week or two if the weather was awful, so why argue over a couple of days?

In any case, the next day would still be in Kano as we were to do a truck cleanout and fully stock the truck, since Kano is the last good cheap place to get almost anything until we reached the east coast. The following day we would head down to Yankari Game Reserve and return to Kano to meet Shaun from London. During that time, Richard, who volunteered for the task, would fly to Lagos and back to obtain visas for Cameroun, taking our passports and huge sums of money with him. Richard was probably the most experienced traveller amongst us and we were all confident of his ability to deal with that task, even though Lagos is known to be a most unpleasant city full of thieves. Richard was one of the most easy going guys on the trip and the only one to have done a previous EO trip (through Asia). He just loves his music and loves his beer and apart from Mick, always had the biggest bar bill. His willingness to help with anything or to help anyone was just an amazing example to us all. At Dar es Salaam he stayed on and helped Mick work on the truck, just for fun - no payment, just because he likes the people.

That night, Mick took us to the Chinese restaurant in the adjacent hotel. Dale and I offered to help Mick select some courses so we could all share. Everyone, except J-P, thought this was a good idea. He, on the other hand, insisted on ordering his own! The evening was a bit bizarre with some strange behaviour on some people's parts, but that may have been because I wasn't drinking. The beer didn't appeal and I decided to avoid the wine after Gerd ordered a bottle and it was atrocious. I seem to remember it was from some odd country like Hungary! I returned to the campsite with a few others around eleven and Mick retired to the cab of the truck to listen to his own music. This is always a sign that he was pissed off with things - the combination of London sending out another driver, people arguing about whether they were "getting their money's worth", and J-P being his usual arrogant self. I was in bed soon after and tried to put all these issues out of my mind - after all, I was having a great time.

It was a bit cooler and clearer as we arose after seven but the day would warm up to be even hotter than the previous one. It would be a day of work, with a truck cleanout to do. After a leisurely breakfast, we paid Richard our visa money, mine costing N330 or US\$33 - quite expensive, but more to the point, Richard had a huge bag full of money! The truck cleanout was mostly completed by midday when we stopped for lunch and someone even went and bought a bucket of icecream from a nearby shop. What a treat! Most of the others wandered off after lunch to search for interesting shops, but I helped Dale repack the truck as she was taking over the job of quartermaster and was carefully stocktaking all that we had. She did a great job all the way through to Dar of keeping track of what we had and where it was stowed. I took over from her then and carried the job through to Francistown.

We were finished by three o'clock and I managed to grab a shower during one of those brief moments when the showers were working! I also managed to repack my own bag, which was in a state of dusty disarray! It was a leisurely evening mostly spent chatting to some other tourists that were around. We would be getting away early the next morning so I was in bed early.

It was another clear morning and subsequent hot day as we arose at 5.45 and managed to get away right on time at seven o'clock. Richard got a taxi about the same time for the airport

although as we later found out he never managed to get to Lagos that day but had to wait until the next. Getting air flights in Africa is a real challenge and he soon mastered the system of bribes that is necessary to secure a seat!

We headed east out of town picking up fuel on the outskirts. I had discussed the route with Mick the night before. His notes indicated that there was a bridge out on the main highway and that we had to take a different and much longer route through Azare. We turned off the highway earlier than I expected, going through Gaya where there was some confusion about which way to turn. Eventually some locals directed us in the correct direction. Further on, beyond Azare, we turned the wrong way again, and I could tell this from the direction of the sun, even though it was nearly midday. I gesticulated to Mick from the side of the truck and he soon stopped, reconsidered, and did a U-turn. Soon after that we stopped for lunch, just south of the town of Kari, now back on the main highway and headed south towards the large provincial town of Bauchi.

Lunch was extended while the wood gatherers devoured a nearby dead tree since we expected fire wood to be in short supply at the game reserve. We passed through Bauchi around three and then headed east and onto the narrow single track tarmac road into the park. Once through the gate it was onwards to the actual village, arriving just before five o'clock. We waited in the truck while Mick checked at the "office" as to where we could camp. It's a pleasant spot with plenty of trees, a bar, souvenir shop, basic toilets (no showers) and plenty of baboons slinking around suspiciously. We had soon set up on an open area nearby and I, having unpacked my gear for the night, was first to go down to the Wikki warm springs. What a superb spot! The springs exude crystal clear water at 29°C and they have constructed a paved area for about 70 metres along the edge forming a beautiful sand bottom swimming area. Unfortunately the depth is mostly only a couple of feet.

I quickly walked back to the camp and grabbed my swimmers and went back down. J-P was close behind. I was soon having a soothing warm bath! Of course you can't use any soap or detergent as it would pollute the stream. J-P was soon in the pool too, deciding to not wear anything - after all it was dusk and nobody else was around. I then spied some baboons wandering along the paved area. My clothes were further from them than J-P's and I yelled to J-P to watch his stuff. Just as I said it one of the baboons accelerated and had grabbed J-P's clothes! He was soon out of the water and yelling at them and the baboon dropped the stuff and scurried off. You really do have to watch these little bastards although they are really just looking for food.

Back at camp, a white guy called Francis had appeared together with a crate of cold beers! Mick had apparently brought a number of zoo keeper's uniforms from London and had duly delivered them to Francis who more or less runs the National Park. We sat and chatted to Francis for some hours and he joined us for dinner. His stories were interesting and amusing. He works for the Nigerian Conservation Foundation and was in fact born in Nigeria but was educated in England. He told us of the poachers who kill elephants for the ivory. A single tusk can fetch N25,000 in Lagos and if the poacher is caught he gets fined N1000. The poaching guards earn about N2500 p.a. so they too are vulnerable to corruption. In Lagos there is a heap of corruption that allows the ivory to get out of the country officially, essentially by relabelling its origins. Until the corruption is stamped out, Francis fights a losing battle to save the elephants.

It was, however, amusing to hear his views on the local black people. Perhaps it is racist, but after all, he lives with them and helps them day after day. He was particularly critical of their lack of respect for equipment - trucks for instance are driven until they stop - maintenance or investigation of a problem is never in the mind of a black driver. He finds this frustrating since funds are very limited and to have equipment ruined through abuse is very wasteful. He told the



story of a day when one of his black assistants took a group of locals into town (about 90 km) in the "company" Bedford, rather like ours. On the way back it developed an engine rattle but did the driver stop and investigate? No, he drove it until the engine expired - no oil! Just then along came an EO truck, full of passengers, so they agreed to give him a tow back to the camp. With no engine, the brakes don't work for long (air) so he had to put it in gear and ride the clutch! A little later the towed vehicle overtook the EO vehicle and disappeared into a ditch. The black driver said his leg got tired so he took it out of gear! Unable to extricate the truck they eventually loaded all the locals AND their produce onto the EO truck (the passengers must have been thrilled) and got back to camp!



Francis also told us about the baboons. They are a genuine problem and some people have been injured by them when they become nasty. He told us to be on guard all during the day (they disappear into the trees at night). Throw rocks at them, yell or anything, but don't let them get near the camp or they'll pinch stuff. Also, he said, don't let them get near you if you're eating or they may hurt you. Francis believes the only way to keep them under control is to shoot one occasionally when it does something nasty, as an example to the others. They are intelligent animals and they know they are safe and can do whatever they can get away with. Unfortunately shooting animals as a punishment is not consistent with running a National Park so the problem continues unresolved.

Next morning we arose at an early 5 am for a game drive - the first of many on the trip. The best time to see game is always early morning or late afternoon, and from the experience of the whole trip, the afternoons are always better. We were away just after six and had peeled the truck's canopy back even though it was pretty cold. Even as we drove off we could see the baboons heading for our cook tent although EVERYTHING had been put away except the tables and we



found them overturned when we returned. We stopped briefly to photograph the sunrise on our way down to the steaming creek below the warm springs, then meandered around a big loop track, perhaps 10 km in all, in search of game. We had one of the black park rangers as a guide up front with Mick. Alas we only saw a handful of waterbuck and quite a bit of birdlife, but nothing really worth getting excited about. We were back at eight o'clock for breakfast.



The day was spent mostly lazing about the warm springs, periodically dipping, reading, writing postcards etc. Gert had stayed at the camp and was chopping some wood - he must be crazy - it was definitely over 30°C! Anyway, apparently he heard noises in the truck and discovered a number of baboons were climbing all over it and one had opened the velcro air vent at the front and was climbing through! After much excitement and yelling Gert managed to disperse the attack. From then on we played guard rather more carefully and I did one stint of about an hour in the afternoon, sitting a little distance from the camp with a pile of small rocks beside my stool. Whenever one got a bit close, I threw a rock at it and it would retreat. Even then one snuck into the tent and stole an orange!

The afternoon game drive got under way at 3.30 pm and was excellent. Within a matter of minutes we had found elephants and were soon adjacent to a fairly large herd - perhaps 20 within 50 metres of the truck. Great photos, much excitement all round. A little further along we found a big monitor lizard and later on a small herd of water buffalo. We returned to camp just after sunset feeling pretty thrilled at our first "big game" sightings. By the end of the trip I was almost bored with elephants! In our absence another truck had pulled in and was setting up along side of us. It was a private Danish truck with a number of passengers, mostly Scandinavian and some rather nice looking ones too! The driver was Kurt and was taking the Mercedes truck all the way to Kenya or Tanzania or perhaps further, hoping to sell it somewhere to pay for the trip. We saw quite a lot of the Danish truck later in the trip.

The next day, November 21st, we would return to Kano and got away just on seven o'clock. Francis had informed us that the bridge that was out on the main highway east of Kano was in fact passable provided that it wasn't too wet and it was certainly very dry at present. Thus we were to take the shorter route back through Ninji. We stopped in Bauchi for an hour to shop and then for lunch next to a beautiful rock outcrop and baobab tree at midday.



Back in Kano we drove around in circles for a short time while Megan and Mick tried to find that elusive road to the camping ground but eventually we found it and arrived just after four o'clock. After dinner Shaun appeared, apparently having arrived that day from London and staying in the hotel next door. About nine o'clock with many of the others over at the bar, Richard turned up with everything under control - visas obtained and tales of the awful humidity and seediness of Lagos.

November 22nd was to be spent in Kano with Mick and Shaun working on Merv's engine. It was a lazy start since none of us had much to do. After breakfast, Shaun talked to us all about the company's concern over the truck breakdowns, the "knife" incident and the general uneasiness of the trip. He was there, as we knew, to see that everything was under control. I then wandered around town with Dale, visiting the Post Office to send some postcards bought and written at Yankari, then to a number of "department" stores where we could get cheap booze. The plan for many of us was to buy our Christmas alcohol here since it was so cheap. I got a litre of vermouth and a 750 ml Gordon's Gin for N50 (US\$5) each.

J-P and I were cooking that night but didn't have to shop since Mohammed was arranging all the supplies - we just had to supply him with a list and the stuff duly arrived. We had asked for some pumpkin and what we got was two gigantic whole pumpkins, about 15 inches in diameter! So I made curried pumpkin soup followed by sweet and sour chicken. I leisurely did this for much of the afternoon while J-P looked after desert - he did egg whites poached in milk with a sauce made from the egg yokes. I also made a batch of muffins (from flour and yeast) and fried them ready to reheat for breakfast next morning. Shaun and Mick had successfully completed work on the truck, without replacing anything, and all looked good for a departure the next morning.



We got away slowly the next day after some supplies still had to be organised. Urs announced he wasn't coming with us - some problem at home with his girlfriend so he would aim to rejoin us at Bangui in about ten days time. He would have to fly to Lagos in order to get a flight to Bangui, and eventually ended up having his travellers cheques stolen in a taxi in Lagos. He was waiting for us in Bangui and had apparently resolved his dilemma for the time being.

Having left Kano mid morning we headed east on the same route we had used three days earlier, but continuing east from Azare through Potiskum. We eventually camped in savannah country about 80 km east of Potiskum and I mostly remember the site for the prickles and burrs that attached themselves to everything. Definitely not a place to be wearing thongs (or flip flops as the British call them or jandles as the Kiwis say).

After dinner Megan played hairdresser for Doc Ian who previously had almost shoulder length blonde hair but came out almost with a crew cut! It was a fine night and a good fire. We sat around cooking popcorn on the fire and discussed colloquia with Gert who was noting it all in his little book and reading it back to our considerable amusement. Gert had become a close friend even by this stage of the trip, despite his considerable difficulties with the English language. The extent to which his English improved during the trip was remarkable. His keen interest in everything going on, especially the geography, paralleled mine and it was not surprising that we spent a lot of time together. He was an incredibly hard worker and chopped wood almost every night, just for the exercise. Previously he had always travelled alone but despite being very quiet and shy at the start of the trip, he really became part of the group and ended up making many close friends.

Our last day in Nigeria began slowly as Steve had taken over Urs's trailer packing job and was still learning how to get everything to fit! He continued the job on and off all the way to Francistown. We stopped in the large town of Maiduguri mid morning for fuel (very cheap in Nigeria, like 5 cents a litre!), food and drink, since supplies would be relatively hard to get in Cameroun. Andrew who was J-P's helper for water was having some difficulty finding a supply but eventually located some and ended up returning with a small army of black helpers that he had befriended each with a 20 litre jerry can of water on their head.

After lunch we reached the border area with a preliminary police check at the town of Bama where we all had to get out, one by one, and show our passports to the policeman sitting in the shade of his tent. The actual border is located slap bang in the middle of the village of Jibiya. Everything went smoothly with no-one having to get out except Mick and no search of the truck. It took Mick a while to get the truck carnet stamped but we were eventually done after exactly an hour. They then opened a gate in the middle of a village (there were locals just walking back and forth around it) and we drove into Cameroun, the border post being just a hundred metres away.

## **CAMEROUN - Elephants, Mountains and Waterfalls**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 7.

Distance Travelled: 1184 km.

Cameroun is a little known, rarely visited country, but has a great deal to offer. The terrain varies from arid plains and mountains in the north, including the spectacular Kapsiki Mountains, to jungle in the south. Our visit was restricted to the north and undulating central regions. The people are friendly, a strange mixture of cultures and religions, including both Muslim and Christianity.

Population: 10 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 55.

Main Exports: Cocoa.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$460.

Currency: Central African Franc (CFA) shared by many countries in the region and guaranteed by the French, thus no black market. French currency can be used in lieu. FF1 = CFA50 (fixed) which makes about CFA300 = US\$1.

Languages: French and local native dialects.

Independence: 1960 from France.

Government: Presidential Republic.

Climate: Dry in north, tropical in south near the sea. Dry season November to March.

The Cameroun border formalities were straightforward with only Mick leaving the vehicle. We had to continue a kilometre or so to the outskirts of the village to get the carnet stamped at the customs office, but otherwise we were completed in just over an hour. We were then on a gravel road that heads south east across a flat plain with the rugged mountains to our immediate south. It was about 30 km to the town of Mora which we passed through without delay. There we joined the good tarmac road that runs north-south through much of Cameroun and links it to Chad in the north. We were to head north to the Waza National Park but stopped about 15 km from Mora to camp in a low scrubby area just past one of many small villages.



During and after dinner the drums from the local village became apparent and some of the group wandered off to see what the celebrations were. They returned later reporting a religious festival - dancing, singing and so forth. The village was Seventh Day Adventist - a very common form of Christianity throughout a lot of Africa. Next morning I accompanied some of the group back to the village after breakfast and they welcomed us, each person wanting to shake each of our hands. They were preparing for a gathering in the church - perhaps the best of the mud brick and grass roof buildings in the village. We couldn't stay and returned to our camp to complete the packing. We departed just before eight o'clock for the journey of just under an hour to the entrance of Waza N.P. Enroute we passed a huge convoy of French military and road building vehicles headed south from Chad where the French are busy helping them fight a war.

The entrance to the N.P. is not signposted and we had to seek the assistance of a local kid on a bicycle who willingly lead us, on his bike, to the entrance down a vague side track. We paid our entrance fees at the park, me throwing in a swag of my Francs since Mick hadn't changed any. It cost us CFA1500 (US\$5) each with Mick paying for the truck and a guide. Waza is a completely flat area except for the hill at the entrance, and is made up of thick acacia scrub, grasslands and several waterholes that play host to a great variety of birdlife. As we drove through we found antelope, warthogs, a reasonable herd of giraffes and heaps of birds including storks and egrets. Waza is famous for its elephants but they must have been hiding and our guide lead us on and on through many small tracks, eventually stopping for lunch beside one of the waterholes.

As we were finishing lunch, the guide had wandered off, and returned claiming to have found an elephant. He led us over a nearby low hill and sure enough, there was a single bull elephant in amongst the scrub. We couldn't get very close so returned to the truck to try to find the big herd. The guide lead us through a maze of narrow tracks and with the front of the canopy peeled back, the truck was fast filling up with nasty acacia thorns! Still, it was worth it when we suddenly came across the main herd, playing in a muddy waterhole. We drove literally into the middle of the herd and sat observing and photographing them for about 30 minutes. I counted at least 130 elephants in that herd!





We eventually left the park mid afternoon and returned to Mora where we bought some food and attempted to replenish the soft drink supplies that had been largely depleted during the hot day. We then camped about 10 km out of town to the south west just under the "shadow" of a spur from the mountains that are such a contrast to the absolutely flat plains stretching west into Nigeria and north to Chad. I climbed the hill to watch the dusk light fade and the camp fire below glow in the darkening crystal clear night.



Next morning was to be spent in Mora - it is reputed to have one of the most fascinating Sunday markets with all variety of goods and many different cultures coming together. We were there from 7.30 to 9.30 am and it was indeed interesting. The main market area was perhaps 100 metres by 50 metres with some stalls under canvas or grass thatched canopies and others under the shade of the occasional tree. It was actually well organised with areas for different food stuffs, clothing, stationary and other odds and ends. There was even a barber! Down the back was the poultry area where you can get your live chickens. The food was otherwise limited - potatoes, onions and not a great deal else, except plenty of herbs and spices. The butchery was a little further down the road and was not really a pleasant sight!

I assisted J-P to get the water before we left, having to pump it from the town well. It is easy for us to take for granted the ability to turn on a water tap in our homes but almost everywhere you go in Africa water is a commodity that must be obtained just like anything else. J-P had also located a young guy who would take us to a nearby village and would arrange for us to have a tour of the insides of the chief's house. This was not on the EO agenda but Mick agreed to do it, even though we all had to contribute a small sum. Apparently Guerba trucks regularly go to this village.

We set off with this teenager in the cab with Mick and J-P and were soon climbing into the rugged mountains south of the town. The road became narrow and extremely steep with many switchbacks. In some instances we could barely get around the corners without reversing back, which with the trailer is almost impossible. Mick must have been contemplating disconnecting it

but in the end we made it to the village, about 10 km from Mora. At some of the slow places children ran along side the truck trying to sell us the toys that they had constructed from wood - intricate cars and trucks, but they looked so fragile that they would never make it home in one piece.



At the village the teenager's older brother gave us the tour, speaking in French with J-P translating for us. The internals of this mud brick, wood and grass construction is fascinating. First there is a small courtyard off which is a stall where a sacrificial cow is kept, almost completely in the dark. It will be slaughtered for a religious ceremony when the harvest is completed. The village's religion is animist. Then we entered a number of dark rooms off which run the wives' area and the kitchens. The chief has 47 wives and 108 children and each wife has a small bedroom and may share a kitchen with some other wives. The rooms are cylindrical mud constructions, about eight feet in diameter, with a small doorway. The furniture is negligible and they just sleep on a low stretcher or on the ground. These numerous rooms are arranged randomly in an area which is completely walled and has a grass thatched roof. The wives, we were told, take it in turns to cook for the chief. Children are raised by their mothers and the boys, once of working age, leave their mothers and sleep with the rest of the men and work outside the house. The daughters stay with their mothers learning domestic chores until of marrying age! It all sounded like typical African male chauvinism - a continent where women do most of the work. Outside the house we could get an excellent view down the valley towards Mora and could see hundreds of tiny mud and grass huts spread across the hillsides. These are all part of this village. The people grow maize on the arid hillsides, which are roughly terraced. Water is scarce, especially when we were there in the dry season and the women have to cart water about 5 km in ceramic jugs carried in their heads.



We had soon retraced our steps back to Mora and were heading south west on the dirt road that takes us through the Kapsiki Mountains. After lunch we wound our way up into the hills again, the road being quite slow going although nowhere near as bad as the dead end road to the village. The scenery was fascinating - rugged and arid hills with numerous villages and sporadic cultivation. It was very warm and dusty so when we came across a well somewhat south of the locality of Koza, Mick couldn't resist stopping. We all had a good wash as we hauled the water by the bucketful out of the well and into the 5 plastic washup bowls, or in some cases, directly over someone's head. The few locals there were not entirely amused with our apparent wastage of water.



After passing through Mokolo the road became rougher and would continue in that vein with many washed out sections all the way through to Dourbeye late the next day. We camped with the striking peaks of the Kapsiki mountains in view, perhaps 30 km to the south. These peaks are akin to Queensland's Glasshouse Mountains. The campsite was up a sidetrack which we later decided was a disused and overgrown airstrip. Patches of asphalt could be seen in places. We had not seen any villages in the area but a number of locals still appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and sat around watching our peculiar antics. It was a clear and cool night and I believe Mick, Doc Ian and Richard sat around the fire devouring a bottle of scotch and arguing until some ridiculous hour of the morning.





Gert and I sat up front with Mick the next day, which would take us right through the rugged Kapsiki Mountains. The road was appalling in places and we were probably only averaging about 20 km/h. As we got closer to the main set of peaks we stopped several times for spectacular photographs. Further south we stopped for about an hour in Bourha to shop, although there was precious little food to be found. After lunch we continued through the rugged and picturesque country, crossing the wall of a large dam and finally reaching Dourbeye by 2.30 pm. The road south from here is closed for reasons unknown - the official reason is bandits but everyone suspects that there is something along the road that the government doesn't want foreigners to see! What's more, even the road eastwards to Guider was gated and the border post (we were almost on the Nigerian border) was run by a moronic official who wanted to delay us for as long as possible! Despite giving the guy a printed passenger list he insisted on writing our passport details by hand, one by one as we filed through his office. This took well over an hour - just as long as it took to get into the country officially!

At least the road east to Guider was good tarmac and we made reasonable time, eventually camping in some undulating wooded country about 15 km south of Guider. Once again, despite the area being seemingly remote, black kids appeared from nowhere and I had an interesting conversation with some of them. They seemed somewhat apprehensive and kept their distance but I eventually got one kid of perhaps 12 years to show me his school books and once you can find a map of the world it keeps them amused to try to explain where you come from!

Next morning we got away quickly so as to spend some time in the large city of Garoua, about 100 km south. It is a relatively civilised place with modern government buildings the likes of which we had not seen since Kano. The markets were no different to elsewhere, although it was not my turn to shop or cook. I visited a bank, the post office and the patisserie for a morning tea cake. We lunched somewhat south of the town and continued through undulating scrub country that borders the Benoue National Park, which was not open at that time of year. Along the road we saw the odd baboon and quite a lot of bird life, including brightly coloured small birds rather like canaries. Mick had a particular spot from his notes in mind for a campsite, located at the top of a

long climb. This is the Massif de l'Adamaoua which runs east to west across the country. The 15 km climb was indeed steep - mostly first gear, and took us about 45 minutes. At the top we pulled off into an old gravel pit adjacent to a microwave tower. It was overcast and hazy, partly due to smoke from some nearby bushfires that we could see burning into the night.

The final 35 km into the town of N'gaoundere was completed quickly the next morning and we were there just after eight o'clock. The good road ends there and indeed the town itself is a bit of a dead end with streets in shocking condition. J-P and I had to shop for dinner but the small market where Mick had stopped was obviously not the main market and was very limited in its offerings. We grabbed a cab to the main market and were able to buy pineapples, mangoes, bananas, avocados, tomatoes, capsicums and such like, all quite cheaply. J-P also bought some local root vegetable rather like a stringy potato and believed he could boil it and put it in a tomato based sauce. It turned out all right although I'd hate to have to live on the stuff! We got another cab back to the truck with our produce and then Mick had some difficulty locating the correct road that would take us 50 km eastwards to some waterfalls where we hoped to camp.



With the correct road located, we headed out of town on a reasonable dirt road through undulating country, much of it cultivated and with many small villages. Further out it entered some scrub country and at about the right distance there was a road to the right. Alas this road lead to some more choices and none seemed to lead to the falls. We followed it down over a very dubious bridge and up a very steep climb the other side. I was convinced that the river we had crossed was the ones with the waterfalls but were they upstream or down from that point? We U-turned and tried one other side track but it dead ended so we had lunch and then turned the truck around - not all that difficult in the scrub country where you can drive in amongst the scrub a fair way. Back to the main road and Mick decided to try a little further on and sure enough, we



found the turnoff, properly signposted, about 5km further up the road. It's about 3 km into the falls and we camped on flat burnt off area (very dirty) right next to a ford through the creek.

Many of us quickly descended the rugged hillside beyond our campsite to find the falls. Sure enough, there they were, but not quite like the video of them I had seen back in Australia - or was my memory fading? In any case, the falls were very welcome and most of us took a shower during the later part of the afternoon - surely the coldest and most exhilarating shower I have ever had! I also did some laundry in the creek and Mick got some helpers to wash down the truck, which he parked in the ford. While I was preparing dinner, Mick had walked beyond the ford and discovered that the main waterfalls are about a kilometre further up the road - these falls are very big and were the ones I had seen in the video. Nevertheless, the small falls were far more suitable for showering!

During the cool evening we sat around the fire, watching the bright fireflies come and go - we would become used to seeing them all through the rest of Africa. Discussion ensued about the playing of the stereo late at night and J-P was adamant that he had a right to quietness so he could sleep. He believed that in all normal civilised countries it is an offence to make undue noise after 10 o'clock at night and that we should be the same. He had no real support from anyone else and was basically making an idiot of himself. Nevertheless, Richard agreed to buy a reasonable length of electrical wire so that the speakers could be taken a distance from the truck out to the fireside and those not wishing to listen could sleep elsewhere.

It was quite cold the next morning and a heavy dew made sure my laundry was still very damp. I was learning that it was to become increasingly difficult to get clothes to dry and the situation wouldn't improve until Uganda or Tanzania. Almost all of us walked to the big waterfalls after breakfast and we eventually got away just before eight o'clock.



The run back into town was punctuated by a local truck that had rolled over in the middle of the road. The small group of black guys were busy unloading its cargo, mostly firewood, and looked



like they would be at it all day. There was no way we could get around them easily since there was a drop on one side and a big ditch on the other. Why not help them to right their truck? Well, it was clear they were working at African pace and it probably didn't matter to them if it was righted that day or the next! Soon J-P had surveyed a route through the scrub to the right and with a bit of digging and chomping of a few scrubs, we could get around. The total delay was 45 minutes and we reached town by 10.30 after a short delay at the police check on the outskirts of town.

Others had to shop this day and we got away after an hour, stopping at the post office at the other end of town on our way. Lunch was almost entirely tropical fruit - pineapple, mandarins and mangoes - really superb, and something we would come to expect from here on. The road south east to the border with the Central African Republic (C.A.R.) is entirely gravel but is in good condition and quite fast through undulating country. The only problem was that it was very dusty. Another police check delayed us somewhat at Meiganga and we also bought some more soft drink. The night's campsite was chosen just a few kilometres out of town in a gravel pit and the only hassle was a nearby bushfire that was creating a very smoky atmosphere. The night was mild and overcast and we had a good dinner, mostly done by Gert since Gerd was feeling a bit off colour. Dessert was bananas cooked in orange juice and was particularly tasty!

A new month (December 1st) and hopefully a new country, since we expected to easily get into C.A.R. this day as it was only 100 km to the border. We were away just before seven and entered some more hilly country with odd bits of tarmac road and some lovely jungle filled gullies. We stopped in the border town of Garoua-Boulai and did shopping. Things were very hard to find and we eventually left at midday, hopeful of quickly getting through the border which is virtually in the town. First we took the wrong road and ended up driving through a maze of back streets before eventually locating the border. The Cameroun exit formalities were straightforward, indeed Mick said the officials all seemed "stoned" and didn't seem to care what he did! It nevertheless took 1h 18m, part of which was Mick trying to locate the key for the padlock on the border gate which he had to unlock and open himself! We had served ourselves lunch on the truck while we waited at the border. The C.A.R. border post is some kilometres beyond the gate and we had soon reached there but little did we realise what we would encounter!

## **CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC - Into the Tropics**

Facts:

Nights in Country: 5.

Distance Travelled: 596 km.

The land locked country of C.A.R. consists mostly of undulating savannah country with pockets of dense jungle in the south along the Oubangui River which forms its border with Zaire. The country remains amongst the most corrupt in Africa with a series of repressive and brutal regimes, including the famous Jean-Bedel Bokassa who slowly raped the country from 1966 to 1979. The ordinary people are poor and in some areas unfriendly and almost hostile. The police and military are corrupt and troublesome. All in all, it is a country to be avoided yet it is virtually impossible to cross Africa without passing through the C.A.R. and its somewhat seedy capital city, Bangui.

Population: 3 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 16.

Main Exports: Diamonds.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$250.

Currency: Central African Franc (CFA) shared by many countries in the region and guaranteed by the French, thus no black market. French currency can be used in lieu. FF1 = CFA50 (fixed) which makes about CFA300 = US\$1.

Languages: French and Sango.

Independence: 1960 from France.

Government: Military dictatorship riddled with corruption.

Climate: Hot and dry up on the plateau but hot and humid at lower altitudes along the Oubangui River.

It was just a few minutes after we had pulled up at the C.A.R. border post that Mick returned from inside the building to tell us the bad news - it was a public holiday - Independence Day - and the border was closed. There was, quite simply, nothing we could do but wait until next morning. There was another couple there, travelling on bicycles of all things. They were Dutch and had arrived some hours earlier and had no joy in trying to convince the officials to let them through. They more or less joined our group for the next 18 hours and ate and slept with us for security. C.A.R. is reputedly one of the worst countries for security and we were less than impressed with having to camp our first night "in" the country at the border where we would be surrounded by lots of locals. In any case, the officials said we could camp on an open area directly opposite their post and that we proceeded to do, being more than usually diligent about security. In fact, the locals were not much of a problem - just a few kids that wandered around our camp, but most kept their distance, unlike at some places later in the trip.

So the afternoon was spent lazing about, reading and so on, and fortunately it was not too hot, being somewhat overcast. During the later part of the afternoon we had a good game of baseball, using an axe handle and a soft rubber ball that Steve had bought somewhere earlier in the trip. I recall scoring a home run and also a direct hit of a local woman who was standing nearby and obviously not watching the game carefully enough. She was unconcerned but it certainly amused some of the kids looking on. We decided that we had better do a 24 hour guard, which would become common practice through much of C.A.R. and Zaire. We formed up pairs and were to do two hour stints, usually just sitting around the fire and occasionally walking around the campsite

just to make sure no-one was thieving anything. The locals don't usually cause any problems if they can see you are awake but otherwise they have been known to slash tents and grab things. It was a dewy night and I did the first watch with J-P from 10pm to midnight. As we did subsequent watches our shift would move to the next two hours so that everyone got to do the four different shifts at some stage. The first shift was always the easiest since you simply stayed up a bit later than usual and in any case there were usually others still up sitting around the fire chatting. The early morning shift, 4 - 6 am, was not too bad provided you got to bed nice and early. The worst shifts were the two middle ones where you had to get up and then go back to bed again.

We awoke next morning at 6 am with Steve banging the oven with the axe handle - some joke! For the first time I found my sleeping bag damp - it is wonderfully warm but seems to gather a heavy dew as soon as we are in humid weather - and we would be in very humid weather for at least the next month! Still, it dried off very quickly in front of the fire. One of the soldiers from the border post had come over and was sitting at our fire - he was friendly enough and we had a bit of a joke with him. By seven there was action at the border and a seemingly endless stream of trucks was arriving and lining up to get through the border. Mick went over to get our passports processed but alas, he was told to wait. It seems our passports didn't include the customary bribe that ensures quick transit and every one of the trucks, perhaps 20 in all, were processed and had left the border before we could go. They also searched all our bags and the truck quite thoroughly. There were quite a few kids around the truck, which was by now pretty well packed except for our bags spread across the tarp. One of them had found a chameleon and was chasing it through our bags! It eventually escaped into some nearby bushes!

We finally left that border just before ten o'clock and even then we had to stop for a further 15 minutes another 2 km down the road at the customs office. The day was now pleasant - overcast and reasonably mild, perhaps 26°C. The road was good smooth gravel as we headed towards Bangui, 600 km away. The cyclists, who had cycled from Yaounde, had been processed quicker than us, and we passed them about an hour later. We would see them again much later in the trip after they had used river boats, truck tops and many other modes of transport - it made our adventure look pretty tame!





It was just before midday that we stopped at a police checkpoint just before a small village. Richard and Doc Ian were up front with Mick and I don't think either of them had tops on. There was some debate going on and I could see this could be our next exposure to the corrupt police for which C.A.R. is so famous. Sure enough, as Mick came and told us, the guy wanted to fine them for not having shirts on! Mick resumed the argument, which was difficult since he doesn't speak French and the policeman doesn't speak English. "J-P, keep quiet", I was saying to myself. Meanwhile, J-P started lecturing us all that Mick would have to pay the fine - it was a way of life and you just can't avoid it. No, we all say. You can't pay fines that are so obviously bribes - it just makes it worse for everyone else. J-P was making an idiot of himself again - nothing new in that. The important thing was that everyone else was right behind Mick in his stand on "no bribes" and we had all the time and patience to back him up. After a while, the policeman has changed his tune - he wanted to check the truck out. He found the front left indicator light not working - in fact a loose wire and Mick has it fixed and showed the guy. No, he wasn't impressed - he wanted the equivalent of about US\$70 or he wouldn't let us go. A standoff developed, so we just sat. Eventually after 40 minutes he got bored and said we could go - "you see", we all said to J-P!

After lunch we were due to reach the town of Bouar which according to Mick's notes was to be treated with extreme care. Apparently some tourists did something nasty a while ago and the people can be openly hostile. It was true - even as we pulled into the town several kids threw stones at the truck. Unfortunately we had to buy some food so we pulled up in the main street and took up our "defensive positions". The truck sides are rolled down, someone sits in the cab, at least two in the back, and two people on each side just standing against the truck. I was one of the latter. The situation was made doubly worse by the fact that everyone seemed to be pissed, presumably the independence day celebrations were lingering on. A group of about 30 locals gathered around the truck - some wanted things - my thongs, tee-shirt, anything at all. There were some real weirdoes amongst them - one "cool dude" with the most ridiculous sunglasses, another guy who was obviously the village idiot and wanted to pick a fight with anyone and everyone. It was a war zone, and we were all pleased to get the hell out of the place after 45 minutes.

We eventually camped just 20 km further down the road and did the usual guard duty all night, although it was my night off. It seemed well away from civilisation, in an old gravel pit, and while we saw a few locals next morning, nobody bothered us during the night. It was quite cool and damp and we got away smartly next morning at seven, hoping to do the remaining 400 or so kilometres to Bangui that day. The morning was misty and it didn't really warm up until mid morning. The countryside was getting greener and greener with many valleys with thick vegetation. We had a trouble free run and were making good time on the fast gravel road. After lunch we stopped for food in Bossembele. Many of us sat in the truck and the people were more friendly here. Some of us blew up some balloons and gave them to the group of inquisitive kids that had gathered beside the truck - I don't think any of the balloons survived for long as different kids ran with the same balloon in different directions! The town had very little food so we pressed on.



The road is mostly tarmac from there to Bangui and as we got closer we could see the huge valley ahead of us. The road gently meanders its way down from the plateau into the Oubangui River valley where Bangui sits. As we lost altitude, so we gained heat and humidity, and despite the fact that it was dusk as we reached the outskirts of Bangui, the humidity was oppressive - something we would have to learn to live with for the next three weeks. The police check is 12 km from Bangui centre and we were there for over half an hour as they checked passports and the like. Even out in this suburb, there was a certain buzz about the place - certainly Bangui is a vibrant city but one of the most threatening as well. I think that was the first time I saw a dead monkey tied to the side of a utility - some kind of sick status symbol that we were to also see in some parts of Zaire.

It was well and truly dark as we tried to locate the camping ground which is about 7 km from the city centre to the west. We were entering from the north west and had to turn right at a place call "Kilometre Sans" (5 km) where there was a hive of activity - markets, restaurants etc. Where the campsite was meant to be was dark and quiet and Mick overshot it necessitating a tedious U-turn in the dark on a very narrow road. It was nice to be there though and fortunately it was a pleasant spot where we would have to spend at least a couple of days while we obtained visas for Zaire. The campsite was busy with quite a few other tourist groups of a wide variety of nationalities. Another private Bedford truck had a group of adventurers living in relative squaller compared with us. Several smaller parties were also there with tents, including a young couple with a small child and a large dog travelling in a camper van.

The cold shower at Bangui was the first since Kano (10 days), other than the well and waterfall in Cameroun, and was understandably welcome. Urs had also turned up - as we had hoped and expected, he had been in Bangui for several days and was staying in a room in the camping ground. I went to bed quite early since I would have the midnight to 2 am guard shift - even in the camping ground we did guard duty since there have been previous reports of theft in this camping

ground. The humidity was oppressive and as the night wore on what amounted to a thick warm fog descended on us. The mosquitoes were also fearsome and I was applying liberal amount of "Rid". There was a good fire and we had become well organised with tea and coffee for those doing guard duty, so it wasn't too unpleasant. I even managed to write a few letters under the light in the camping ground!

When I awoke at 6 am, sleeping out still, I not only had 2 mosquitoes inside my net (arrgh!) but the moisture was overwhelming - the net was full of water droplets and my sleeping bag was literally drenched. The fog was thick yet it was still quite warm - it took a while to dry the sleeping bag beside the fire - a procedure I had to master over the next few weeks through Zaire.



The plan for the day was to get into town, go to the post office to collect mail and someone had to go to the Zairian embassy to find out about the visas. As was usual, they would be available the same day, so we didn't need to put them in until the next day, but we got something of a shock when we found out that it was going to cost us the equivalent of US\$60 for each visa. Mick also had to pickup money sent from London to one of the banks in Bangui - this would fund him right through to Dar es Salaam. The first challenge was to get into town, using the peculiar but efficient taxi system. Urs had explained it to us so we were forewarned. From Kilometre Sans, which was a pleasant 30 minute walk from the camping ground, you catch a cab (fight for a cab would be a better description). These cabs run back and forth between town and Kilometre Sans and can carry as many passengers as can fit, often as many as six in a Nissan Sunny or Renault 12. The journey costs CFA100 (US 35 cents). Coming the other way it is generally easier to find a cab.

At the post office I got a load of mail then went to the bank to change enough money to pay for the Zaire visa as well as a phone call. I then walked around town - the Shoestring talks about Bangui as if everyone is a thief and I was certainly keeping my wits about me, especially walking alone, but it was really a quite pleasant city with lots of trees and a pleasant aspect across the huge Oubangui River. In the main market I bought some replacement sunglasses (US\$5) since my good ones had broken an arm back in Cameroun. Around lunchtime I met up with Gert and Gerd wandering the streets and we stopped for some lunch in the local patisserie. After lunch we wandered through the artisan's market where they sell all kinds of supposedly authentic crafts. We were all on the lookout for Christmas presents (we all had to buy a present for one other



person, names drawn from a hat - nobody knew who was buying for them though!). I bought a mounted set of butterflies - very colourful for which C.A.R. and Zaire are famous. I also got some nice malachite necklaces. It was now unpleasantly hot and just as humid and the three of us decided to head back to the campsite. We hailed one of these taxis and walked the remainder from Kilometre Sans by about four o'clock.

There was a German guy there talking to Mick about road conditions through Zaire and gave us some seemingly useful information. He had been driving trucks in the area for years. He advised us that the eastern route through the Zaire border at Mobaye was not on due to the road being out between there and Lisala so we decided to take the shorter route through Zongo. This was despite the fact that the Zaire border officials at Zongo were reputedly amongst the worst. The reputation of the officials turned out to be accurate, however the German's information was not since we met a Kamooka truck in Zaire that had come via Mobaye without any problems.

Dinner was a bit late after they had a lot of trouble getting the fire to go - dampness was to be a continual headache for the fire starters over the next few weeks. I decided to put up the fly sheet of our tent to see if I could escape some of the condensation during the night yet still allow a reasonable flow of air. It worked reasonably well although it is very difficult to put up a fly sheet only (especially on your own) and the condensation literally runs down the inside of the fly sheet so if you brush against it as you move in or out, you get drenched anyway.

Next morning, we filled out forms for the Zairian visas and many of us headed into town again. I revisited the post office and got two more letters - they sometimes don't look that carefully and miss them first time through so it pays to revisit, although Bangui wasn't too bad. I then went to the Boganda Museum, named after the first president of C.A.R., where there are interesting exhibits of local lifestyles, art and crafts etc. It cost a mere US\$1 to get in and when they knew I couldn't read French, the guy insisted on showing me around and explaining every exhibit to me in his broken English. I then went to the telephone office (different from the post office) and made a phone call - very expensive - about US\$50 for 15 minutes, but after all, it would be the last contact before Kampala and that would likely be after both Christmas and the New Year. I then ran into Richard who was enroute to the Zaire embassy to check up on the visas so I tagged along. The visas were ready and I got back my passport there and then. I returned to the campsite then for a relaxing afternoon, a bit of sleep and then to help the Kiwi girls with the cooking. I did guard duty from 2 - 4 am that night and it was relatively mild for a change and not nearly as humid as it had been two nights earlier. J-P was meant to assist me but he and George had gone out on the town and had not returned - in fact they romped in at 7am next morning just as many of us were leaving for town. They must have had a wild time.

It was a relief to me that J-P hadn't returned since it was our turn to shop and cook that night. The plan was to go into town, do the shopping and to get away by ten o'clock and into Zaire. I took Gert and Gerd as they were our helpers and also needed to shop for the following night. Shopping was much more fun without J-P! We went to the main market, which was a real war zone - the women selling their produce virtually chased us around the market! I returned via the big French supermarket where I lashed out with the remaining money and got some mozzarella cheese and some ham - a Pizza was on the menu for that night! Back at the camp via the bakery and we were all ready to leave right on ten o'clock, except Dale and Marshall were nowhere to be found! They eventually arrived at 10.50, with the excuse that they had to buy a new spoon - our previous big stirring spoon had become separated from its handle! Still, Dale never lived down this delay all because of the desperate need to find a spoon.



Thus, we were away at eleven o'clock and meandered through town, stopping briefly at a shop where Andrew thought he might have left his wallet, but it wasn't there and he lost quite a bit of cash but nothing "essential". The C.A.R. border is a bit strange, sort of strewn along the waterfront. We pulled up where the ferry was and the adjacent buildings housed customs and immigration. Formalities were mostly completed but then we all had to take our cameras in and have them counted - they were apparently declared on the carnet and they want to be sure we hadn't sold them. It was just before midday when we were ready to go - but who runs the ferry?



Mick located the ferry master and examined the ferry - it was a drive on/reverse off ferry - something of a challenge with the trailer. The approach was also precarious, to say the least, and Mick returned to announce that the ferry would be moved to a better spot a little upstream and we would drive there, just a couple of hundred metres away. Here we detached the trailer and pushed it around to the front, attaching it there. It is much easier to manoeuvre with it on the front and then Mick carefully drove down the narrow track to the river front where the ferry was waiting. I carefully guided him and he was soon lined up and drove onto the ferry. We set off right on midday and reached the other side - perhaps a kilometre, after about ten minutes. The ferry more or less just beaches itself on the Zaire side - the place is called Zongo - and we had soon reattached the trailer on the back and had driven up the bank to the border post.



## **ZAIRE - Mystical Land of Jungle, Rivers, Pygmies and More!**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 21.

Distance Travelled: 2665 km.

Zaire is the third largest country in Africa after the Sudan and Algeria. It is substantially jungle, being perched across the equator and with the second largest river in the world, once known as the Congo, but now the Zaire (which simply means "river"). The country is well known for its isolation, lack of infrastructure, shattered economy and corrupt government. In some ways it has one of the most stable governments in Africa with dictator Mobuto having been in power since 1965, yet his repressive and brutal regime has seen the country sink into poverty and turmoil. From a tourist's viewpoint, nothing is a surprise in Zaire - we could easily lose a month in our schedule if the weather turned bad since there was not a single tarmac road on our route, save for a few kilometres through the town of Kisangani. Supplies would be limited with not much other than potatoes, onions and some tropical fruits. And we would see a continuation of bribery and corruption amongst the police and military.

Population: 31 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 37.

Main Exports: Copper.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$210.

Currency: Zaire. Originally valued at Z1 = US\$2, it has now devalued to Z450 = US\$1. Black market only gives an extra few percent but avoids the enormous delays of changing money in banks.

Languages: French, Lingala.

Independence: 1960 from Belgium.

Government: Military dictatorship.

Climate: Hot, wet, humid. Humidity moderates in the far east at higher altitudes.

The Zongo border post is in a tiny brick building under an enormous mango tree overlooking the Oubangui River. The officials were slow and corrupt, although quite polite about it! They had no currency declaration forms but forced us to make up our own, filling in the details of our currency and then stamping it. They didn't keep a copy and we knew we could simply throw away the declaration after we had left - it was a joke. We ate lunch while waiting and stood continual guard around the truck as there were quite a lot of locals coming and going and they are reputed to have some excellent thieves amongst their rank. After several hours of seemingly nothing happening, Mick explained that they were demanding a US\$5 per person entry fee (in addition to the US\$60 visa we had each bought). We had been warned of this fee and knew it was nothing less than a bribe but then the day was wearing on and we didn't want to have to camp here! Eventually a bit after 3 pm Mick agreed to pay, having consulted each of us, since we would actually be paying. Once paid in cold hard US dollars the passports were quickly stamped and we were able to leave, but only to go about 200 metres up the road to the Customs Office. Fortunately there were no hassles there and we were only delayed a further 10 minutes.

We had no local currency and the bank in Zongo was now closed, but a French guy offered to change some money for us. He was from a local mission and we followed him in his car up to the

mission about 2 km away. There Mick and I (acting as banker again) went inside and transacted the exchange, Zaires for US dollars. The guy didn't have as much as we wanted so a few people had to miss out. The money isn't quite as bad as in Nigeria although it still took a while to count and I was under pressure and trying to figure out what the notes all were. We eventually got away from there, hoping to put a reasonable distance between us and the thief ridden Zongo before we camped.



The road was atrocious near Zongo but improved somewhat once we got about 5 km from town and the continual roadside habitation dwindled off to just every kilometre or so. The scenery had changed remarkably since we crossed that river - jungle and mountains and a continual dampness on the roads and in the air. The road was single track dirt, slippery and muddy in places, but generally pretty good. The difficulty would be, as was so often the case through Zaire, finding a spot to camp. Not only is there thick jungle up to the road but there is habitation in almost every cleared area - indeed it was a constant surprise to me just how much habitation there is right through Zaire. There was rarely more than 2 or 3 kilometres without a small village of mud huts and lots of people. Mick spied a smallish gravel pit after about 40 minutes, perhaps 20 km from Zongo. There had been a few villages but not too much, and although we did full guard duty, no-one gave us any trouble at that campsite except a few natives on bicycles who tried to tell us it was too dangerous to camp there!

With the cook tent up and the fire makers at work, I set about preparing the pizzas for dinner, leaving J-P to do the soup and he was also baking a cake using some paw paw and we would eat that interesting concoction the next day for lunch. With much flapping of the fire we got the oven somewhere near pizza temperature and got them cooked OK, but it was pretty late when we ate them. There was a bit of drizzle around and some thunderstorms in the area so everyone had

pitched a tent, with us in the cook tent. Sure enough, it rained quite heavily during the night - welcome to Zaire!

George was on 4 - 6 am guard duty and we were awoken at 5.30 by him playing Christmas carols on the stereo - a most unpleasant experience! We had a good run all morning along quite reasonable dirt tracks through country varying from dense jungle to wide open grassland, except the grass was 6 foot high! Everything is big in Zaire, like the bamboo trees that you see almost all the time, which in some cases must surely be 100 feet high. The biggest hazards were some big bog holes and passing other traffic - invariably trucks carrying locals and produce, on the narrow roads with soft edges. Sure enough, during the afternoon as we were stopped in the middle of the track picking up some firewood, another truck came the other way and Mick had to pull to one side but the front wheel immediately went way down into the soft mud. The guy in the truck stopped and we hooked up and chain and had our truck towed back onto the hard centre of the road within minutes. The black guy was then asking for money but Mick said "Hey, we got bogged to let you past!" J-P was having hysterics and was telling Mick he was unreasonable - "You're in the poorest country in the world and you should give him a bit." It wasn't so much what J-P was saying, and indeed Mick did give the guy some money, but the way he said it - he gets so self righteous and arrogant that everyone had just about had enough of him.

We reached our next ferry crossing soon after lunch - a nondescript little "creek" about 100 metres wide. The ferry trip was a little further though as they were once planning to build a bridge (or perhaps they did and it had been washed away). In any case, the ferry had to chug upstream about 200 metres from where we boarded to where we drove off. While this was a drive through ferry, it was motorised by a small boat attached to the side with an outboard motor - highly sophisticated! This meant that he had to berth it the same way on both sides and thus we had to reverse off. Fortunately the landing was pretty flat and the ferry very short, so I had no difficulty in guiding Mick off in reverse. The hassle with trying to backup straight is that you cannot see the trailer so someone must guide Mick so that he knows as soon as the trailer is swinging either way. As was usual we had to donate 10 litres of diesel to run the ferry, which was otherwise free.



Having negotiated several oncoming trucks and a police check, it was becoming quite late and there was no sign of anywhere to camp, and what's more, there was almost continual villages and people. Eventually Mick saw a huge gravel pit to the right, well down off the road, but it was more or less behind a village. It was nearly 5 o'clock so we had little choice since we were 20 km short of Gemena and there was no sign of the habitation becoming anything other than more dense. It was clearly going to be a difficult spot for security and Mick told us to be particularly cautious before we even alighted. By the time we were out and setting up a fairly large gallery of onlookers had gathered on the nearby embankment and as the evening wore on it grew to well over a hundred. They just seemed to stand and stare most of the time, seemingly fascinated by our activities, which were no doubt very foreign to them.





After we had finished dinner, there was some frivolity as we had the music going nicely and got the natives dancing. This all seemed fine until Mick discovered some older teenagers had crept around to the back of the trailer - all locked up - but they had cut the bungy straps that kept the plastic cover in place. It was no great disaster, but Mick chased them all off in a brief rage and the entire group dispersed. It was pretty dry and I was sleeping out, as well as doing guard duty from 4 - 6 am. Thus, I was in bed pretty early but was briefly awoken at midnight. Noel and Jenny had been doing guard duty since 10 pm and at the changeover, a black kid had crept over to their tent (fly sheet only) and had reached underneath and grabbed Noel's sleeping sheet. Luckily he didn't have his sleeping bag out or he may have lost that. Noel chased and yelled at the guy as he ran off into the darkness but it was too late. All in all, it didn't leave us feeling very friendly towards this lot! During our 2 hour guard duty prior to dawn, J-P and myself continually wandered around the campsite looking for movement but fortunately saw none. At least I got my sleeping bag fully dry during guard duty by laying it across some camp stools next to the fire!

We departed right on seven o'clock and saw an amazing sight as we drove off. We always bury our rubbish and it was often Steve's job to dig the holes and fill it in next morning. Alas, this morning, the group of spectators had witnessed the procedure and as we started to move they literally pounced on the rubbish hole and started digging with their hands and then tossing rubbish everywhere. I guess they were partly inquisitive and also looking for useful things like empty cans and bottles. The way they fought each other was a sight to behold.

We were in the town of Gemena just after eight and some went shopping, others to the bank and some stayed on guard, including myself. The town is very spread out with no obvious centre, no made roads and was pretty sleepy, with relatively few people or traffic. The shoppers returned over an hour later, foot sore and weary and complaining that the market was several kilometres

away! Apart from that, there wasn't much worth buying except fruit, but we could live on that forever if we had to. Meanwhile J-P and myself were organising some water from a tap around the back of the nearby hotel and Mick moved the truck a bit closer. Carrying 20 litre jerry cans of water is not my forté I'm afraid. We eventually departed after two hours in town.

About an hour later, just before lunch, we stopped at yet another police check. There was a young policeman there and as usual, Mick jumped out, shook his hand, and generally looked friendly! The guy wanted to see Mick's insurance papers - he bought insurance back in Kano I think, and it was perfectly valid, at least as much as anything is in Zaire! Anyway, the guy told him it was no good and he'd have to buy some more. Of course this was all after considerable communication difficulty since Mick can't speak French! There was also another guy in the background who turned out to be the insurance salesman - the policeman was just working for him! A standoff was developing when the policeman wanted a passenger list - no problem, but then he spied J-P's name and nationality - French. He wanted to speak to J-P, figuring that if he could get his message across in French he would be more successful. Mick must have made sure that J-P didn't get too involved, since the policeman eventually gave up and we departed after a 35 minute delay - quite amusing really!

Habitation was everywhere and we had a pretty good audience for lunch. After lunch we passed through an extensive area of rubber plantations and then, as we neared the town of Akula, the road kind of disappeared into a creek bed - it had simply been washed away in the last flood and we drove along the sandy creek bed. At Akula we reached our next ferry - a hive of activity with markets, a river boat "parked" across the bow of the ferry and no sign of the ferry captain. This river, the Mongala, was pretty wide - at least 500 metres. We certainly wanted to get across it that day and it was already 3.30 pm. Mick was running around all over the place in search of the ferry captain and eventually found him - very drunk - up on the river boat. Well a real circus ensued as this captain, dressed in what looked like a red dressing gown, got us to load the truck onto the ferry and then insisted that pictures be taken of him with groups of us - he too had a camera! He was very friendly, arms around everyone and having a lovely time, but all the while the day was wearing on and our options for camping before dark were diminishing. I was concerned at how he was planning to get the ferry out from behind the river boat, and once we were under way it took him 10 minutes of to'ing and fro'ing to extricate the ferry from the jam. The scenes along the shore of the river in the fading light were magical - grass huts, smoke from cooking fires, people fishing, guys in dugout canoes (pirogues) - it gave me one of my favourite photographs of the trip.



It was a full hour by the time we got going again on the far side and we immediately entered a tract of dense jungle with small villages about every kilometre and absolutely nowhere else to pull off and camp. It was getting pretty dark and we were becoming concerned, and discussed the need to actually camp in the front yard of one of these villages - at least they were pretty small and quiet compared with the previous night. Mick pressed on until 5.30 pm and then chose a



small village and stopped - he asked J-P to assist in speaking to the people. One difficulty in this situation is finding someone who can speak for the village or the family. Mick spoke with a young guy who claimed to be such a person and at the price of several biros, we were allowed to camp on their "front lawn", so to speak.

It was a good campsite and the local children were friendly and didn't cause us any trouble. Still, after the previous night's experiences we were being pretty careful and tended to have guards sitting on each corner of the campsite most of the time. The only troublesome one was a young guy who was "a bit slow" and he continually pestered us about one thing or another. The people were very poor - just their ragged clothes were enough to tell us that. When we spoke to some of them we learned of their inability to travel far, the number of people living in each hut, and so forth, all of which was hard to believe. Andrew, as usual, was having a great time sitting talking to a group of kids and teaching them to count in different languages - French, which they knew, then English or German.

Dinner was late, due to the interminable difficulties in getting a fire to go in these damp conditions. Needless so say my sleeping bag was drenched when we awoke early next morning. Alas, the fire had died during the night and we barely got it going that morning as Dale tried to cook some fritters and I tried to dry my sleeping bag. There just wasn't enough heat to go around! Still, we got away right on seven and headed towards Lisala through some very dense pieces of jungle and some relatively long stretches without villages. The road was little used and we spent a bit of time at one spot negotiating a failed bridge - more of a culvert really, but we had to put a sand mat across a huge hole so as we could traverse it safely. Then came some real boggy stretches but Merv pulled through with flying colours and we weren't stuck at all. The others hazards included the nasty insects - horse flies, dragon flies and the like which often came looking for some nice white flesh to bite on. The strikingly beautiful butterflies made up a little for the nasty insects. There was also one oncoming truck which, so narrow was the track, almost took one of our sand mats with him as he crept past with just millimetres between us.



After lunch we reached the town of Lisala and our first sight of the great Zaire River. The town is set high up on a hill, much of it overlooking the river, which would be at least 100 feet lower. We parked in a quiet tree lined street outside an old colonial building, left derelict from the days of Belgian rule. It was not my job to shop so J-P and myself headed down to look at the great river. A set of steps leads down to the waterfront where there was a hive of activity - a big river barge was unloading goods, locals were washing in the river and fishermen moved about on the expanse of river before us. The river is indeed huge - in fact in the hazy conditions you can't clearly see the other side, perhaps 2 kilometres away. The water was flowing fast with debris moving with it.



The river forms the lifeline of much of Zaire with freight being heavily dependent on the river boats that ply the river. J-P quickly ascertained that the "big" river boat had left for upstream the previous day - it would be a disappointment to some on the trip who had hoped to catch a ride from here or Bumba through to Kisangani. It is reputedly amongst the most bizarre and chaotic few days of adventure to be found anywhere in the world! We eventually saw the river boat in Kisangani with its numerous attached barges forming a huge moving island with masses of freight, live animals of all descriptions and masses of people. It has been described as "one big party" - the Zairians do love to party and love their beer - Primus - a nice dark beer that with a very high alcohol content which conveniently comes in large bottles - 700 ml as I recall.

From the river, J-P and myself wandered through the habitation and markets that are scattered across the river bank as we headed up to the main town. Along the route we saw the people going about their everyday activities - washing, cooking etc. Small stalls along the pathway sold roasted peanuts - these were commonplace all through Zaire - they roast the peanuts by lying them in the sun and then sell them for about Z50 (10 cents) for a hand full. They were always very tasty and by crumbling off the outer skin there was little likelihood of catching anything nasty! In the main part of town with its sandy unmade streets we stopped for a drink in a bar and lazed about under the shade of their verandah. Some others were there buying beer and we assisted them to carry some crates back to the truck. It was some time before we left, such were the difficulties in Zaire of finding all the things we needed, and we eventually left at 4 o'clock after almost two hours.

The road out of town was excellent by Zairian standards, smooth gravel, and continued pretty well through to the next town of Bumba. We stopped about an hour after Lisala in a gravel pit set in fairly thick jungle. A few locals wandered or cycled by but no-one gave us any bother. That was excluding Marshall, who had a lovely time after dinner. He had found that a particular kind of wood that was lying around in copious quantities was really dry and burned well and he proceeded to pile it on the fire until we had a raging bonfire with flames leaping 30 feet in the air. We all sat back about 10 metres and warmed ourselves - not that it was particularly cold, but just as fast as the bonfire had developed it died away and the fire returned to normal. Alas, the fire didn't drive away the mosquitoes which were absolutely thick at this place and despite setting up my net super carefully I still discovered four or five of the little buggers in there with me next morning - heavens knows how they get in! At least it wasn't too damp that morning and it fined up into a clear and very hot day.

It was about 4 hours to Bumba, the next major town upstream along the Zaire River. We needed to shop, get fuel and possibly stay the night, if we could find somewhere to stay. We first pulled up in one of the streets near the market - the town had that usual Zairian sleepiness with people lazing about or moving slowly - after all it was pretty hot. I was standing guard around the front of the truck when a young black guy started talking to me in pretty good English - he told me he was studying the language. Mick's notes mentioned a hotel on the river front run by a Greek guy called Dimitri and this young guy said he could show us where it was. He also said he knew where we could find fuel. Now that turned out to be very useful, since you simply don't see service stations in Zaire - they just don't exist and you have to buy fuel from someone's private supply.

Mick returned from a brief walk around the market and I introduced this guy to him and we agreed to have him show us to this hotel and also to the fuel. We left someone there in case the shoppers returned and headed off to the river frontage and the hotel, since the market is "inland" about 2 kilometres. On the way we crossed the disused railway line, presumably built by the Belgians to ship copper or gold from the mines further north to the river at Bumba. At the hotel there was no joy - Dimitri was there but there was no camping. So we headed for the fuel. The guy directed us off the main road to the east down a narrow laneway which then opened into an open

area with huts all around. The guy lived somewhere around there. The 44 gallon drum of diesel was located and brought out to the truck and Mick checked that was really was diesel. He then siphoned it into the tank, filtering it through some pantyhose! The fuel cost Z300 per litre or about US65 cents - not cheap! We eventually returned to the market and then, discovering that we couldn't find any water, returned to this village on the outskirts of town since the young guy told us that the well there had good water.



We finally headed back into the main part of town, checked out the Hotel Dina, which looked OK for camping and then stopped for lunch on the river front at about 2pm. George and J-P bought a ride in a pirogue across the river to an island. I wasn't too convinced about the stability of these dugout canoes but was to have my try a few days later. The remainder of the afternoon was spent setting up and lazing about in the back of this hotel where there was a bit of a grassed area. We had a room where we could shower but there was no water so we had to take the pump showers across the road to a well, drag up our own water and bring them back to this room and shower by hand! There was also no light in the room so as it started to get dark it was showering in the dark, with a pump shower - takes some co-ordination, let me tell you! The cooks had bought live chickens for dinner and Mick had killed them and enlisted some help to "dress" them. They made a reasonable dinner after which I stayed up to do the 10 pm to midnight guard duty. Even in the relative security of this hotel we were unsure of whether the locals may include some thieves so we took no chances.

During guard duty all was quiet and I mostly sat by the fire talking with Jenny who, together with her husband Noel, were doing guard duty from midnight to 2 am. Jenny is a lovely New Zealander who works with Noel on the family kiwi fruit farm just south of Auckland. I saw quite a bit of them after Dar es Salaam as they travelled on the Danish truck down to Harare and they flew out on the preceding Qantas flight to the one I took back to Australia.

It was relatively cool and overcast the next morning and the whole day turned out to be drizzly and cool. We picked up more water at the village well before we left town and then headed north east away from the Zaire River. The river forms the main supply route through this part of Zaire and thus the road was not well maintained. It was badly washed out and quite sandy in places which made progress slow, even though we never got stuck. Mid morning we came across a group of locals who seemed to be planting things in the middle of the road. The road was literally dug up and very boggy and Mick had to charge through their work to avoid getting bogged. They seemed rather angry about this but we couldn't understand what they were doing and certainly we didn't have much choice other than getting bogged.

Towards lunch we had to stop for Gerd who was feeling pretty unwell and during lunch he rested with very bad stomach cramps. His problems persisted for several days and we all felt concerned as Gerd was a lovely easy going and likeable German. After lunch we had a really heavy rain shower and the roads turned to mud and slush. We all became a little concerned since if the wet was to really set in we could easily find ourselves continually getting bogged. Overland trucks have been known to take nine weeks to cross Zaire - we took three. Fortunately the rain only lasted for about twenty-four hours and Merv kept going nicely even though we came within a hair's breadth of getting bogged on one hill the next day. Merv's ability in mud with the four wheel drive and the really low ratio was something to behold!

We stopped that afternoon in a small gravel pit and Gert and I set up our fly sheet as it was obviously going to rain through the night. The camp was rather crowded as everyone put up a fly sheet or complete tent and the gravel pit was barely large enough. Locals weren't a problem, although we saw a few guys go by on their bicycles! Dinner was late since we had all kinds of trouble trying to get the fire to go, as was often the case in this incessant dampness. After dinner we discussed the need to change time zones as we had headed east far enough that the afternoons were getting shorter and the mornings longer. The debate almost turned into an argument - Mick and quite a few of us couldn't understand this - it really wasn't that important. Maybe the rain was making people a bit tense! In any case, we did change times and this was vindicated when we reached Kisangani and we were on the correct time (UTC+2).

Next morning, December 12, was an exceptionally slow start, partly because of the timezone change (it was now dark again when we awoke) and it was still drizzling and there was no way the fire wanted to burn! The road from there to Aketi was atrocious - many washouts and some bogs made all the worse by the rain during the night. We continued towards Buta, a fairly large town where we would turn south again to head back to the Zaire River at Kisangani. Buta was an opportunity to shop and it was Megan and Jeanette together with J-P and myself who did the honours. There was precious little worth buying in the market - a few exceptionally expensive tomatoes, and fruit - pineapples and bananas. As we left town we spied a bar that had some beer and stopped to restock the bar. After all this the afternoon was nearly gone and we camped in a gravel pit only half an hour later. The night was clear with a full moon, but we could see thunderstorm activity in the distance and I was glad to be able to sleep in the cook tent, since we were helping cook. I don't think it actually rained during the night but next morning it was cool and foggy - everything was drenched.

The morning continued overcast and cool, the road generally good with the odd boggy patch and one pretty bad stretch of boggy ruts in which we almost got stuck. By lunch time the cloud was breaking up and it started to heat up, probably getting to 30°C by mid afternoon when it had pretty much cleared. There were several stops after lunch when the fuel system became blocked - dirty fuel, and Mick had to clean out the filter. Then at about 3 pm we reached the Aruwimi River - probably a kilometre across (just a small tributary of the Zaire) and the ferry on the other side! In



typical African style, the ferry was not coming back until there was someone coming the other way, and that could be hours or even days!

It was very hot and many of us were out of the truck and lazing about under the shade of a tree near the ferry landing. There were a few locals around and some kids had a pangolin, one of those seemingly armour plated animals that curls itself up and hides within itself. It was after about twenty minutes that we decided that the ferry on the other side was not coming back, so a few of us thought we'd grab a ride across, including J-P, since he could converse with the ferryman in French. In the end, George, Andrew, J-P and myself got a ride across in a pirogue for Z500. I was brave enough to take my camera, forever wondering what I would do with it if the pirogue overturned, but the two black guys working the oars seemed pretty skilled. Once on the other side, we left it up to J-P to organise the ferry and Andrew and I bought some drinks at the tiny town of Banalia. The ferry did set off and returned some time later, and I was able to get some rare shots from shore of Merv on a ferry mid stream! The landing was exceptionally bad and the handbrake on the trailer was broken virtually beyond repair as Mick drove off, as the back wheels dipped down well below the ferry level.



It was 4.15, nearly an hour and a half after reaching the river, when we were about to leave. J-P was talking to some black guys with suit cases and it seemed they were church workers and wanted us to give them a lift to Kisangani, 130 km on. We could hardly refuse, so they strapped their live chickens to the side of the truck and loaded in their huge bag of grain plus two suit cases, and we started to wonder about our decision, but we did all fit and off we went. There was little chit chat since only J-P could really converse with them. The same problems with finding a campsite besieged us again but at least we thought that having these priests with us would stand us in good stead with the locals. We eventually camped quite late, about 6.30, at some abandoned huts but there was plenty of other habitation around. Fortunately, by parking just off the road, we formed a virtual compound within this abandoned "home" and while there were large groups of locals on our doorstep, none of them really bothered us. The priests set off on foot to find their own accommodation with locals that they knew and we picked them up a couple of kilometres down the road next morning.

It was my turn to cook with J-P, and fortunately it would be the last until after Christmas! I was particularly proud that I never lost my temper during the entire trip, and in fact rarely got hassled at all. However, this night was the closest I came and it took a good deal of restraint to not blow my top. Despite the fact that the fire wouldn't go properly, J-P had decided we were having crepes and I won the job of cooking them. We had a good crepe frying pan but the fire just wasn't hot enough. I can cope with that but I couldn't really cope with his incessant criticism and hassling. Anyway, we eventually got the 18 crepes cooked and duly filled with dehydrated chicken casserole. They were a nice treat but the difficulties were hardly worth it. At least we had soup beforehand since the crepes weren't ready until after nine o'clock. A few others were fast realising what an asshole J-P was and gave me some moral support in having to put up with him.

I was sleeping in the cook tent although with the door wide open. It rained at about 2 am and there were people scurrying all over the place and a few of them managed to find refuge in the cook tent. We were away on time next morning despite J-P's insistence on cooking plantine fritters on the relatively cool fire. Plantines are the big banana looking fruit that are not really very nice to eat on their own but are vaguely edible as a fritter. They actually go best in a curry as I later found out. The journey into Kisangani was slower than I expected as we went through some quite twisty and mountainous terrain. We also stopped enroute to checkout some rapids on the Lindi River that runs parallel to the road for a good distance and joins the Zaire at Kisangani.

As you enter Kisangani you cross a big bridge and a dam of sorts (perhaps they make some hydro power for the town). It was 10.30 and we dropped the priests off on the outskirts of town. It is a big town, perhaps 5 kilometres across, and once in the centre we saw the bustling central market and busy streets - mostly trucks and bicycles and, of course, lots of people. The streets are in appalling condition - broken tarmac and gravel. Mick eventually found his way to the famed Olympia Hotel where the guard on the gate immediately opened the big gate and allowed us to drive into the backyard where all the overland trucks stop. The little black guy who sort of manages the place, Eugene, immediately introduced himself to Mick and promised all kinds of help. He's quite a character and immediately yelled out in good English, "Any Aussies?", followed quickly by "G'day Mate!" He even had an Australian tee shirt on, presumably a donation from a previous traveller.



There was another overland truck there - a Kamooka truck, but we opted for the under cover area which seems to be the back of a garage. Here we could sleep, cook and eat under cover and in relative comfort. First job was some food for lunch so J-P and I did a quick trip to the market, just two blocks away, and the bakery just around the corner, to get lunch together by midday. It was hot and sunny and I soon had my wet sleeping bag airing and nicely dry for the first time in a week or so by laying it out carefully across some camp stools. After lunch we were descended upon by

the local band of salesmen selling the famous Zairian flour sack clothes as well as other trinkets - ebony carvings, and so forth. I got a tee-shirt and shorts in the flour sack material for about US\$10, probably a shocking ripoff, but what the heck. They seemed very stylish in Zaire but I can't say I can find anywhere in Australia to wear them!

Dinner was to be in the hotel - they were spit roasting a pig for the two overland groups. The afternoon was free for wandering and I visited the Post Office just to see if a letter from the middle of Zaire could reach Australia - and it did! I also got some laundry done by a black guy - the last 8 days of grime cleaned out for just US\$4. He even hung them out on the line but warned me to watch the skies - it might rain! But it was clear blue skies and very hot! So just to be sure, I looked around the corner and sure enough, there was a giant thunderstorm approaching. It was 4.30 as I re-hung my laundry on makeshift clotheslines under cover and the skies opened up - the heaviest rain we had seen since that bad storm in Spain. Still, it only lasted about half an hour and then cleared into a pleasant evening, albeit still hot and humid.

We went to dinner at seven o'clock but sat around drinking Primus and chatting to some other guys from the Kamooka truck, although they seemed relatively unfriendly. It seems they were all pretty stoned on marijuana as well as being pretty tired from catching the Zaire Riverboat from Lisala. The drivers were pretty thick and were telling us of their all night drive to get here and how they had broken the suspension on their M.A.N. truck. Mick had to help them repair it the next day as well as sort out the procurement of several 44 gallon drums of diesel which he shared with them. It was a good night - the beer was cold, the pork was tasty although mostly fat, and the crowd was out of control. George stood on the table and dropped his pants but nobody seemed impressed. Other animal behaviour followed and some of us returned to the truck to try to light a fire and sit beside it and have intelligent conversation, but the fire wouldn't go so we went to sleep instead - after all, it was midnight and almost comfortably cool.

It was an understandably late start next morning with quite a few sore heads around. George approached me after breakfast - he and J-P were planning to leave the trip that day if they could get a flight to Goma where they were going to trek up some of the volcanoes. I loaned George some money, being concerned more by the prospect of J-P not going if George couldn't afford it. I still feel amazed that George was naive enough to come to Africa without enough money and the events that followed several weeks later added weight to my continuing amazement. In any case, George's cheque which he gave me at Kilimanjaro was honoured back in Australia! During the morning quite a few of us walked to a bank to change some money after the black market money changer that Eugene had promised, failed to materialise. The difference between the black market and the banks in Zaire was not great although the charges for changing Travellers Cheques were very high - 1% plus Z1000. Fortunately I had plenty of cash and changed it instead, which was relatively quick - about an hour compared with nearly two hours for those changing T/C's.

After lunch most of us had decided to go on a guided tour to Stanley Falls to see the fishermen and the island village. In reality, few of us knew what we were going to see, but the Shoestring said that the tour was a good thing so were we going anyway. It was pretty cheap, although we had to buy the chief of the village a beer at the local bar afterwards! So we set off on foot just after 1 pm and wandered through the back streets of Kisangani, meandering amongst villages and eventually arriving at a channel of the main river - about 100 metres across and quite fast flowing. I wasn't sure whether we would be going in pirogues or not and had certainly brought my camera gear, but this certainly looked like a place where some kind of boat was required! Some guys with pirogues offer a kind of ferry service across this channel and we all piled in two of these and were soon across the channel. It was a lovely hot day and a dip in the water would probably have been



very cooling but I feared for my camera if one of these seemingly unstable craft overturned, not to mention the nasty diseases that you can probably catch from the water!

Once across there was more walking until we reach the Zaire River and then into two more pirogues for the strenuous (for the oarsmen) trip upstream to Stanley Falls. The falls are really just rapids, with a drop of perhaps ten feet but with an enormous flow of water. We spent some time there gazing in amazement at the local fishermen. They have built bamboo scaffolds out into the river at the falls and they hang huge bamboo conical shaped nets from them to catch fish. They have to be very nimble and quite crazy to then climb out onto the scaffold and haul in the catch. Supposedly they lose quite a few fishermen when they fall into the rapids below. The scaffolds are probably 20 feet high and extend about 80 metres out into the river which is about 400 metres wide, although that is not the main river - just a branch separated from the main river by an island.



Next came the excitement of crossing this branch of the river below the falls in a huge pirogue. This one fit us all - perhaps being 20 metres long and large enough for us to all stand up. Four or so oarsmen had us across through the turbulent waters to the other side where we could walk across the island through scrub and marshland to the main Stanley Falls on the main river. Here the full width of the river can be appreciated - probably at least 2 kilometres, although the rapids are not all that thrilling. From there we walked to the village on the island which has an excellent view of the town of Kisangani. The chief of the village appeared in all his regalia and gave us a demonstration of communication on his drum. The guide told us what it all meant - in French, with Urs trying to translate it for us. The authenticity was a little battered when the chief slipped into his "street clothes" and joined us for the trip back to the "mainland" for a beer.

The trip back was the highlight of the afternoon. We were spread across two pirogues and going downstream and once into the fast flowing channel that we had first crossed, we were really moving along. The oarsmen seemed to be having a race and were singing in the traditional way of the area. Sitting there on our wet bums all in a row in these narrow pirogues was just magical. From there to the small bar we had past on the outskirts of town and we all grabbed a beer, plus a few for the chief. It was about five o'clock and we sat there chatting for quite a while and "people watching" the almost exclusively black clientele who were enjoying their beers and the awful rap style music. I wandered back to camp about six after a very enjoyable afternoon tour - total cost Z550 or about US\$1.25 - what a bargain!

It was a late dinner - you guessed it - the fire wouldn't burn. Mick discussed our departure next day - he still had to go and pickup the diesel since they hadn't located it that day and he had spent most of the day helping the Kamooka guys put their truck back together. Apparently they had to compress the big leaf springs to get them together and were winching them off the wall of the toilets - which almost fell over! Mick eventually intervened and as I recall, used Merv's weight to compress them. Anyway, Mick decided they were nice guys but they didn't have much of a clue as to how to fix their truck!

Next morning was cool and foggy and we hoped to get away by about lunchtime. Mick was off before eight o'clock and others to shop - Richard returned with some live chickens in baskets that we would have a couple of days later. He let them loose for a while with one leg of each bird tied to the others with a length of string. They are really dumb animals and only occasionally did they both decide to wander any distance in the same direction! I tried for a shower but it was a tedious exercise as the water kept stopping. Mick was back at about midday - it takes a long time to find diesel in this country. Even then he had two or three drums in the back of the truck and had to spend quite a while siphoning from inside the truck to the tank since the drums were too heavy to move when full! We had lunch in the meantime and eventually departed at 1.30 pm on a hot and hazy, almost stifling afternoon.

The first 10 or 15 kilometres is a good tarmac road out past the airport - the ONLY tarmac road we saw in the whole of Zaire save for the occasional stretch in a town. Then it was back to the dirt and thoughts turned to the possibility of bogs since the roads of eastern Zaire are supposed to be the worst you can find. We had only gone a few more kilometres when we met a Guerba truck coming the other way and stopped for what turned out to be a fairly long chat. It was always great to exchange stories with trucks going the other way. These guys were headed to Bangui and then north east through the Sudan and up to Cairo, having started in Nairobi. Their news was good since they had had a trouble free run through eastern Zaire so all looked good for a clean run for us, provided we didn't get much more rain!





The rest of the afternoon was on typical narrow and somewhat slippery roads with a number of precarious passing manoeuvres with oncoming timber trucks. There were many villages and a good many of them seemed to delight in hanging dead monkeys out the front - must be some kind of status symbol. We eventually stopped in a large well grassed gravel pit about 70 km from Kisangani, set well into forest and were not troubled by any locals at all - in fact we didn't even do guard duty. It was a lovely clear night and the only problem was the incredibly heavy warm dew which not only caused the usual fire problems but also resulted in the usual wet sleeping bag. The conversation around the campfire was lively and the general atmosphere of the group had changed - for the better - what had caused this? Well, J-P was missing and it was a delightful change of tone. The next ten days were the best the group had and it went to show just how much affect one lousy person can have on the dynamics of an otherwise good group of people.

Next morning was a slow start and a long morning's drive through long stretches of narrow and slippery roads with more oncoming trucks than we would have liked. By lunchtime it was pretty warm and very humid and Megan and Marshall helped Mick kill and pluck the chickens as the rest of us fought off a plague of sand flies that were fiercely attacking us. Later in the afternoon we crossed the big Lindi River on a big high bridge - it was hard to appreciate that these several hundred metre wide rivers are just tributaries of the great Zaire and that we were 2500 kilometres from the sea! After the river was the town of Bafwasende where we quickly got some bread and then pressed on hoping to find a campsite but alas, the road was narrow and through rocky hilly terrain with no pull-offs anywhere. We were becoming quite frustrated - I was up in the cab with Mick, as it was fast becoming dark and we were almost going to stop at the next village and seek refuge when, just on six o'clock, a big gravel pit appeared. I scored the job of digging the trash hole since Steve was feeling crook and George had gone Volcano climbing. It was a lovely clear night so after our chicken dinner I once again slept out and got covered in dew by the next morning.



We planned to reach Epulu this day, December 18th, and got away briskly just after seven as some guys arrived to dig gravel out of the gravel pit. It was a good day's travelling, crossing a number of very pretty rivers and most of the time in the dense Ituri Rainforest. We were gradually climbing and the humidity became just slightly less - or was I getting used to it? We turned east at the town of Nia Nia at 9 am and soon after met another overland truck going our way - a Dutch group who seemed to be travelling very slowly - in fact we got to Epulu by mid afternoon and they didn't arrive until the next day! The road was quite bad in places - both washouts and general roughness as well as some long deep boggy ruts, some of which Mick inspected before we attacked them with great gusto. With the truck traffic on these roads the ruts get progressively deeper until the entire road has sunk down into a cutting almost as deep as the truck is high - some were very narrow as well. At one spot there was another truck bogged - a two wheel drive truck, but he had a good load of passengers who helped push him through so we didn't have to wait long.



Epulu is a delightful place. A largely American funded animal research station there is run by a Swiss guy and they allowed us to camp on an expansive grass area right next to the beautiful rapids of the Epulu River, set below the road bridge maybe 50 metres above. The water was cold but refreshing and it was good to have a swim and a wash in the fast moving water. Some of the guys soon had the spare tyre tube inflated and were doing runs down the rapids - Steve nearly knocked himself out on one occasion. We were initially concerned about what looked like a crocodile sunning itself on a rock about 300 metres above the rapids but we thought it must have been an illusion or at worst a rubber one put there for fun. Later on when it had gone we weren't so sure! (Some years later a tourist was taken by a crocodile here and swimming was banned.) Again it was a beautiful clear night and I slept out next to the truck - the position I had claimed as mine - it always gave me the option of slipping under the truck if it rained unexpectedly!

It was a late start next day as the agenda included an hour tour of the research station, then later in the morning we would go hunting in the rainforest with the pygmies. Those who wished could camp out with the pygmies, which I was contemplating and would wait and see. The hour long

tour began with a short talk from the Swiss guy who runs the research station which, although funded by an American organisation, is conducted under the auspices of the I.C.Z.N. (Institut Zairois pour la Conservation de la Nature). One of their main projects is the capture and raising in captivity of the rare Okapi, the animal that although not a cross, has similarities to the giraffe and the zebra. There were several in captivity there and the local pygmy population is employed to gather food for them in great quantity on a daily basis - they will only eat the foliage of a particular tree. The other projects are less official and include the protection of the pygmies from the tourists and general conservation education.

He spoke about the conservation issues at some length. Zaire has the world's second largest rain forest and it is being depleted at a significant rate. Unfortunately the problem is overshadowed by the Amazon catastrophe but the Zaire figures are just as frightening - all its rainforest will be gone by the year 2060 if the current rate is maintained. As is the case in so many third world countries, the economy is dependent of multinational companies moving in and consuming their natural resources. Even the population increases of the native communities throughout the forest are placing strains on the forests, just for cooking use. This made us feel slightly bad at using firewood for cooking although we were very cautious never to use anything living.

He also told us of the inconsiderate attitude of some tourists who buy monkeys as pets and thus fuel the illegal traffic in these animals - invariably the tourists cannot take the pets home and once taken from the jungle, they cannot be returned. The research station hosts a variety of monkeys and chimpanzees, one of which was hanging around his neck as he spoke with us. This chimp wandered around with us as we toured the site and played with various of our group for some time later. They are incredibly inquisitive and very cheeky and will go for any food they see. However, unlike the baboons, you simply can't help but love them.

The other issue discussed was the pygmies. There are an estimated 40,000 of them living in the Ituri forests that lie between Kisangani and the great Ruwenzori Mountains to the east. Their way of life is mostly unaffected by white civilisation and they live as naturally a part of the jungle as can be imagined. The tribe near the research station is used to tourists and regularly take them on hunting expeditions, and the research station encourages this so as to deter tourists from seeking out other tribes which should be left alone.

By the time we left to go with the pygmies, it was sunny and quite hot yet once into the depths of the jungle it would seem like a different world - warm, humid and dark. We were accompanied by an armed official of the Conservation Institute - he looked like a soldier to all intents and purposes. There are dangerous animals in the jungle and he was there to look after us. We commenced at the pygmy village just a few hundred metres from the research station where we saw much of the tribe lazing about under the shade of their low huts. I guess the average height would be just under 5 foot for adults. A small group were preparing to go with us to one of their hunting camps, deep in the jungle, and this included the chief who was an older guy in a bright blue sweat shirt and rough old trousers. They all walk everywhere in bare feet - me in my hiking boots in comparison! Before we departed a girl came around with ochre coloured dye and smudged some on each of our cheeks - some traditional preparation for the hunt, or perhaps just a ploy to fool the tourists?

We walked for an hour to their hunting camp. The jungle was undulating and thick. We crossed several small streams and all around were huge trees, vines and wildly growing paw paw trees. You simply could not see the sun and I have no idea which direction we were going - we were literally at their mercy. The camp consisted of a number of small huts constructed from flexible lengths of stick and large dried leaves. Some were in disrepair, and most were unlikely to provide



any real shelter if it was to rain heavily. Some had small low stretcher type beds simply constructed from lengths of wood tied together with vine. I was prepared to stay the night and had brought my sleeping bag and mosquito net, although it would be necessary to lay out a mattress of dry leaves to make a place to sleep. It certainly wouldn't be comfortable, even by our "overland" standards.

It was three hours before we went hunting during which time the chief and his small son (perhaps 5 years old) were entertaining us without really trying. First the chief got a fire going - much blowing and the right kinds of dried twigs and it was soon smouldering away. They poke large logs into the fire on end and if they want the fire to slow, they pull them out and then push them back in again to make the fire go faster. The chief then made sure we all had a chair to sit on. There were some chairs already - three sticks of just the right thickness and length with a length of vine to tie them together to form a tripod - then you just sit in the middle! Reasonably comfortable for a while. The chief wandered the jungle within 50 metres of the camp, machete in hand, to locate the right sticks and vine and would have a chair made in a matter of minutes. All this was without a single word of English being spoken, and periodically he called with a high pitched shrill voice as if to attract the other members of his tribe to the spot. In due course more members of the tribe arrived, some carrying the huge rolls of netting that would be used for the hunting and some with their poison tipped arrows. They were mostly teenage kids who proceeded to get into the pre-hunt smoking ceremony. They had a huge, six foot long pipe and were stuffing in the evil weed and each smoking their share. This is normal behaviour for the pygmies who are understandably a very relaxed and easy going group of people!



We set out on the hunt mid afternoon, walking in single file at first, through seemingly virgin bush. Then the guard stopped us and we grouped together while the pygmies proceeded to run their nets through the forest. They choose a valley and net off from one side to the other then run screaming through the jungle to scare any animals into the net. Of course they hope to catch



something big but it's usually a small antelope. Such was the case this day when all of a sudden they were all running towards one spot and our guard ran with them telling us to follow. Several hundred metres away we reached the spot where a small duiker was trapped in the net, squealing as one of the pygmies held it down for us to observe. They then slit its throat and one of them carried it back to the camp while others gathered the net for another attempt in a nearby valley. The second time we waited and waited but despite much activity and screaming, nothing else was to be caught. We headed back to the camp as the afternoon was almost done and some of us would be heading back to the truck for the night.

At the camp the chief sliced off a leg of the duiker for us to take back and barbecue for our dinner. I wasn't really into the night of pot smoking that would follow, so headed back with several others under the guidance of one of the older pygmy kids. We walked briskly through the forest as the light was fading and reached the camp just after six o'clock. I was soon into the river for a quick wash and cool down - very civilised! Noel and Jenny were preparing dinner, since they didn't go on the hunt, and Doc Ian was soon preparing to barbecue the duiker leg to a cinder. With thunderstorms brewing over the nearby hills I decided to claim a spot for my bed in the nearby rondoal but later moved it back out to the truck when the skies cleared and it turned out a perfect night. What with a bottle of wine and a fairly strong vodka and orange (Fanta) I was well and truly asleep by the time I went to bed at midnight! It was a fun night with a much smaller group and we were all having a great time joking, much of it about J-P.

The night was indeed perfect and next morning was actually dry - no dew, no soaked sleeping bag and not even too warm. After breakfast and an early morning swim and wash, we proceeded to pack up ready to depart. The others returned in a state of smoky euphoria about nine o'clock and reported a wonderful evening of bizarre pygmy behaviour. The whole tribe seemed to be there, singing, smoking and generally relaxing. I did some shopping, it being my turn to cook that night, and Jeanette offered to come and help as it was her and Megan's turn for lunch.



After shopping we soon headed off, just after ten. I waited at the campsite to photograph Merv stopped up on the Epulu River bridge, both with my camera and Mick's, and quickly ran after it so we could proceed. We continued eastwards for the rest of the day through increasingly hilly country - the foothills of the Ruwenzoris. Gradually the thick jungle started to give way to larger areas of cultivation. During the afternoon, as we were among some large mountains, a huge thunderstorm developed to the south and I thought we might just miss it. However, at about 4 pm the heavens opened and the road turned to a river, although it was pretty good and we never looked like getting stuck. A campsite was going to be tricky to find with very few pull-offs and quite a lot of habitation. Eventually Mick drove until nearly six o'clock and found a fairly large flat area in front of a church - there didn't seem to be any habitation nearby and certainly no-one was around, perhaps deterred by the now drizzly weather. In any case, it wasn't Sunday - what day was it? After all, we didn't take much notice of what day of the week it was, but in fact it was Wednesday, December 20th - five days to Christmas!

I actually enjoyed cooking that night. Lots of people wanted to help, taking pity on me not only for being without J-P but also for having put up with him. I had calculated that I would only need to cook with him 2 or 3 more times once he rejoined us and there was certainly no way I would pair with him after Dar es Salaam. That night I did a dehyd chicken curry and real fried chips! Then it was creamed rice which Gert mostly cooked, poured over bananas. The fire worked remarkably well despite the crappy weather, but as the drizzle continued and most of us were pretty tired, it was an early night for all. That led to my awaking earlier than usual the next morning but at least I had the scrambled eggs cooking before most people had awoken. It was a cool foggy morning although I had been quite dry in the cook tent.

The road through to Komanda was pretty atrocious in places as we passed through quite a few villages as well as some tracts of jungle, including where we crossed the Ituri River, even there a reasonable size. That would pretty much be the last Atlantic bound river we would see as we continued to climb into and eventually over the foothills of the Ruwenzoris. A brief shopping stop in Komanda around nine o'clock and we were headed south and would in fact travel in that direction on the western slopes of the Ruwenzoris for over 200 km before crossing to the east side. This whole stretch of road had been described to us by other travellers as amongst the worst we would encounter, principally because of the large amount of other truck traffic that it carries. Immediately on leaving Komanda we struck what could have been a problem - a police check and rain barrier. These checkpoints are established supposedly to protect the roads from undue damage after wet weather and can often delay overland trucks and others for many days. Even when the weather is good, they can often be a source of corrupt revenue for the local authorities, let alone after the previous day's rain which we thought could easily be an excuse for a lengthy delay. Fortunately they did not delay us, perhaps because the weather had improved somewhat into a mild yet somewhat unstable day.

The road was typically narrow and very slippery, but now we were also into quite hilly terrain and each hill was a potential problem. The going was slow but we made steady progress for two hours before we came across a truck bogged on the hill ahead of us. We stopped before the hill and wandered up to see what was happening. Two trucks were stopped, both slithering about in the quagmire and both only two-wheel drives. We would not normally have a problem except that the road was now extremely rutted. It took them a while to get out and meanwhile we set up lunch in the middle of the road. It was over an hour before they extricated themselves and just prior to that some French guys in two 4WD Landcruisers had come along and given us a hard time for blocking the road. We only delayed them briefly so they could go up the hill and try to find a way past the bogged trucks. They managed, being lighter and narrower than us.



Mick got Merv up the hill after the trucks had cleared the boggy patch but all but bogged it when he slipped into the very deep rut which lead the right hand wheel unavoidably into the gutter on the right of the road. He really demonstrated Merv's ability in 4WD when he stopped and then gently spun the wheels until he gradually climbed out. We really thought we were going to have to dig, push and mat but instead, we were away, still clean! There were several more delays during the next hour or so, as the trucks in front of us became temporarily bogged or to allow oncoming traffic to pass on these ridiculously narrow roads that carry a huge volume of trucks.



By mid afternoon we were about as close to Mount Stanley (the highest peak of the Ruwenzoris) as we would get and we could actually see snow on the peaks to our east. This was not only the first sight of snow since Morocco, but we were also within a matter of a degree of latitude from the Equator! It looked like it might storm again as it had done the day before, and certainly I got a lovely photograph of a superb towering cumulus cloud that was developing so fast you could actually see it changing as you watched. It didn't rain, however, but we still couldn't find a place to camp. By just after five o'clock we were moderately desperate as we had reached the quite large town of Beni. We had already rejected an airfield adjacent to a village as a possible campsite. There was mention of a campsite in the town but it had seemingly closed down. Mick's notes indicated that we may be able to camp at the waterworks, which we duly found, but no-one there had any kind of authority and people were just coming and going to get water. Someone did suggest that we could camp about 5 km out of the town on some vacant land and thus, we pressed on to there, arriving somewhat after six o'clock. By this time, it was quite dark as we had come well east and were still on UTC+2 and almost 30° east of Greenwich and thus on the border of the UTC+3 zone.

The vacant land looked fine - it was probably used as a playing field in daylight, and surprisingly, people didn't trouble us at all despite our close proximity to town. The weather looked threatening and I pitched a tent but it turned out to be a crystal clear night. There was a good



night of joviality near the fire - after all it was just 3 days to Christmas! I spent some time repairing one of the seats in the truck that had lost its support and kept sliding off with people sitting on it.

It was a brisk start next morning - cool and overcast, and we were keen to put some miles behind us before the inevitable trucks starting getting bogged in front of us. The road became increasingly hilly, rocky and washed out, and the going was very slow indeed. The terrain was like the coastal hills of northern N.S.W. - green and fertile - many bananas, pineapples etc. but the weather now more moderate and significantly less humid. We reached the large town of Butembo at 10.15 - two hours to do just 50 km! Here we shopped and we also changed some money on the black market, which was quite evident. I stood guard and during our stay, a short sharp rainshower drenched us. We left the town after a long stop of two hours and immediately were confronted by a Y-junction on the outskirts of town. It seems that Mick's notes indicated that the road to the right is the main road and is much shorter but can also be quite boggy. The left fork would add many hours to the journey and wound its way through the mountains, but was more rocky and less likely to be boggy. We decided to take our chances with the main road.

We had done perhaps 10 km when we had climbed up into some hilly farmland. Several trucks were stopped and as we squeezed past one he warned us not to continue. Just after this we reached a very slippery hill and Mick did well to get most of the way up this hill. Alas, the back suddenly slid sideways into the gutter and Merv was unable to get enough traction to go the last 50 metres to the top of this hill. Just at the top of the hill we saw a further problem - sixteen oncoming trucks were all waiting for the road to dry out as they were too scared to try going down this hill for fear of slipping off the edge! The trouble was, however, that they were strewn all over the road and were well and truly blocking it. It looked like it would be a long afternoon!





Most of us got out of the truck and certainly just standing up on this slimy surface was a difficult exercise. There was much digging, mud matting and pushing, and we eventually got Merv to the top of the hill after about half an hour. We were never really bogged - just unable to get enough grip. We then waited, trying to encourage these guys to get out of our way. A large crowd of locals was standing by having a lovely time watching all this, together with a number of pigs, which kept wandering across the road. The Italian couple in the Renault 4WD were there also (the ones we saw at Assamakka) although their front drive shaft had broken and we were surprised they had managed to get up the hill at all!

The first of these guys eventually decided to try to get down the hill and one of them did almost fall off the edge, but after a lot of juggling and pushing we managed to get past them all and away by just after three o'clock. The day was wearing on and we at least wanted to reach the equator. The road was slow going - narrow and with some more short boggy stretches and the odd deep set of ruts. We passed through Musienene, the small village before the equator, having taken an hour to cover about 20 km, and then stopped on the equator at 4.15 pm and spent a while taking group shots on everyone's camera. There is a somewhat battered sign there announcing that it is the LIGNE DE L'EQUATEUR.



There were no places to camp as the road was narrow and the terrain hilly, with lots of Australian eucalyptus trees along the roadside. About half an hour after the equator, as the light was starting to fade, we were suddenly stuck in an enormous boghole. It was a set of ruts that had worn so deep that it had formed a cutting, and the normal ground level was at least 2 metres higher than the ruts, which extended for about 30 metres along the road. Mick quickly ascertained that the rear diff was stuck on the ridge between the ruts, not to mention that the ruts were full of muddy water. It was clearly going to be a longer afternoon than we had ever expected.





Mick dug with the hand trowel and others ladled the water out for about an hour. I assisted in getting the mud mats into position by sliding down beside the truck literally into the mud and juggling the heavy mats into position. Others had fetched small saplings and were cutting them into lengths and filling the ruts ahead of us. Our first attempt moved us about 2 metres and we were stuck again. We had to try to extricate the mats that were now strewn about under the truck and dig some more so as to replace them again. One mat could not be moved, being stuck under a wheel. Maybe twenty minutes later we had another go, but again only managed a couple of metres. The saplings seemed to not be working so well and were piling up in front of the front wheels rather than going underneath them. We cleared some, repositioned the mats and tried again. This time Merv came out of the bog and we all gave a shout of jubilation. Most of us were filthy - those of us that had been under the truck were literally covered in mud. I kept my shoes on, always conscious of getting a rock or twig in my foot, whereas other went barefoot. I just washed my shoes by walking through a big puddle! The other mud would just dry hard next to the fire later that night and would then mostly brush off. We straightened the mud mats, double checked all the shovels and axes, and were off just after seven o'clock - two hours!

There was still nowhere to camp, and we never liked to travel at night as it increases the risk of accidents. And we were all tired, although the adrenalin was flowing and we were all pretty high, with Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon at full blast on the stereo as we continued into the darkness on this now lonely mountain road. Mick finally stopped at 8.20 pm at a side track and decided that we could get the truck far enough off the road to not block it and we could set up camp on this track - hopefully no-one would want to use it! The fire was going to take a while to get going so the cooks quickly did dinner on the gas cooker after we had the cook tent up. It turned into a clear night and I was sleeping out beside the cook tent but ended up having to cram into the cook tent at two in the morning when there was a brief rain shower. The end of my bed and sleeping bag were hanging out in the rain but it didn't really matter! At about 4 am the drizzle



set in and stayed until dawn. All in all, it was a fitting conclusion to a reasonably disastrous day, yet we were all in very good spirits, being almost thrilled at finally encountering some really challenging Zairian conditions.

We were concerned that there would be more bogs the next day but the road, while mountainous and narrow, was generally solid and rocky and we never looked like getting bogged again. The morning was misty and the scenery was more like a scene out of Nepal as we meandered through hills and valleys, with many small villages and cultivated land. We stopped briefly in Lubero, 30 minutes from camp, just to buy some drinks. It was still quite cold - a real contrast from the warm conditions of the last three weeks. At around ten o'clock we met two oncoming overland trucks - one a Dragoman and the other a private Dutch truck. We chatted to them for a while and they confirmed that we would have no troubles from there on. We lunched after crossing the highest point on the road, which must be around 2500 metres (over 7000 feet). Then for two hours we meandered through some incredibly densely populated countryside with hillsides literally covered with huts, mile after mile. These were the nearby towns of Luofu and Kayna-Bayonga.



After leaving the last of these towns we reached the gate to the Virunga National Park. We would have to traverse this and leave the other side before nightfall, otherwise we would be charged an exorbitant tourist fee for staying in the park. Soon after the gate we reached the "edge of the mountains", the Escarpment de Kabasha, where we could see the Great Rift Valley spread out ahead of us - it is a thousand kilometres wide at this point, all the way to Mount Kilimanjaro, with the mighty Lake Victoria in its middle. To our north we could see Lake Edward where we would be in a few days time - the lake is half in Uganda.

As we descended on the narrow rocky road, we started to see the game on the plains below - elephants and buffalo in large herds. Once on the plain we saw large numbers of antelope all around us, plus a few itinerant warthogs. An hour and a half after entering the park we reached

the main tourist centre where there is a safari camp. There were many baboons around and then as we crossed the river on a large high bridge, we could see many enormous hippos lazing about in the sun on the riverbank below. It was five o'clock when we reached the park exit and the warden there said we could camp outside the park in a particular area and showed us to it. He then wanted to charge Mick for camping but wanted much more than Mick was prepared to pay. Mick sent him away and later in the evening he returned and argued with Mick but I don't think he got much joy - it was obviously not a proper camping area and there were certainly no facilities. I wandered down to the river and could hear the hippos nearby. Gert returned soon after saying he had met one rather closer than he had wished!

So it was just two days to Christmas and time to bake lots of goodies for the next few days, or at least practice. After dinner, the oven was duly set going and during the evening we baked lots of biscuits and some cakes. Unfortunately most of them got eaten straight away! After all, it was the official midway point for me and Steve on our 22 week "Africa A-Z", as well as eleven weeks since we left London. It was a nice clear night and I slept out although it clouded over later, but did not rain. It was quite dewy the next morning and we were away before seven.

The roads through the volcanic regions around Rutshuri and Goma were consistent - seemingly carved out of the volcanic rock and bone shakingly rough. Thus, the 90 km to Goma took all morning - four and a half hours. In Goma it was straight to the National Parks office to inquire about gorilla visits - we had been warned that it would be heavily booked and that the office would probably be closed over the weekend and Christmas (Monday), and the warnings turned out to be correct on both counts. We were all bitterly disappointed once it became clear that we could not see the gorillas, and I was a bit annoyed that we had not been organised enough to get J-P and George to take our money and book them for us. Of course, the difficulty with overland trips is that you can never be sure when you will arrive and in our case, we could easily have been bogged for several more days. Yet we didn't have the time to wait in Goma doing almost nothing for the week until the first available booking. The short haul trips can book ahead because they know they will be there, and you have to pay in advance - US\$50 per person - more in Rwanda.

We then meandered around town looking for a place to have lunch but ended up at the Rwanda border and had to do a U-turn. Here we met an Exodus truck coming into Goma and they planned to go to the same campsite as us for Christmas, so at least we would have some company. We eventually lunched near the lake and then spent much of the afternoon shopping. Dale found a hotel that had showers and I, among others, went and used it since we had not had a wash since Epulu. It was freezing cold of course. Others were planning to swim in the lake although the books warned against it due to Bilharzia. I played safe but then again, I don't know of anyone who contracted the disease.

We left town at three having not seen any sign of George and J-P, not that we were concerned - in fact we were overjoyed! After some wrong turns we eventually found the campsite at an abandoned mansion - half built - right on Lake Kivu. It was a superb spot although there were quite a lot of locals around from time to time, but very friendly and nothing was stolen to my knowledge. After setting up we tried to find firewood but in the end, Mick and some others went off in the truck to get some from elsewhere - obviously this was a popular spot and the firewood supplies were depleted. Our tent was eventually set up down on a flat grassed area near the lake.





Christmas Eve was a fun night - a good fire, we visited the Exodus truck when it rained and later, as the night was clear, we sat around drinking and singing. An Irish guy on the Exodus truck was a good guitarist and could sing many songs, especially the Pogues, and we all sang along. I went to bed at midnight, looking forward to the best Christmas I could imagine - in Africa, with a great group of people, and not a worry in the world. I arose late - eight o'clock. People were wandering around - some awake, some asleep. It was a slow start as some of us did laundry in the lake or got locals to do it. The baking activities commenced and the oven was kept in full production for much of the day - biscuits, sausage rolls, party pies, cakes. Mick had the chickens that we bought live in Goma killed and was dressing them. Others were peeling vegies or decorating the tree - a small Australian eucalyptus chopped down in its prime and stuck in the ground near the cook tent - Andrew had made some great decorations. Mid morning a herd of long horn cattle walked through the camp and down the beach past our tents - quite a remarkable sight! Then a large group of black kids visited and we entertained each other for a while - they were friendly and fun but eventually Mick had to chase them away.





There was a brief rainshower around midday - not enough to dampen our spirits. The presents were handed out around three o'clock, Doc Ian doing the honours in the Father Christmas outfit! The presents were interesting - from useful, to drinkable to hilarious. Mine was drinkable - they know me well - red wine! We eventually sat down to dinner, under the cover of the cook tent as it was starting to rain, at four o'clock, and it was just like home - roast chicken, spuds, beans, etc. followed by Christmas pudding. Some were using beer to lubricate the day, I was devouring a bottle of Gin and another of Vermouth - dry martinis for me thank you. It kind of sneaks up on you and by seven o'clock there was a kind of hush over the camp as people seemed to be falling asleep all over the place. Several of us just flaked out on the seats in the back of the truck!

I tried to go to bed about ten o'clock but there was a group of loud people on the rock jetty. Urs was among them and was performing true to form when he is drunk. Everyone could hear him and he was sure he could see the Southern Cross since now we were in the southern hemisphere (I knew he couldn't because it was only rising very early in the morning, maybe 4 am). In any case, I went out and joined them for a while, figuring if I couldn't sleep, I'd might as well join in. The night was cool and it also rained. Gert and Megan disappeared and it didn't take long to figure out that they were becoming more than good friends - so I had the tent to myself.

When I awoke at six the next morning, I was still feeling somewhat seedy and was a little sick, but it passed by the end of the day. We packed and went into town by 8.30, and Mick confirmed the gorilla situation with the National Parks office. We shopped, me helping, since it was my turn to cook the following night and to help that night. We actually bought strawberries in the Goma market and had them that night with this Angel Whirl stuff which was really tasty. We left Goma just after eleven - still no sign of J-P and George, although we weren't looking too hard! Lunch was on the road back to Rutshuri and I just slept through it, still feeling crook. We camped at the Rutshuri waterfalls by 3.30 pm. with a relaxing setup, visited the waterfalls down the hill below us, and then it was into preparing dinner. It was a quiet night in comparison with the Christmas

festivities and the only excitement was when a vehicle pulled up at about nine o'clock and J-P and George emerged. Oh shit, we all thought, the good times are over! J-P was immediately spouting off about the volcano they had climbed but no-one was interested and I think we all just went to bed early to get away from him. It was overcast and very damp and dewy next to the waterfall, and indeed it always seems to be misty around these volcanoes which we never really saw for cloud and fog.

We were away early the next morning as it was a border crossing day, although it turned out to be a quick one and thus we need not have rushed. We stopped in Rutshuri for drinks and then headed east on the atrocious road to Djumbo - this is where you can start the trek up to see the gorillas, but alas, we were continuing straight through to the Ugandan border just beyond. The mountain gorillas live in a relatively small tract of land about 40 km by 10 km which spans the borders of Zaire, Rwanda and Uganda. Fortunately all three countries now have National Parks or sanctuaries covering the region, but it had made the protection of the gorillas very difficult until recent times. Obviously the gorillas don't understand where the borders are! Within this tiny area, a series of volcanoes rise to well over 12,000 feet, the tallest being Mount Karisimbi at 14,782 feet. Mount Sabinio at 11,960 feet marks the three way junction of the borders. It was frustrating to be so close to the gorillas - a matter of a few hours walk, but it was not to be. In any case, it is a good excuse to return to Africa! Fortunately for Dale she was able to return to the area after Dar es Salaam and did see the gorillas before returning home to America.

We reached the border post at ten o'clock - over two hours to do about 30 km! The Zairian exit formalities took 53 minutes and the Ugandan post was just a couple of hundred metres further on. It was immediately almost midday as we changed time zone to UTC+3. It was a bit sad to be leaving Zaire - it is a fascinating country, full of contrasts and extremes. Yet it was good to be entering an English speaking country and one that has its own chequered history, which meant that we were among the first of the EO trips to go this way.

## UGANDA - The Jewel of Africa

### Facts:

Nights in Country: 9.

Distance Travelled: 935 km.

While Winston Churchill described Uganda as the "Jewel of Africa", most people would more immediately think of Idi Amin and the atrocious years during which Uganda and its people were subjected to such terrible treatment. In fact, Uganda's people are among the most friendly you could find, and the country is a rich fertile one set high on a plateau with a lovely temperate climate. Alas the economy is still in turmoil and a thriving black market exists.

Population: 16 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 150.

Main Exports: Coffee.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$200.

Currency: Ugandan Shilling, Official USh350 = US\$1, Black market USh700 = US\$1.

Languages: English, Luganda.

Independence: 1962 from Britain.

Government: Military dictatorship.

Climate: Despite being on the equator, the climate is relatively temperate, with average maximum daily temperatures around 25°C, slightly hotter in December to February.

The Ugandan border post was manned by a single official and he was inundated by our arrival. Nevertheless, he was friendly and we didn't have to leave the truck, Mick getting all the passports duly stamped. Some nationalities (non Commonwealth) had to pay a small fee for a visitor's permit. We also filled in a group currency control form - a joke really since it was impossible for them to really check it and I don't think they wanted it when we left. Some books talked about attempts to implement stringent currency control in Uganda with compulsory exchange, but it certainly seemed to have disintegrated when we were there. I didn't ever change any money officially, doing it all on the black market at double the official rate. The official wanted to check the truck but when he looked inside the trailer he decided it was all too hard and we were away after just under an hour.

We stopped for lunch just a few kilometres from the border and then continued on the remaining few kilometres to the small town of Kisoro. Here we were vaguely hopeful of arranging a gorilla visit, but inquiries quickly revealed that Uganda had banned all gorilla visits until proper arrangements had been made, they having only recently established the gorilla sanctuary. We decided to stay there anyway in the grounds of the Travellers Rest Hotel, somewhat of a dump. This was just before three o'clock and we just lazed about for the rest of the afternoon. We had no fire as we had no wood and there was none around. After dinner, it was a cold night and some of us sat in a huddle chatting. It was a fun night and I eventually went to bed at 10.30 pm in the cook tent where J-P was busily snoring away. Having changed time zone it was now very dark when I arose at 5.30 next morning. It was clear and cold but at least I could see the Southern Cross! George delayed our departure briefly, as he was rather unwell having developed a bad fever in reaction to a tropical ulcer that was developing on his leg following an injury he got climbing the volcano. I got his tent down for him and packed it away.





The road from Kisoro to Kabale is superbly picturesque, winding through volcanic hills and craters, mostly terraced and cultivated, rather like Nepal or Bali. There were many banana plantations as well as maize, coffee and tea. The gravel road was actually in very good condition – smooth and well graded. Many people were in the fields working and would always wave to us as we waved to them. As we initially climbed into these hills we could get a view back to the Virunga volcanic peaks poking out of the low cloud and fog below us.

In Kabale, a bustling town with a thriving market, we stopped for over two hours obtaining diesel and food. I helped Ann and Dale do the shopping as I also needed to get some bread for lunch. Our departure was delayed when Urs said he had found a guy in the market who would change money and offered to pool all our money. He went off with about US\$250 and took ages to return. We were starting to get concerned when he appeared - the problem was that the notes are of such small denominations (US\$ 50 or US\$100), it not only took him forever to count it all but he had trouble fitting it into his day pack - roughly 2,500 individual notes! It was worse than Nigeria - here the largest note was worth (in black market terms) 15 US cents!

We lunched just out of town then continued on what started out to be an excellent tarmac road winding through the nearby hills. This is the main road to Kampala. Once out of the hills into undulating country the road deteriorated with many huge washouts and stretches of potholes. The going became slow again as it took us two and a half hours to do about 75 km to the junction where we would turn north towards the Queen Elizabeth National Park. The junction was in the right place but was a narrow dirt road with no signpost. We gathered some firewood while Mick talked to a local to try to ascertain if it was the right road. I don't think he got much sense out of him but we took it anyway. The road meandered through undulating country past many villages and continuous cultivation. It was narrow and washed out and after a short distance we heard a noise from the trailer and stopped. Mick checked and the shocker mount had snapped off. He unbolted the other end of the shocker and we continued. There were few spots to stop but we

eventually found a vacant area next to the road - it was nearly six o'clock but would be light until almost seven.



Within minutes we had an audience of dozens of locals. They were friendly enough but overly inquisitive. We set up the tents in a semi circle around the open side of the cook tent and I strung a rope between the back posts of the tents and we made sure the spectators kept behind the rope. It was a bit bizarre - after all, it was their land and who are we to come along and tell them what to do, yet we had to get things done and didn't want them under our feet. They seemed happy and stood there or sat behind the rope watching our antics. Later many of us got into conversations with various of them - Mick was talking to the local school teacher and was showing him maps of where we had been. I talked to a high school student who was very interested in Australia and how we live there, what crops we grow and so forth. It was great to be in an English speaking country at last, and to find such friendly people was a joy. I counted 150 of them around the camp at the peak, but as it got dark they wandered off back to their homes. Meanwhile, George was in a bad way and the two kiwi nurses and Doc Ian were cleaning and dressing the ulcer on his leg and administering antibiotics. Doc Ian was very concerned about it and recommended that George get proper attention once we got to Kampala. Problem was, however, that George had very little money left.

The fire would not go that night - no dry wood, but it was a clear night and I slept out. The mozzies were very thick and by next morning it was misty and damp, although it had not rained. We got away a bit after seven after filling up the water from a nearby supply. The road continued to be quite crappy through to the main tarmac road at the town of Ishaka. By then the morning mist had cleared and it was a fine and hot sunny day. The tarmac was true to Ugandan form - washed out, potholed but with stretches of roadworks. It continued through pleasant undulating country before descending onto a plain where the National Park commenced and there were herds of buffalo in the distance. We lunched on the roadside around midday and it was pretty hot, probably 35°C. Further north we crossed the channel that joins Lake Edward and Lake George where there is a fishing village and many marabou storks circling overhead. Soon after is the junction where we turned left to reach the park settlement. The Danish were stopped there having lunch - we had last seen them at Yankari and they had crossed Zaire and come into Uganda at the border from Beni.

At the main gate we paid the entrance fees and continued the 10 km or so to the Mwye Lodge settlement and eventually located the camping area down by the channel. It is a reasonable spot set high on a hill overlooking Lake Edward and the channel. The sound of the numerous hippos could be heard in the channel below us and would be heard well into the evening. After setting up we walked back to the lodge for a couple of drinks at the bar. Some people spied a menu that indicated we could have dinner there fairly cheaply. When Mick came in they asked if he would pay and he said he would pay half if everyone wanted to go. A quick check revealed that some people were not interested so it appeared that if you wanted to eat there you would have to pay. J-P started kicking up a fuss, saying Mick should contribute. I didn't care one way or the other - the place didn't look that thrilling and besides, the amount of money involved was insignificant either way - a couple of dollars at the most. As we walked out on our way to the truck to go on an afternoon game drive, J-P was still harping on and I told him squarely to shut up, and that he was making a fool of himself. Well, the usual threats followed - "Don't call me an idiot or I'll smack you in the mouth!" I just laughed, told him not to behave like a child, and walked away. Things were fairly tense between us for the remaining few weeks of the trip!

The afternoon game drive was disappointing - we saw quite a lot of antelope - waterbuck and Ugandan kob, plus a few warthogs, but not much else. We were back at camp by seven and some went off to dinner at the lodge, returning later to pronounce it barely worth the small charge! Dale and Ann were cooking us dinner and having all kinds of problems getting the fire to burn and eventually brought out the gas cooker. We eventually didn't eat until after ten and didn't get to bed until midnight. I was feeling lazy and hadn't put up a tent, so was sleeping out. The mozzies were thick and there was lightning all around us. The rain arrived at 2 am with gusty winds as well. I quickly got under the truck and managed to get back to sleep in the relatively dry environment. Unfortunately you can't put up the mozzie net under there so I was smothering myself in rid! We awoke at 6 am and tried to dry things out - at least it had stopped raining. Some people stayed behind as we headed off on the morning game drive just as dawn was breaking at 6.45 am.

This time we headed further out into the park and found a big herd of elephants, although they were pretty timid and kept retreating from us. We also saw warthogs and buffalo. The sight of the huge Ruwenzori Range as a backdrop to the plains of the park was very striking. We were back mid morning and had a leisurely brunch. It was a chance to get some chores done or just sit around as we had booked a boat trip on the channel at 2.30. I repacked my bag, did some laundry and managed a nice cold shower in the solitary shower that we had camped near. We picked up a drink at the bar as we walked down to the lake to get the launch. Not everyone went on the launch trip as it cost USh1700 - sounds a lot but that's only US\$2.50.

The trip was well worth it - we must have seen a thousand hippos that afternoon, not to mention the hundreds of birds, some buffalo and a monitor lizard. The hippos were incredible, both in and out of the water, and from the safety of the big launch we could get up real close to them. The cameras were really busy and I certainly got some superb shots, especially the one of the baby hippo with its mother.





After the two hour trip we left the park, and headed out to the main road and ended up camping just off it, technically still in the park, and just 2 kilometres north of our second crossing of the equator. The biggest problem with the campsite was the relatively long grass which made it hard to get the bottom of the mozzie net to work properly. I slept out in the clear conditions but ended up with quite a lot of mozzies inside my net and had to resort to applying lots of repellent to keep them at bay.

It was the normal early start the next day, the last day of 1989. We were into the small town of Kasese by 7.30 am and obtained some diesel and continued northwards to the larger town of Fort Portal, where we would shop for food. We met up with the Danish truck enroute and they ended up staying with us all the way through to Kampala, including spending New Year's Eve with us. The road was pretty good and we were in Fort Portal by ten o'clock on a mild and sunny morning. We left by midday, heading east towards Kampala on a road that quickly deteriorated into roughish gravel. We lunched just out of town and then continued through hilly country with the odd rocky outcrop, stopping to camp on a vacant area near a small village called Kyegegwe at about five o'clock. I walked to the top of a nearby rocky hill to survey the surrounding countryside, then settled down to a Gin and Fanta. We were 207 km from Kampala and would reach there the next day. During dinner I shared my Christmas present bottle of red with a few others. Right on cue at a quarter to twelve the heavens opened and there was a violent thunderstorm. Luckily I had helped Jeanette put up a tent (since Gert and Megan were now sharing). Midnight came and went and we all headed off to bed - a bit of an anti-climax I suppose.

It was an understandably late start the next morning, not helped by the light drizzle still falling. Dale and I left early on foot, wanting to get a bit of exercise in preparation for our Kilimanjaro climb, and were picked up a couple of kilometres down the road. J-P, Gert and Megan were riding on the Danish truck and we travelled in convoy all the way to Kampala. The early part of the road was narrow and somewhat muddy after the night's rain. We stopped in the village of Mubende

around midday and did some shopping, as well as getting water. Doc Ian was shopping as he had decided to change places with Steve and become a cook rather than a trailer packer. Lunch was in a quarry not far out of town and soon after that we got to a long stretch of new highway that was being built but not yet opened. We ran along side it mile after mile, occasionally crossing to the other side. Eventually we reached the point where we could use the new highway and it was good for the remaining 50 or 60 kilometres into Kampala.



Kampala is a large city with quite a few high and relatively modern buildings. As we travelled through the outskirts there were of course the usual makeshift market places and squalid houses, but once in the centre there are quite a few pleasant tree lined streets and good quality houses. We immediately headed for the Athina Club House which allows overland trucks to camp in the grounds - the problem was that there was another EO truck there already, headed from Dar es Salaam to the west coast, and they had occupied all the available space! Thus, we had to pitch our tents on the roadside out the front. The Danish truck did similarly. We would have to be careful with security and always leave someone behind to keep an eye on the tents, but that was not a big problem, especially since George was not generally in a fit state to walk too far. We were set up soon after six and wandered into the bar to chat to the other EO expedition members.

Well it was indeed interesting to see and meet another EO group. There is something about EO, its drivers, trucks and expedition members, that is distinctive. I met four other groups during the entire trip and while they were all quite different, they were also obviously EO! It's very difficult to pinpoint, yet it gave me some satisfaction that we were with EO and I would certainly go with them again. Much of it is their drivers - I met seven of them - and they were consistently good guys - sensible, fun, competent. The groups always had a good mix of people - nationalities, ages, backgrounds. In any group there can always be trouble makers, as we surely knew, what with



Robbie and Peter and then J-P, yet the rest of our group were great. The same could be said for these other groups in one form or another. Some of this group were Aussies and Kiwis and perhaps they were drinking more than was sensible - yet they had had a difficult first three weeks of their trip with delays getting visas in Nairobi, and quite a few boggings across Tanzania. There were two "oldies" - one American lady who was built like a tank and was a trailer packer! The other was an American guy who was on his third EO trip, having done a London - Kathmandu at least a decade ago. He was a real seasoned traveller and had some good stories to tell.

Dinner was late and I was in bed by eleven, yet a few were still in the bar and returned to the fire to continue their drinking. I awoke early in the morning, well before six, since Urs was still sitting by the fire talking at the top of his voice. I think Mick had only gone to bed in the truck an hour or so earlier and Rich was still hanging in there. I got up just after six - it was just starting to get light - and both Urs and Rich refused to believe what time it was. Actually, Urs wouldn't have believed anything, he was so drunk. Just then Urs got onto the subject of J-P and started calling him all kinds of names in his loud voice. People were starting to stir by now and a few were wandering around in their usual early morning daze. Then J-P appeared and challenged Urs, saying "what did you call me?!" I could see an ugly scene developing, as could a few others, and we stood back hoping that J-P would have the sense to back off - you don't argue with a drunk - he won't give in. Urs was bating him and J-P was getting into his now well known aggressive temper. There was a short scuffle, a bit of sparring, but J-P did back off in the end, humiliated and disappeared into the cook tent to try to regain his cool. This was getting ridiculous - I was determined to remain unaffected by this asshole - he was not going to spoil my trip, although I was really starting to wonder how long it would be before someone would really take him on. I could also barely imagine the possibility of him continuing all the way through to Harare with us.



That morning we had some official business to transact - me leading the onslaught to the Immigration Department to get some extensions to our visitors passes (the lone guy on the border from Zaire would only give us 7 days and it looked like we would need 8 or 9). Mick drove the truck the couple of kilometres into the centre of town where he could park, and we headed off. He was going with Doc Ian and George to the US Embassy and hopefully to see a Doctor about George's leg and lack of money. The Immigration Office seemed more like a partitioned area set up in an underground garage and no-one seemed interested in helping us. We eventually just wandered around the offices until someone would help and eventually obtained some meaningless forms which we filled in as best we could. You soon learn in Africa that if you don't know the answer to an inane question, you make one up. They hate "not applicable" or "unknown". After about an hour we all had our visitors passes extended by a little man in a tiny office wielding his rubber stamp.



I had done Mick's, George's and Doc Ian's and went to the US Embassy to find them. The security there was amazing - security guard, leave your bags outside, metal detectors, closed circuit television - wow - that's the first embassy we'd seen like that! They soon told me that the group of three had gone to see the doctor just around the corner so I went there and delivered George his passport. I kept Doc Ian's since he and I needed to get Kenyan visas which I would arrange. I went via the post office where I was disappointed that there were no letters, then to the Sheraton where I could locate what seemed to be the only taxi in the city who took me to the Kenyan Embassy. There I applied for visas for me and Doc Ian, as well as getting forms for the others who needed them. The taxi waited and took me back into town, since the Kenyan Embassy is about 4 or 5 km from the centre of town.

Back at the truck parking area the other EO truck was just pulling out - it seems they had a RICHARDS in the passenger list and had collected all my mail, which I duly got and sat in our truck opening. I took it with me to the Nile Bistro where many of us had agreed to eat lunch and sat there reading it with others who had also got mail. The Nile is not a bad place - rather like Damsi's in Niamey - you could sit outside or in and it had basically western style food - omelettes, fork dishes and so forth. After lunch I needed to change some more money and went with Gert who had already located a place recommended to us. It was some kind of trading store - electrical goods I think, and we just walked in, straight up the stairs and into a dimly lit room. Here we carefully counted out the seemingly endless supply of dirty notes and handed across our US dollars to the middle aged black business man. Changing US\$40 returned about 400 notes which, as you can imagine, is about three inches thick! It is conventional to count them into US\$1000 bundles, either 10 US\$100 notes or 20 US\$50 notes, with the last note folded in half and wrapped around the rest. This made it much easier to subsequently pay for things - you hand across so many lots of US\$1000, then make up the rest with odd notes.

At the post office I first bought stamps for some postcards - US\$180 each or about 25 US cents, then phoned home - the first since Bangui almost a month before and with almost certainly no mail getting through since Bangui, it seemed worth the expense. I had obtained the phone number of the Sheraton Hotel from Andrew, who said they were prepared to take incoming calls. It is not only much easier to phone into Africa from overseas but significantly cheaper. I bought the minimum three minutes at the post office for US\$7650 (about US\$11) and got a terrible line, but managed to get the Sheraton phone number to them. I immediately walked to the Sheraton, chatted to the guy behind reception. Sure enough, when my call came through I talked at the counter there for about half an hour. In Australia that would have cost about A\$60 or about US\$50 - much better value, and the line was almost perfect.

I walked back to the campsite by mid afternoon - the truck had already returned. I was helping the Kiwi girls with the cooking and dinner was somewhat interrupted by a violent thunderstorm. Into the evening I played secretary for the Kenyan visas as well as collecting the money for the Tanzanian ones, even though I didn't need one of those. Dale had done the secretarial work for those that morning but I needed to collect them and then take some of them to the Kenyan embassy as, from memory, Americans and Swiss needed both. The rain continued into the night and I slept in the cook tent leaving our other tent to you know who.

It was still teeming down the next morning and we almost all piled into the truck at a sleepy seven o'clock to go to the Sheraton for breakfast. This was to be our treat - an all you can eat smorgasbord breakfast - fruits, cereals, croissants, pastries - all for US\$2750 or less than US\$4! I lingered on there, just absorbing the lovely surrounds - the view across Kampala, the marabou storks in the trees, the gourmet food, and the tables of overlanders - so incongruous with the Sheraton. Mick had left a bit earlier and I had agreed to meet him at the truck parking area at ten

and we would go to the two embassies. It seemed to take forever at the Tanzanian embassy, mainly because it took them about 15 minutes to count the money which nearly filled my day pack! Even at the Kenyan embassy I had to pay US\$3700 for my visa and the same again for Doc Ian's.

Mick dropped me back in town and I did some shopping in the usual African style market place for soap and other such essentials. The weather was, by now, fine but overcast, warm and humid. Back at the Sheraton, I met up with Dale and we had some lunch in the "lobby" cafe where George was sitting writing some "fantasy" postcards home to his parents and friends. It seemed George had a desperate desire to play a piano and had asked the guy behind the bar to see if the manager would let him play the piano upstairs in one of the bars which was closed during the day. Well, we could hardly believe it when, after lunch, they said he could, and a few of us, Dale, Noel and Jenny included, meandered upstairs to witness this event. What a surprise! George was a bloody good piano player and we all sat and listened for a while, more in amazement than anything else!

Later I walked back to the post office to recheck the Poste Restante, as I was expecting a small parcel and in fact various people seemed to be getting extra items at their revisits. It was a poorly run post office and the guy would not let us look at the pile of letters ourselves. The trouble is that if a letter gets misfiled under the wrong alphabetic letter, it may never be found. It is a frustrating business, but nothing you can say or do will make the dead-pan faced man behind the counter show the slightest bit of interest in actually finding your letter. I never did get my parcel!

Dale and I walked back to the campsite, a pleasant half-hour walk through the tree lined streets of Kampala, finishing with a cut across the golf course and up a steep climb to the Athina Club House. I never felt the slightest bit threatened in Kampala, despite its chequered history, and several times walked around at night, although in a group. You can still see the bullet marks on many of the buildings - one building on the route back to the camp was part of the government owned broadcasting station and had many such markings! Mick returned in the truck later in the afternoon after a day of sending telexes to London and so forth. He had some news of our schedule with regard to the Kilimanjaro climb, which to date was unclear. It seemed we could go to Kili before Dar and those doing the climb could leave the trip and find their own way to Dar or elsewhere after the climb. That suited me fine, as the concept of having to find our own way from Dar to Kili and back did not appeal. We were now in a position to carefully plan the remaining weeks of the trip and it was clear that we had lots of time and it would be quite leisurely.

That night we had agreed to eat out under our own arrangements and I went with Mick, Ian, Rich, Noel and Jenny back to the Nile Grill. Kampala is a reasonably lively city at night and we enjoyed sitting outside with the many locals also eating there. It was a popular place, although there were very few whites to be seen anywhere in Kampala. The dinner was good - a steak for a seemingly enormous US\$3900 but that's less than US\$6. We walked back to camp in the now cool and dewy night.

Next morning, we couldn't resist the temptation and many of us were off to the Sheraton again for another dose of croissants and pastries. Mick and I then went to the Kenyan embassy to collect the passports and then we had another challenge - to find some water to fill our tanks. Now you wouldn't have thought that was a big problem in a big city, but there had almost always been no water at this Athina place and while some had snuck a shower, I never succeeded, getting into the shower once and finding the water missing! Someone had suggested to Mick that there was a well down on the south side of the city. We found the well OK, although the road was atrocious with all this rain and we were dodging big puddles and bogs just to reach it. Anyway, the

water pressure was useless - it not only would have taken us hours to fill the tanks and jerry cans, but there was a continuous stream of locals from the surrounding villages (I hesitate to call them ghettos) which would have made our job all the more difficult. It really is hard for us to appreciate what it would be like living in a big city but for the water supply to simply not work most of the time.

Anyway, just then a policeman appeared and told Mick that he should be able to get water at the nearby police training academy. We got directions and headed off, entering the academy despite signs of "Do Not Enter". We pulled up near some huts as troops of police (who look like soldiers - police in Africa always dress like soldiers) were being marched up and down, rifles at their side. This was a bit disconcerting and I suspected we should not have been here. Mick was braver than me and headed off looking for help. He returned about fifteen minutes later, by which time I was beginning to wonder whether he'd been arrested. He told a tale of being taken to the head of the whole academy, who whilst unable to offer him water, was very friendly and gave him a full rundown on the problems of the country, the city and the water supply in particular. He suggested something that, given some lateral thinking, we should have thought of ourselves - go to the fire brigade!

The fire brigade is next to the clock tower, which IS on the map, and we quickly located it and pulled up out front. Mick soon returned and said all is well - they had plenty of water and we drove in around the back. This fire station was pretty much as good as any you would see at home and after they filled our tanks in a matter of minutes from their high capacity supply which feeds directly from nearby Lake Victoria, they offered to give us a guided tour of their equipment. It was all brand new Mercedes and other German made equipment, in sparkling condition and apparently barely used. I suspect it was an aid grant from the German government. They complained of how there is no funding for their operations so that not only do they have little or no equipment for other brigades around the country, but they barely have enough to maintain the equipment here. This is typical of overseas aid – inappropriate and a poor use of limited funds. The whole exercise of finding water was interesting - not only because of the challenge and the ultimately unusual path to success, but also the incredible friendliness of everyone with whom we dealt.

Back in town I had to post some stuff to London for Mick and then walked back to the camp. We were preparing to depart the next day, as we now had all our visas and were restocking with a few things. During the afternoon we did a truck cleanout - the first since Kano, and it was indeed putrid. Later in the afternoon I walked back to town to try the P.O. one last time, buy some souvenirs and then back to camp for dinner. Mick discussed the detailed schedule for the remainder of the trip and Urs announced that he had decided to leave us and return home to Switzerland. While we were all pretty amazed at this, just as we were about to get to the magnificent game parks of Tanzania, we could sympathise with his emotional anguish and shared a drink with him after dinner.

During the night the rain returned and it was still raining next morning as we packed up in most unpleasant conditions. We got away a bit after seven and dropped Urs in town before heading east. We were soon out of the city and the weather fined up into a warm sunny day. Kampala had been a fun time - it's a pleasant city with friendly people, nice undulating terrain, tree lined streets, and of course, the Sheraton - a really top class hotel (by African standards at least) with a \$4 "eat as much as you can" breakfast. By nine o'clock we had reached the Nile River at the dam wall and huge bridge at the north end of Lake Victoria. Alas, pictures are not permitted and the signs on the highway make this clear.



Soon after the river we reached the quite large town of Jinja where we would stop for an hour or so. I soon found one of the cheap hotels from the Shoestring and negotiated a shower for some of us at a few hundred shillings - very welcome, albeit cold of course, after the waterless showers of Kampala! The remnants of my Ugandan shillings were spent in the nearby market and on some dubious looking samosas from a cafe.



We lunched in the hot midday sun nearly a hundred kilometres further east on the now excellent highway that links Kampala and Nairobi. We were surrounded by small children at lunch time - friendly and curious as usual. From there we soon turned off the highway to the south east through to the Kenyan border at Busia. There was a pre-border police check which delayed us about ten minutes and then we were at the border, a busy place with numerous trucks and people going in all directions and the customary big wire gate delineating the two countries. The afternoon was becoming very hot and humid and threatening clouds were developing all around us. The Ugandan exit formalities were straightforward enough until it decided to piss down with rain. The official decided to come into the back of the truck and hand our passports back individually - he was friendly enough. We were soon through the big wire gate after 43 minutes.

## **KENYA - Is this really Africa?**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 2.

Distance Travelled: 346 km.

Kenya is certainly one of the more westernised countries in Africa, and since its independence in 1963, with relatively stable government under the rule of Jomo Kenyatta and subsequently Daniel Moi. Its economy and infrastructure have developed better than most of its neighbours. Our journey would take us only through a very tiny corner of Kenya with only two short days of driving. This would allow us to skirt the edge of the great Lake Victoria enroute to the famous game parks of Tanzania. EO did not operate in Kenyan game parks in 1989-90 because of peculiar rules which prevent foreign registered vehicles from entering them. Thus, I would not get to see the main parts of Kenya, including its capital, Nairobi, which is perhaps the best known city in East Africa. Others from the group did travel there after the trip, but for me, that will have to come on another visit to Africa.

Population: 16 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 66.

Main Exports: Coffee.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$320.

Currency: Kenyan Shilling, Official KSh21.64 = US\$1, No black market.

Languages: English, Swahili.

Independence: 1963 from Britain.

Government: Presidential "democracy".

Climate: Up on the plateau, the climate is temperate, with maximums in the 23°C to 28°C range. On the coast it is much hotter and very humid.

It was mid afternoon on January 5th as we sat in the truck just inside Kenya waiting for the formalities to be completed. We had our passports stamped and returned but then there was a long delay. It seemed Mick had to pay a road tax and they would only accept it in local currency, but of course he had none. It took him ages to sort it out - I can't recall if he did find a bank or whether he convinced them to accept US dollars. In any case, we eventually left after four o'clock, having spent just over two hours at the Kenyan border post. Not a terribly impressive start for this supposedly more sophisticated country. Later on in Dar when the new group joined there were several stories about hassles with Kenyan officials when entering the country and it certainly seems they are overly officious and far from polite.

It was a hot and steamy afternoon as Mick headed southeast eventually finding a nice campsite beside a fairly large flowing river, about an hour later. There were a few locals about, mostly some big black guys who were shovelling sand from the river into big piles on shore, presumably to be used for building. The weather looked unstable and there were certainly thunderstorms still about so I pitched a tent. It was a quiet night and I was early to bed, with some drizzly rain about.





Next morning was cool and clear and we were away on time at seven o'clock. An hour later we had crossed the equator for the third and last time as the day was becoming hot and sunny. The countryside was green and undulating as we got a good view of Lake Victoria to the south - so huge it looks like the sea. We descended into the lake-side town of Kisumu where we would spend the whole morning shopping and sightseeing. This would be our only exposure to a Kenyan city.

It was easy to tell we were in Kenya - the roads were all good, signposted as well. In the town, the streets were much tidier, the bank was highly efficient, shops well run. The whole place just had a more civilised and efficient atmosphere, although in the main market the atmosphere was still very African with all manner of goods being sold in makeshift stalls amidst muddy walkways and a general appearance of chaos. I first went to the bank and obtained a small amount of Kenyan money, just for postage and food, with a knowledge that the excess could easily be converted to Tanzanian money on the Tanzanian black market. Kenyan currency is considered a hard currency in most other African countries. I also converted a US dollars travellers cheque into US dollars cash, Kenya being one of the few countries where you can do that. The bank, a Barclays, was efficient (I was done in just a couple of minutes) and there was virtually no commission on the travellers cheques.

I spent the rest of the time in town wandering to all kinds of places - shops for postcards - the first decent ones for a while, the post office, the market, the Wimpy Burger shop - not to eat, just to say hello to Steve, and down to the lake. I also grabbed some morning tea in a cafe - samosas and coffee. Back at the truck by midday and we were off by 12.30 after waiting for the bar and food shoppers to return. Lunch was next to a river just out of town then we continued south through lovely rolling hills with Lake Victoria intermittently visible to the west. Even the housing looked



different in Kenya with galvanised iron roofs dominating over the grass ones that had been the norm in other countries. The traffic on the road was also different with trucks being in much better condition plus a lot of matatus, those kind of mini-bus style taxis which are a popular form of transport throughout Kenya.

The hot afternoon became similar to the previous with increasing cloud and instability and as we passed through the small town of Kisii the thunderstorms started. When we eventually camped just before five o'clock it was still teeming down and we had to get the cook tent up in the rain then quickly ferry the baggage into it, get the tents up and repack the trailer. Having done all that, the rain decided to stop and it cleared into a lovely evening. Doc Ian was cooking and had got some fish in Kisumu which was a really pleasant change. It was wrapped in alfoil with lemon juice and herbs, then cooked over the fire. The only problem was that there wasn't enough!

J-P was really on the outer by now and was sitting on his own with absolutely nobody even talking to him. He had gotten into a fight with Megan over his bar bill, since he had somehow not budgeted his Ugandan money properly and had not payed. But now in Kenya with no black market, his bill had, in US dollar terms, gotten that much larger so he was refusing to pay. I might add that he was arguing over a relatively small number of US dollars, and given the salary that I know he would be on in his job, it was impossible to have any sympathy for his viewpoint.

It was again cool and clear next day as we got away before seven and continued south through undulating country with a lot of sugar cane growing, in addition to the usual coffee fields. We stopped briefly for diesel and then for drinks and water in Migori, then continued to the border. The last piece of road, about 15 km from Migori to the border, was atrocious, although a good introduction to what we would encounter throughout Tanzania which must surely have the worst roads in the whole world! The Kenyan border formalities took just over an hour and then we headed a small distance down the road to the Tanzania post, arriving just before 11 am on a now hot and sunny day.

## TANZANIA - Big Game and the Big Mountain

### Facts:

Nights in Country: 24.

Distance Travelled: 2790 km.

Tanzania is famous for its game parks, some of the biggest in Africa, especially Serengeti and Ngorongoro. It is also famous for the highest mountain in Africa, Mount Kilimanjaro, the climb of which was beginning to occupy more of my thoughts as that challenge grew nearer. The country is very beautiful, although the people can be relatively unfriendly and always ready to rip you off. The increasingly corrupt regime of Julius Nyerere, who has ruled since independence, has ultimately lead to the economy being in tatters. The roads are deplorable, the people are lethargic and the cities are seedy. Yet as a tourist destination it has so much to offer. The Tanzanians are attempting to capitalise on that by charging relatively large fees, payable in US dollars, for entry to all National Parks, plus road taxes, also payable in hard currency at the various checkpoints. Still, a strong black market exists although, as I found out, it is more dangerous to use than in countries like Uganda, Nigeria and Zambia.

Population: 17 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 46.

Main Exports: Coffee.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$180.

Currency: Tanzanian Shilling, Official TSh190 = US\$1, Black Market up to TSh295 = US\$1.

Languages: English, Swahili.

Independence: 1961 from Britain.

Government: Presidential "democracy".

Climate: Varies substantially from the stifling heat and humidity on the coast to the arctic conditions atop Mount Kilimanjaro. Much of the country is on a high plateau with pleasant temperate conditions similar to much of Kenya and Uganda. The west season is normally in April and May so fortunately we saw virtually no rain at all.

January 7th would be the first of 25 days in Tanzania during which time I would get a new group as the "Great Safari" trip concluded and the "Safari South" would begin. The border post is haphazard with a myriad of different buildings, people and trucks seemingly spread all over the place. We parked prior to a derelict looking gate and Mick went to investigate. I could tell it was going to be a long border crossing when the arrangements kept changing - what you had to do and in what order depended upon whom you asked. Ultimately we had to be processed by immigration, health and customs. The latter, as usual, turned out to be the greatest delay.

Eventually we were being processed by a moron who had to check our currency declaration form and then do a compulsory official exchange of US\$50. Of course the money is bulky and must be counted, all taking time, but the guy was working like a snail! We were going through in the order on the passenger list and somehow J-P was after me, and I was second last. So eventually, I got my bundle of Tanzanian shillings and a stamped currency form and passport and then J-P went in and the guy ran out of money! So he just let J-P go with no exchange, which generated some resentment with the rest of us since none of us really wanted to officially exchange any more than we had to!

We finally departed after almost three hours of mostly sitting around in the shade of the truck or the buildings, since it was a pretty hot day and that time had spanned midday during which time we had lunch on the truck. From the border the road continued rough and potholed, with seemingly continuous washaways that made it impossible to average more than about 25 km/h. The country had also changed to drier undulating grasslands with less cultivation and back to the usual mud brick and grass roofed huts in all the villages. Mick was feeling pretty tired and stopped quite early, just after three, when he saw a suitable spot. It was a pleasant camp site in what looked like an old quarry. We had time to pitch tents which were damp from the previous night, although I would repack mine and sleep out since the weather now looked more stable and rain was unlikely. About 40 locals came around the camp and curiously observed us curiously observing them. They seemed a friendly lot and one of them, who seemed to be the village idiot, was sitting next to Doc Ian and Gerd trying to understand the game of chess they were playing! There were some lovely looking women and little kids around and I got quite a few good people photos - they didn't seem to mind being photographed although they were a little shy.



During the afternoon Megan and Marshall had helped Mick kill and dress a couple of chickens that we had been carrying alive since Kisumu. As dinner approached the crowd of onlookers grew to 70 and we had to be careful to keep them at bay, although they were definitely not malicious. After a good dinner the night was perfect and starry. I sat on the trailer chatting with Mick over a few drinks. J-P had probably already gone to bed since no-one would speak with him, and generally the rest of us were pretty relaxed. I went to bed around 10.30 although others continued drinking around the fire until after midnight.

It was dewy again next morning but quickly turned into a dry and hot day after we departed at seven. The road was crap - there is no other way to describe it. I was up front with Mick as we



aimed to reach Musoma by mid morning to shop for several days worth of supplies. We would be heading east through Serengeti and it could easily be four days before we would be able to buy any kind of food. It took four hours to cover the 100 km to the Musoma turnoff, with the only highlight being a beautifully constructed bridge over the Mara (of Masia Mara fame) River, duly guarded by a group of lazy looking soldiers. The road into Musoma was tarmac, descending out of the rolling hills down to the shores of picturesque Lake Victoria.

We stopped for 90 minutes in Musoma, which has a good market, and J-P and I bought for our cooking two nights later. He was insistent on buying a bag of beans which the next day he duly soaked in water for 24 hours before cooking. We lunched on the roadside just out of town looking back over the lake, and after scoffing down some lunch, I and several others wandered up the road to be picked up about half an hour later. It was not only a beautiful day but I for one was becoming more and more nervous about my fitness for the Kili climb due to start ten days hence. From the Musoma turnoff we headed east on one of several roads that leads into Serengeti. From the advice of the truck we met in Kampala, we would see most of the game in the eastern part of Serengeti and certainly in Ngorongoro. So we saw no point in entering the park at its far western entrance when we could travel east outside the park to the Ikoma Gate. After all, it would cost us about US\$25 per person per day to be in Serengeti!



The road east was just as bad as the morning's road and narrow as well. It meandered through undulating savannah country with intermittent areas of cultivation and small villages. After several hours battling this road we came over a rise to see the expanse of the Serengeti plain spread before us - it is a beautiful sight. We stopped just prior to five o'clock on one of these rises with a lovely view. There were virtually no locals about and the afternoon was warm and clear. After a dinner of lake fish, I wrote some letters and eventually was in bed, outside, at 10.30. I'm not so sure it was a good idea being outside since during the night several people reported noises of a struggle between some animals very near to the camp, perhaps a lion or hyena or more likely a leopard and something smaller. EO has a strict policy of sleeping in tents when in the National

Parks since animals will never enter a tent, even though they may wander through the camp. But here we weren't actually in the National Park, although we were quite close and obviously the animals don't know where the park starts and stops! Anyway, nobody got eaten by anything except the odd mosquito!

Next morning the remaining two live chickens were killed, plucked and dressed for that night's meal, since we didn't want to have to do it in the park where it could be difficult to dispose of the rubbish. We got away at about 7.20 as it was already becoming quite warm. We had soon descended onto the plain and had something of a battle with a plague of tsetse flies as we passed through the long grass covered savannah. We reached the park gate at 10.30 and paid all the relevant fees (EO paid for us in Serengeti but we paid individually for Ngorongoro). It was US\$600 for the truck and all of us for 24 hours in Serengeti - the Tanzanian's sure know how to charge, and it's all payable in hard currency.

Once in the park, the terrain was not immediately much different, although there is no cultivation or villages of any kind. We gradually moved into some slightly undulating areas as we headed towards the main creek that flows through the park and to the Seronera Lodge area just beyond. Fairly soon we came across quite a lot of giraffe and many antelope - Thomson's Gazelle for which the area is famous. As we crossed the creek, hippo were grazing in the pool above a small ford, although none were out of the water so we were not all that impressed in comparison with Queen Elizabeth where we had seen so many of them. The lodge area is spread over about 5 km and there is a park office, the main lodge and several camping areas. We stopped at the park office at about a quarter to one and proceeded to have lunch as it was now the heat of the day and most animals would be resting. We sat under a large tree eating while a rock hyrax wandered about providing good photo material. These squirrel like animals are apparently related to elephants in a zoological sense - I never did understand zoology! The brightly coloured lizards also provided good photographs and it was hardly surprising that when I compared my photos at home with other friends who had been to Serengeti they also had the hyrax and lizard shots.

We lazed about for a few hours before heading off on a game drive just after three. A park ranger sat up front with Mick to suggest a route. We meandered around the plains for nearly three hours - it is superb country with its open savannah, kopjes (rock outcrops) and treed areas along the few waterways, but alas, we saw very little wildlife. In the creek we saw a crocodile from a fair distance and quite a bit of birdlife, including some ugly looking vultures. Then we found a small family of monkeys. Later on we saw more gazelle and a few hartebeest, but it was generally disappointing. What we did see were the other tourists of a number of varieties - horrid pink Bedford trucks of the "Tracks" company and a single wealthy tourist in the open top Land Rover. It was almost amusing to see tourists since we didn't really consider ourselves to be tourists, and this view was reinforced later that evening.

Having dropped off the guide, we went to the lodge for a drink. Seronera Lodge is literally built on one of these big kopjes and the route to the bar winds its way among the rocks - quite spectacular. We all grabbed some drinks - beer or coke, and I chatted to some Australian women - they were loud, smoking TOURISTS - quite horrid really. They had no concept of where we had been and I had little interest in their short couple of week trip to East Africa, living the relatively good life in these quite well run lodges. I could see I had become an overlander!

As the sun set, forming a magnificent silhouette of the famous "flat topped" acacia trees complete with marabou storks, we headed for the campsite about 5 km away. It was very quickly dark and we saw a few animals from the back of the truck - hyenas I think. The campsite had perhaps five trucks - several were pink "Tracks" ones, completely operated by local drivers and cooks. We were

keen to chat to these people as we had always done elsewhere on our travels - exchange stories, get information of road conditions, things to see and so forth. I was helping cook so didn't get to talk with them until a little later. Several things were memorable about these other groups. First, they were all on short trips, some as short as a week, and they were very reserved, hardly knowing each other let alone really wanting to talk with us. Only a few of them came near our campsite, we mostly having to visit them. There were several families - Mum, Dad and the kids, some quite young. They were being fully catered to - several cooks doing all their work. But above all, they were so raw - just TOURISTS! Back at our camp there was still work to do. I had to repair one of the seats again after it broke during the day. We then prepared for a quick breakfast so we could get away early next morning, both to see the game and also because we had to exit the camp before our 24 hours was up!

Needless to say we were in tents and there were certainly animals around - hyenas and, to a lesser extent, lions tend to wander through the camp at night seeing what scraps they can find. We arose at five and were away at six. As we slowly motored in the predawn light we came across quite a lot of hyenas wandering home after a night of scavenging - large and ugly animals they are. The sun came up in a beautiful fashion at 6.45 and now we could get a clear view of the increasing numbers of wildlife as we headed east. Quite a few ostrich, gazelle and zebra were seen before we reached the Naabi Hill gate where we officially crossed from Serengeti N.P. to Ngorongoro Conservation Area (which is also effectively a National Park). The gate and office are perched atop one of the only hills in the area and provide a magnificent view across the plains where we could see huge herds of zebras and wildebeest. We would be in Ngorongoro Conservation Area for two days and paid US\$52 per person.

It was after nine o'clock as we departed and we effectively had all day to reach the crater rim and book the next day's trip into crater. Thus, when we immediately saw a huge herd of zebra we wandered off on a side track and simply watched and photographed them for some time. Back on the main road, which is of reasonable condition although narrow and dusty, we continued to see zebra and some migrating wildebeest. I say some, because I have seen photos of huge numbers although we probably saw at least a thousand! What with stops and the dusty road, we made slow and leisurely progress, passing through the famous Olduvai Gorge just before midday. The gorge is just a rocky creek bed but a few kilometres downstream is where, back in 1959 the Leakeys found the oldest fossils of skulls of an ancestor of the homo sapiens, dated to 1.8 million years. Later, in 1979, Mary Leakey found a fossil of a footprint of an upright walking animal, dated to 3.5 million years. All of this has given Olduvai Gorge the notoriety of being "the birthplace of man", but unless you're into archaeology, it's just another creek!

We lunched in the shade of a treed creek bed a little further on, as it was really quite hot, probably in the mid thirties, but perfectly dry. From this slightly undulating terrain we gradually drew closer to what at first was a vague range of mountains in the distance. This is the range which encloses the Ngorongoro Crater, the largest of a series of volcanic craters in the area. During the next two hours we slowly made our way to the range and up the long and often rough climb. Along this stretch we saw our first Masai, the colourfully dressed tribesmen who graze their cattle in the Conservation Area. They are a striking looking people, almost always dressed in red colours with a lot of colourful jewellery and always carrying a spear. Also along the road were giraffes and zebras. The view back across the Serengeti plains is superb as we neared the top of the pass and ran alongside a smaller rounded crater and then caught our first glimpse of the massive Ngorongoro Crater. The thing that immediately hits you is the pink colour of the huge shallow lake that takes up some of the crater floor - the pink is the thousands of flamingos on the lake!



We reached the "park" headquarters, just past the campsite, prior to four o'clock and arranged and paid for our Land Rover trip for the next morning. This cost another US\$10 - pretty reasonable actually. At the campsite we set up with the magnificent view of the crater spread right before us. It is a magical spot. It was mine and J-P's turn to cook, and with us needing to arrange our own lunches to take with us the next day, it was up to me to bake some bread. Thus, I left J-P to do much of the dinner while I got the dough mixed and kneaded, then sitting by the fire to rise several times. J-P was making his bean dish which turned out to be pretty awful, not helped by the local rice we had bought in Musoma, which seemed to have more stones than rice! Anyway, we got the oven going, which took seemingly forever, and I eventually got the bread baked by eleven o'clock after most of the others had retired for bed. At least the bread was a success and everyone appreciated the nice thickly sliced bread for making their sandwiches next morning. It was clear and quite cold, since we had gained a few thousand feet of altitude, and to top it off, we had the campsite to ourselves.

A day in the crater! We looked forward to the prospect of lots of wildlife up closer than you could see if you visited all the world's zoos, and we weren't disappointed. The two Land Rovers picked us up at 7.30 after we had packed our sandwiches. It was a superb day - clear and getting warm. The cloud built up a little during the afternoon but it remained fine. We immediately retraced our steps towards Serengeti for several kilometres before turning right down one of the two crater access tracks. Access to the crater floor is strictly limited due to the environmental impact of vehicles. The drivers are also required to remain on the existing myriad of tracks and a placard on the dash tells us not to ask them to do otherwise. We had just started our descent into the crater when our vehicle had a flat tyre so we took the opportunity to take photos of the crater spread before us. It is 20 kilometres in diameter, almost perfectly circular, and probably about five hundred feet deep. The natural amphitheatre forms a lush haven for a myriad of animals. Almost as soon as we had stopped, two enterprising Masai warriors had appeared and proceeded to collect money for photographs - TSh100 per photo.

Once in the crater we wandered around looking at the wide variety of animals - zebra, wildebeest, jackals, hippo, flamingo, ostrich, secretary birds, gazelle, a lone elephant, several foxes, water buffalo, hyena, hartebeest, warthog and three rhino. The animals, for the most part, are very used to the daily visits by open top Land Rovers and generally just stand there allowing you to take their photograph. It's the closest thing to a zoo without being one. The terrain varies from the dusty wasteland near the lake to lush green pastures and sometimes boggy marshlands. The other Land Rover stopped in deep water at one stage and the driver had to wade around drying its electrical system.

We headed for the lunch area by one o'clock after our driver had been fruitlessly searching for the elusive lions. There are only about 20 lions in the crater and they can be mighty hard to locate and even then, you have to be lucky to get them near a road. The whole morning was a game of cat and mouse with about twenty vehicles going in all directions. When one rushes off, others tend to follow in the belief that they have found something interesting.



Lunch was adjacent to a large pond on the west side of the crater. The tawny eagles do very well at this spot, swooping down and grabbing people's sandwiches from their hands; they are incredibly skillful! Having eaten my sandwiches in the Land Rover, I then moved outside to photograph their antics. After lunch we saw two prides of lions, lazing in the sun about 100 metres off the road. Apparently J-P convinced the driver of the other Land Rover to drive off the track, and from all reports, the driver had just about had enough of him and did so just to shut him up. We were a little disappointed at not seeing them up close. We finally headed to the east side of the crater into a wooded area where there is a monkey colony and thence up the steep and twisty alternate access road which meanders through dense jungle on the edge of the crater. We were back at camp before four o'clock and soon after most of us went to one of the lodges for a drink or two. The lodges also sit atop the crater rim with a wonderful view of the entire crater.

Back at camp it was bedlam - about five other groups had moved in and there were tourists everywhere of all varieties. A French group had set up beside us, several Tracks trucks and some others as well. Getting a shower meant queuing, but it was worth it to have my first shower since Jinja, six days earlier. It was perishingly cold, with the water stored in a concrete tank that had not allowed even the slightest bit of warming from the strong sun. Just as we were finishing our dinner at 7.30, another truck arrived and pulled up beside us - it was an EO truck and turned out to be a group who were doing the exact reverse of our trip. Some of the group had done the Safari South from Harare as well, them being the first of that particular route. They had had Roscoe as their driver, although their driver was now an Irish guy. I spent a long time that evening talking to quite a few of them, exchanging stories. There were quite a few Aussies amongst them and they seemed a really good group. Quite a few had also climbed Kili and those stories also had us interested. One guy, John from Sydney, was rather like me in his keen interest in places, schedules



and so forth and we exchanged a lot of really useful information. Bed was late after all that chatting - almost midnight.

It was overcast, cold and breezy when I awoke next morning. We were away slightly late after having to wait to get some water, but reached the exit gate in time by 8.20 am, departing within our 48 hours! We had discussed our plans for the remaining days of the trip and it was frustrating that we didn't really have sufficient time to do the rugged loop to the north around Lake Natron, but without doing it we would essentially have a couple of days to kill. Since the trip I've seen the photos of Lake Natron and I wished I'd pushed harder for that. Anyway, from Ngorongoro we headed to the village of Karatu where we would shop. There was not much in the small market which I wandered around in about 5 minutes, but we were there for a full hour while others tried to find a few reasonable ingredients for dinner. Fortunately our next stop was the nearby Gibbs Farm.



This place is located about 5 km off the main road and is perched on a nice slope looking south over the valley. It is set amongst bushland and banana plantations. It is like a country tea house - the kind of place you would find in the Blue Mountains out of Sydney, with beautiful lawns and gardens. Here we would spend about three and a half hours, initially having a drink on the lawns, then inside for a beautiful smorgasbord lunch, then tea or coffee back out on the lawn. It is a popular stop for most of the overland trucks and even though we had to pay the TSh2600 (US\$10) ourselves, it was worth it. After lunch we sat for a while just taking in the sun and lazing on the grass. Most people read my short story that I had written a few days earlier on the "Demise of the Frenchman", which with the star character out of earshot, provided us all with some entertainment.

After leaving we only travelled for an hour down the bumpy dirt road and stopped right at the top of the escarpment where we could get a clear view across Lake Manyara and another part of the



Great Rift Valley. There is a large quarry at that spot, well known to EO drivers, and we decided to camp there. It is a really deep quarry and thus I could get a great "aerial" shot of the campsite by wandering out of the quarry and around the wall. A few locals visited but seemed content to watch us from above! The afternoon was still quite warm and lead into a cold and clear, yet quite dry night. We had more good times around the campfire and bed was pretty late. We must have been getting more and more relaxed with the end of this part of the trip close at hand and so little distance left to cover.



We nevertheless arose and departed early next morning, intent on getting a full day of game viewing in Manyara National Park, including the early morning when the animals can be more active. It was just half an hour's drive down the twisty and rough escarpment and then into the park where we took a little while to pay our fees and arrange a guide. As we waited a herd of very large elephants were wandering along the hillside just above us, making their usual racket of destroying the trees! The woman ranger sat up front with Mick and we rolled back the roof of the truck so those who wished could sit out in the sun. I always tried to sit out of the sun as it is just too strong and I sunburn rather more than I suntan! Manyara N.P. was very good value and we saw a wide range of animals - vervet monkeys, impala, warthogs, hippos, pelicans, giraffe, buffalo, wildebeest, a lone elephant, heaps of rotten baboons and a few ostrich. One of the highlights was to see some mating giraffes, but still no lions!

Lunch was at the official picnic area, which is set up with pit toilets, tables and some shade. A small Abercrombie and Kent bus pulled up as we were half way through lunch and set up their gourmet lunch for their terribly wealthy customers, each with an individual plastic lunchbox. What really topped it off was that they had witnessed "a kill". It seemed luck was not with us, and you have to have luck when game viewing. After lunch our guide located the carcass from the kill, or

at least part of it, lying beside the road. It looked like a wildebeest. Then behind us she spied the large lion sitting about 50 metres from us, but in amongst a dense clump of bushes and trees. She was just sitting there, contented after the kill, and was not moving for anyone. Unfortunately the light was just not good enough for a decent photograph. We continued northwards, seeing plenty more giraffes, baboons and monkeys, eventually reaching the gate a bit after three o'clock. It had been an excellent seven hours of game viewing.



Once outside the park we rejoined the main road and there was a beautiful running creek passing under a small bridge. Mick immediately stopped and decided he was going to have a wash. Well it certainly was hot, and we were pretty filthy, although the water was freezing cold. Mick always keeps his shampoo and towel in the cab of the truck so I was able to steal a bit of shampoo - I always liked to wash my hair when I could. It was a refreshing ten or fifteen minutes - fortunately there were no locals around peering at all these unusual naked white bodies in the creek!

Just ten minutes down the road and we were in the village of Mto Ma Wbu, which apparently means either Mosquito Village or Gnats River, depending who you ask. Well we didn't find any gnats in the river, although when we camped just beyond, there was certainly no shortage of mosquitoes, so I guess the former translation won out. This village has a thriving craft market as well as a reasonable market for food. I managed to change some money in one of the shops, being satisfied with TSh250 to the dollar although you could get TSh285 without difficulty in the larger towns. I only wanted a small amount changed as we would be in Arusha during the next day or two. I then picked up a few cheap gifts - Masai jewellery and tee shirts.

We camped about 30 minutes beyond the village on this big grassy plain. The ground was like rock and I was pleased to have decided not to pitch a tent as I watched others getting right angle bends



in their pegs. It was after five and cooling down to a pleasant clear evening, although threatening thunderstorms could be seen around the hills to the north. Before dinner a large herd of zebra came and visited, investigated us, and wandered off again. Once again it was a really fun night, sitting around a big fire (which for those of us sleeping out, was meant to keep the wild animals away, since although we were not in a N.P., we were obviously still in big game country). We would arise late next morning, so bed was not until about midnight.



Our departure wasn't until 8.30 am on this day, January 14th, which had the advantage that three Masai warriors wandered by and passed the time of day with us as we packed up. Despite their reputation, they are quite friendly and it's just that some of them on the tourist routes like to make their money from the passing foreigners, who after all, are invaders into their traditional lands. The road east from there was pretty crappy for a while, but eventually improved as we neared the tarmac road which then runs north east into the main tourist centre of Arusha. Just prior to the main road we could see the peak of Mount Meru visible through the haze, but unfortunately Kilimanjaro lays directly behind it and was thus not visible. Mount Meru is no slouch though, standing proudly above the town of Arusha to a height of 4,556 m (14,950 feet), more than twice the highest mountain in Australia! However you must bear in mind that the surrounding terrain is a plateau set around 2,000 m (6,000 feet).

We could travel at a normal speed once on the tarmac, with some roadworks and a toll gate being the only delays. These toll gates charge foreign vehicles typically US\$3 and the drivers get issued with a bundle of greenbacks for the purpose. We passed through the outskirts of Arusha at 11.30 and then headed north on the Nairobi Road. The plan was to camp somewhere pleasant with a view of Kilimanjaro, then retrace our steps into Arusha where we would spend much of the next day. We lunched right next to the base of Mount Meru which is an awesome mountain in its own



right. Later, when we camped, we could see the superb volcanic crater shape on its top - incredibly spectacular. I would like to go and climb it sometime as it would certainly be a great view from the top as well as from along the narrow ridge leading to the summit.



Just north of the lunch spot, after yet another toll stop, we planned to pick up a road that would take us east into the hills west of Kili. The road is marked as a reasonably main one on the Michelin and Mick's more detailed Tanzanian map, and I certainly found it right where it should be, but it looked overgrown and completely disused. We wandered up it about a kilometre to the first fully washed out creek crossing and decided "give it a miss". We could have camped there but we were down behind a nearby range and thus had no view of Kili. Thus we continued north a few more kilometres until we had a good view to the east, although by this time (1.30 pm) Kili was well shrouded in cloud as is typical any time after mid to late morning. Mick found a side track and we disappeared into the scrubby bush amongst a group of low rocky hills. We camped when he could go no further, perhaps 300 metres from the road and while not directly in sight of Kili, a short 100 metre walk to the top of a rise would provide the desired view whenever the majestic mountain "revealed" herself.

We relaxed for the rest of the quite warm afternoon, some reading, other writing letters or just sleeping. I wandered up a nearby hill and sat on a rock looking at where the mountain was, contemplating the challenge that I and six others from the group would be facing in a few days time. Marshall wandered by and we chatted. He was a fun kid, and I use that term affectionately, since many of us grew to value our friendship with him, although we treated him more like a son. I certainly gave him a big hug the next day when he left us to travel to Nairobi to join his next expedition, climbing Mount Kenya. As we chatted, a couple of Masai wandered by and we tried to have a meaningful conversation with them. For TSh100, they allowed Marshall to take a photograph of me standing with them. They just seemed to wander out of the bush. Nearby a herd of cattle and some goats were wandering about also, yet on the plains several kilometres to

the north I could see large herds of animals with my binoculars, probably zebra. We were, of course, within fifty kilometres of the Kenyan border.

Back at camp, Mick had replaced the injector pump and was off test driving the truck. We had a reasonably early dinner after I had checked out the route to the nearest hill, since I planned to walk up later in the evening when the slightly past full moon would rise, hopefully right over a clear Kili. Just after dinner as we were settling in for a pleasant night around the fire, lights appeared from the highway and two young English guys in a fairly battered Land Rover appeared. They were fun guys with lots of stories to tell, having driven the Land Rover from England. They had seen our camp-fire from the road so wandered in and camped the night with us. Meanwhile, Gert was off looking for the mountain and returned excitedly reporting that he could see the snow capped peak. I wandered to the top of the hill and sure enough, there was Kilimanjaro in the dim twilight, mostly clear of cloud. Two hours later most of us walked up the hill to watch the moonrise over the mountain - a really magical sight with the light reflecting off the snow. Even in that light, the magnitude of the mountain was apparent.

Next morning we arose fairly early so as to be sure of seeing the sunrise over the mountain. After breakfast in the twilight we all wandered up the hill to witness a superb sunrise over a crystal clear Mount Kilimanjaro, although the lower slopes were obscured by cloud. Through the telephoto lens, the volcanic cone filled much of the frame, so huge is this mountain even from this distance of about 80 kilometres. We then leisurely packed and departed into Arusha, arriving there just before nine o'clock with a full day of shopping and eating in this busy and quite pleasant town.

After helping Marshall and his lead filled pack down to the taxi station where he quickly arranged a ride to the Kenyan border, I wandered through town with Dale, looking for the "black market" to change some money. Despite some directions from J-P we couldn't find the place, so we returned to the truck and Gert told us of a place right near where we had parked - an electrical good shop run by Pakistanis. When we entered the tiny and crowded front shop we were directed to go through the door to the back. Here we could carry out the transaction in privacy, turning the last of my Kenyan Shillings into a lot more Tanzanian ones and also some US dollars into local currency. Dale and I then checked out the various supermarkets and curio shops. I also had to get some photocopying done for Mick of stuff that needed mailing to London. Then it was to the post office and to a nearby shop to buy a couple more tee shirts - at TSh500 they were a bargain.

I joined quite a few of the others at a large Chinese Restaurant in the middle of town for lunch around midday and then returned to the truck to write some more letters and subsequently post them. We were meant to depart at four o'clock but Mick was still off trying to send a telex and others were still arranging to get some soft drinks from a nearby cafe. Then when that was done, Doc Ian was missing, off trying to locate some drugs to replenish the medical kit - a difficult business since drugs are not only rare in Africa but also they are often not what they profess to be. We departed town just after five and headed out to the campsite just out of town at a club on a small lake. The place even had hot showers - the first since Timimoun so far as I could recall, but that was a very long time before!

People were starting to realise that this REALLY was the end of the trip and that as a group, we only had perhaps two more nights together. Yet this very fact created a tense atmosphere, given the standoff between most of the group and the intolerable J-P. As dinner was prepared, Mick and some of us grabbed a drink in the bar and chatted about the possibility of a bit of a party at Kibo Hotel the next night. Even so, after dinner there was a frustration creeping into the conversation

as we sat around the fire. I think people were really starting to see that the trip had been great BUT that it was nevertheless spoiled by J-P and his arrogant attitudes.

I had set up bed next to the cook tent and apparently J-P had pitched a tent on the far side of the cook tent. The drinking continued and it was obvious that something was going to break. Apparently someone removed a few pegs from J-P's tent (with him inside) and of course, it collapsed. Now such antics are generally taken in good humour but given all that had gone before and the attitude of the tent's occupant, it was not going to be left at that. Soon after, Doc Ian saw J-P going to the back of the trailer. Fearing that the Frenchman may have been planning to sabotage or even vandalise Ian's camera equipment, he just moved over to observe more closely. Words were exchanged and, predictably, the Frenchman gave Ian a punch to the face. Hmmm. I was starting to look for my bed, as were most others, although the night was not yet over despite it being midnight. A little while later, Mick, who had been down at the bar, ran by at great speed and a scuffle of sorts broke out at J-P's bed (he didn't re-erect his tent). It seems Mick and Ian were talking and Mick just became so frustrated by the situation that he ran up to J-P, kicked his bed and demanded to "have it out". Mick wanted J-P to hit him, then he would have a clear basis for getting him off the trip, as if he didn't have enough reason already!

The night quietened down and the sap from the big tree we were sleeping under periodically dripped on me to my considerable annoyance. In the morning, it was like someone had died - no-one talking, just getting organised to leave. Doc Ian had decided to leave us there and then and head straight for Nairobi rather than going to Moshi - he just didn't think it was worth the added risk of another outbreak of war. We dropped him off in Arusha at the taxi station and then we headed east. We had to stop at the Tanzanite Hotel, a few kilometres out of town to collect some notes that Roscoe had supposedly left for Mick but they weren't there - they were at the Kibo Hotel instead. So we really got going on the 80 km run east to Moshi just after nine o'clock.

The day was superb and we had almost continuous clear views of Mount Kilimanjaro, growing bigger and more awesome with each kilometre that we covered. To look at it from 50 or 60 km away doesn't make you think it would be hard to climb, UNTIL you realise that you ARE 50 or 60 kilometres away and you study it more closely - it really is an enormous mountain. It is really a 1000 metre high volcanic cone sitting on top of a 40 by 80 kilometre oval shaped plateau which rises almost 3000 metres above the surrounding landscape which is itself a plateau set at about 2000 metres above sea level. The size of the mountain combined with those altitudes makes the climb a challenge to any person.

We passed through the outskirts of Moshi a little after ten having made good time on the highway, which is generally in excellent condition - one of the few Tanzanian roads that is! Continuing on, we were soon at the village of Himo where we turned to the north on the 23 kilometre gradual climb up to Marangu where the various hotels and hostels are located that service the base of the mountain. By 11.30 we had pulled into the grounds of the Kibo Hotel, one of EO's major bases. There we were met by Robyn, another EO driver who would look after some of the arrangements for our climb before departing herself on a short four week trip due to commence in a few days time. Her truck seemed to be a lot of pieces, undergoing a reasonably major overhaul.

After doing some laundry and grabbing some lunch it was time for some truck and bag cleanouts. The truck wasn't too dirty, having been done in Kampala, in addition to which the quantity of supplies was now becoming much smaller. I assisted particularly with the repacking since I was to take over the job of quartermaster from Dar. Hence, I worked with Dale to take a proper inventory of everything so as to know what to buy in Dar and beyond. I also fully repacked my bag



since I was only keeping at Kibo the stuff I absolutely needed for the climb and this had to fit into my day pack or on my body! That meant wearing my walking boots all the time, except for a pair of thongs, and just a few changes of tee shirt and undies! Of course I had to separately carry my sleeping bag. It all fit - just, complete with thermal underwear, beanie, several pairs of socks, water bottle, gloves, some toiletries, hand towel and medicines, toilet paper and of course my camera, although I only kept the small lens with me. In the end I had to have a plastic carry bag for my heavy jumper. The remainder of my stuff was packet into my big bag, which would remain securely in the bottom of the trailer until I rejoined the truck in Dar.

During the afternoon Robert, one of the guides for the climb, came around checking what additional gear we needed. I needed a parker and some waterproof pants. He returned later with a selection of stuff, all in fairly ordinary condition, but also relatively cheap. Late in the afternoon I managed to get a hot shower in Mick's room which the hotel had provided for him. We had pitched our own tents on the lawn in front of the hotel, more to air them than to sleep in, although I did sleep in it on my own that night. Before dinner I had a farewell drink with George in the bar, being concerned to get my cheque, which was duly mailed off to Australia once I got to Dar. Dinner was in the dining room for the whole group, and but for the fact that J-P was up one end of the table, more or less on his own, it was a good night - "the last supper". The meals at Kibo were great - roast beef on this occasion. We had a fire going back at the truck after dinner and chatted for a while but it kind of fizzled out and I quietly slipped off to bed at about eleven.

The next morning was spent packing and preparing for the climb after awaking at a late seven o'clock. By nine we had the truck pretty much packed and then Siara, the climb leader, myself and Mick went off to buy the food for the climb. We walked to a store about a kilometre away and Siara specified what we needed as Mick checked the reasonableness from his list. You can never tell whether they're ripping you off since you never see the food again until it hits the dining table in the huts on the mountain. For all we know they might have eaten most of it themselves. We returned by 10.30 and at eleven, after hooking up the trailer and lots of hugs and fond farewells, Merv left us - the first time we would be parted for more than a day since London, and in this case it would be nearly a week. But seriously, it was the last time for the foreseeable future that I would see many of those good friends - Megan and Jeanette the Kiwi girls, Gerd the smiling German, the ever so friendly Andrew, English Ann and of course George. We would join up with Mick and Richard a week later and of course the other six were staying to do the climb.

We went to our rooms - the seven of us split across two rooms and as would become common over the next week, we were fighting for a bed in the other room to J-P! I nearly always seemed to lose out, but then I was the tolerant older person in the group! Robyn arranged us some sandwiches for lunch and after a bit of a rest, the six of us, excluding J-P, walked to Kinukamari Falls, having enlisted the very cheap services of a teenager at the hotel gate to guide us. The falls are quite pretty and we lazed about there for a while before returning and basically relaxing. As we dozed in our room, we heard some music being played by one of the cleaning ladies on a pretty ancient cassette player. It sounded dreadful but then Dale recognised it - Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young! "Geez", she said, "I threw that cassette out from the truck yesterday and now they're playing it!". You have to give it to the Africans - they don't waste a thing!

Dinner was a tense affair with nobody wanting to talk to J-P, so it was over with fairly routinely. Most of us were in bed soon after nine o'clock, being keen to maximise our rest in preparation for the next five days, although in reality, we got lots of opportunity for rest on the mountain. Climbing Kili is all about pacing yourself, altitude acclimatisation, and relaxing when you feel less than terribly well!

So arrived January 18th, Day One of the climb, and after a seven o'clock breakfast we packed ready to go. Up at the truck (Robyn's) the porters were gathering and what an army there were! Our bags, in my case the plastic one with extra clothes plus my sleeping bag, were packed into huge plastic bags and then into hessian bags. One porter would carry two or three people's stuff, others would carry the seemingly endless boxes of food, and other carried cooking utensils, hurricane lamps, boxes of plates and so forth. And yet others carried food and clothes for the porters and guides. In all, for us seven humble climbers there were four guides and about fourteen porters, a total party of about twenty-five! We were loaded into the back of a small ute and ferried the five or so kilometres to the National Park gate. We stopped enroute for a superb photograph of the mountain, thirty kilometres away and glistening proudly against the blue morning sky on what was to be the first of a series of almost perfect days. We waited at the park gate for nearly an hour while Robyn paid the huge fees and the porters were gradually ferried up. The sign reads as follows, except I have added the equivalent altitudes in feet:

#### KILIMANJARO NATIONAL PARK

##### MARANGU ROUTE

PLACES	E.T.A.	ALTITUDE	VEGETATION ZONE
MANDARA	3 HRS	2700 M (8,860 ft)	FOREST
HOROMBO	5 HRS	3720 M (12,200 ft)	MOORLAND
KIBO	5 HRS	4705 M (15,440 ft)	ALPINE DESERT
GILMANS	5 HRS	5685 M (18,650 ft)	ALPINE DESERT
UHURU PEAK	1.5 HRS	5895 M (19,340 ft)	ICE CAP

The park gate is roughly at 1800 metres (5,900 ft), so the rises in altitude are as shown below. I have also shown my estimates of the distances and shown the times I took for ascent and descent.

	Altitude	Difference	Distance	Up	Down
Gate - Mandara	900 m	2,950 ft	8 km	2h 35m	1h 45m
Mandara - Horombo	1020 m	3,350 ft	14 km	4h 20m	2h 45m
Horombo - Kibo	985 m	3,230 ft	12 km	5h 30m	2h 50m
Kibo - Gilmans	980 m	3,215 ft	3 km	4h 45m	1h 15m
Gilmans - Uhuru	210 m	690 ft	2 km		

We commenced the walk at 9.30 am and Siara brought up the rear telling us to take it slowly. There is no doubt that the way you approach this walk, even though this first day is just a short stroll, can affect your chances of success. It is important not to overexert yourself or become breathless, and even at this relatively low altitude I was consciously controlling my breathing by synchronising it with each two or three steps. The track is an old 4WD track which goes about two thirds of the way to Mandara Hut but they rarely allow vehicles on it now. It's quite washed away and would be quite unpleasant in wet conditions. The quite dense forest is lovely to walk through, protecting us from the harsh sun. Birdlife is abundant although we saw no other animals. People coming the other way on their descent would smile or smirk, depending on their success. I was walking with Dale, us prepared to bring up the rear while the fitter ones amongst us had sprinted ahead. We reached the halfway sign at 10.40, happy with our leisurely progress. A little after that the track climbs more steeply, then briefly descends to a creek crossing and deteriorates into just a narrow walking track. Beyond the creek it climbs steeply again and becomes rough and rooted,

before briefly levelling out across some different terrain with low bushes and grasslands. It finally rises through some more light forest to Mandara Hut, where we arrived just after midday. Gert and Steve had been there about an hour and while I was sceptical of their pace, they maintained it all the way to Uhuru.



The porters gradually arrived with their loads on their heads, some of them looking rather tired. We were given lunch a little after one o'clock after being allocated a sleeping hut and dumping our stuff in there. The huts both there and at Horombo are A-frame wooden huts, in good condition. The dormitory huts sleep four while the large dining hut has benches and tables to seat about forty people. At Horombo it would be crowded since that is the main crossing point of those going up and those coming down, and there are typically forty to sixty people a day (excluding guides and porters) climbing this mountain. Why do people do it? Well, it is not only the highest mountain on the African continent but is perhaps the highest point on the Earth that can be reached by a "non technical" climber, although there may be some higher peaks in South America that are accessible.

During the afternoon, we took the short walk to Maundi Crater, which is mostly for something to do, but also provides a pleasant view out to the east, and certainly makes you realise how high you are already. The grassed crater is pretty boring but the vegetation and flowers are interesting as it is in the semi grassland zone. Upon returning to our hut to laze about, we had a Swedish guy come and join our hut since we only had three. Dinner was at an early five o'clock since there is no lighting anywhere and so is best before it gets dark. Later on, people stay to chat by the light of a hurricane lamp. Dinner was the usual kinds of stuff for the mountain - lots of carbohydrates and lots of liquid. Dehydration becomes an ever increasing risk as you gain altitude and basically, you can never drink too much. The sunset over the cloud layer below us was picturesque and then a



cold and mostly clear night developed. The "group of six" sat in the other hut chatting by candlelight, not being particularly tired, and eventually we bedded down at ten o'clock. It was cold but comfortable.

The aim on day two is to spend the maximum time at Horombo Hut, acclimatising to the altitude. Some books recommend that you spend two nights there but that is probably unnecessary. Thus, Siara had told us to arise at six, breakfast at 6.30 and start walking at seven. It is a fairly long and tiring walk, commencing with a steep climb through the last of the forest - the track is very washed away and covered with roots and rocks. After an hour, Dale and I, bringing up the rear as usual, suddenly popped out onto the moorland and there you get a superb view of the mountain ahead, still at least 20 km away. It was an opportunity to stop for a rest and to remove some clothes as the day was warming up. From there on there are few really steep climbs but mostly gradual rises across moorlands and through boggy areas and creeks. The terrain gradually changes from grasses to real moorland bogs, with *Senecias* (those huge bizarre looking plants) and lots of beautiful wildflowers.

At 10.20 we reached Kambi Ya Taaby, a creek at 3,485 m (11,500 ft), and soon after we caught up with Noel and Jenny having a rest. We walked with or close to them for the remainder of the time to Horombo, descending into and out of a number of deep rocky gullies. The weather also deteriorated as cloud rose on us - it's an odd sensation since cloud normally descends on you, but in this case it rose from a lower altitude and soon we were walking in misty cool conditions. Horombo was reached at 11.20, a total of 4h 20m - quite respectable and I didn't feel like I'd exerted myself very much at all. Gert and Steve had been there for ages of course and had the huts arranged, as well as informing us that it was 8°C. I felt good - just the slightest of headaches. Someone said there were some Australians in the dining hut and I went in to speak to them. They were on their way down and were apparently continuing on to Mandara that day. Upon further investigation it turned out the guy works with my ex-wife in Melbourne! Small world it is.



After lunch we rested on our beds and around three o'clock there was a thunderstorm all around us but it didn't rain - I guess it rained somewhere below us! Dinner was early as usual at five but I felt slightly off colour - not in an altitude sense but a slightly upset stomach. Who knows what it was, but I had a minor bout of diarrhoea that night, having to wander down to the toilet twice. The only consequence was that I didn't eat as much as I should have. The views outside were superb, not only of the stars but also of the lights of Moshi to the south. I was in bed by seven, complete with a couple of Panadiene to relieve the increasing headache. I slept OK, except for the visit to the toilet. I was of course wearing my thermal underwear in my sleeping bag. Gert said it was about 3°C.

Day three aims to give you sufficient time to reach Kibo Hut at a leisurely pace and to rest there, but no more. Thus, we breakfasted at 7.30 am and departed right on eight o'clock. I felt reasonable although not really interested in food. Still, I made sure I drank lots and took some fruit to eat along the way. The morning was again clear and cool, warming into a sunny day, although a breeze ensured that we would be anything but hot. In fact I walked all day in my thermal underwear, gloves and beanie, such was the chill in the wind. Again, Dale and I brought up the rear with Siara keeping an eye on us. We crossed the Maua River at 8.45 at 3,940 m (13,000 ft) and reached the last water supply at 9.45 where we filled our water bottles. The porters must fill water containers here and carry them to Kibo Hut.



The terrain gradually became more and more arid as we climbed to Mawenzi Ridge. Mount Mawenzi is the spectacular sister peak to Kilimanjaro, ever present on our right during the morning's walk - it's a technical climb. From the ridge we had an uninterrupted view of the volcanic cone of Kilimanjaro and it grew more and more awesome as we began to pick out the tiny track that later that night would be our route to the top. Soon the vegetation had completely ceased and we found ourselves in an alpine desert - just rocks and the odd raven. Some groups of boulders were huge - 4 metres high, others just right for sitting on to rest which we were doing



with increasing frequency. I also recall seeing an aircraft fly by, a large commercial jet cruising at an altitude not that much higher than us. They tend to do a pass of Kilimanjaro on the regular Nairobi to Dar es Salaam route.

By midday I was developing an altitude induced headache and signs of nausea. It was a convenient time, since I could remember to take two panadiene and an Amoxal (anti-nausea) each six hours, starting then. The final climb to Kibo hut stretched before us and looked insignificant, but the incline was all the more difficult at that altitude and it was a long hard slog. We arrived at 1.30 pm, sunny but cold and windy, the awesome mountain fully visible. "Don't look", I told myself, because it looked like an impossible climb. Some lucky people arrive with the mountain shrouded by cloud so they can't see the awful climb ahead!



We tried to eat some lunch and then slept fitfully. The dormitories of the stone building hold about 15 people plus a table to eat at. It was cold and quiet, just the wind and the occasional noise of someone arriving late or going off to the toilets. I was still almost fully clothed and in my sleeping bag and reasonably comfortable. They awoke us (if we were asleep) at five for some dinner, mostly just potatoes - food was not appetising - I don't even think the best French dinner would have been appetising! I got some food down and drank several cups of tea (bad move, too much caffeine) while Gert was eating like he does at sea level - a lot! I took my next dose of pills at six and we returned to the business of trying to sleep. It got colder but I was warm OK. Dale had her crinkling space blanket over her and it rustled like a piece of alfoil every time she moved. The caffeine got to me and I had to don boots, parker and beanie to venture outside. It was freezing cold, wind howling and misty cloud slipping by in the night. I returned and actually slept for a few hours, awaking at eleven and being unable to fall asleep again, knowing that "they will come and get us" at midnight.



Almost exactly at midnight Siara and another guide came in bearing a hurricane lamp and a plate of biscuits. Then tea was brought and we tried to eat - as usual Gert was scoffing it down and most of us were looking at it sourly. We gradually prepared, moving slowly in a half asleep and half nauseated state. I carefully checked everything - boots, parker, gloves, beanie, glucose tablets in my pockets, and water - ah - my water bottle is empty. Others soon caught onto this problem and we demanded they bring us water - it took some time but they did bring it so we could all fill our bottles, absolutely essential for the climb in the dry high altitude atmosphere. I had taken my next six hourly dose of pills, checked my pack was complete and thus we were ready. Somehow all this took almost an hour!

It was one o'clock in the morning as we emerged into the cold night. The wind had largely subsided and it looked like we would be blessed with almost perfect climbing conditions. In some ways I feel cheated at not having the challenge of a climb in blizzarding snow or high winds! At that point we walked off in single file with our guides spread amongst us. Other groups were also starting and it was hard to see who was who, but our guides seemed to take care of us. Dale was ahead of me, J-P ahead of her and the others further ahead. Your thoughts as you walk are confused, as your mind wanders, almost dreaming, and then concentrating on your steps and your breathing, then wondering what time it is, how far you have gone and periodically looking up at the awesome silhouette of the mountain like a wall in front and the stars above and behind. It was probably only 30 minutes before we had spread out and I found myself walking behind just one of our guides, Robert, with a few other groups of people some way behind and some way ahead.

The track is like a gravel pit as it heads onto the steeper part of the volcanic scree which goes up at about a 30° angle. The track soon begins its zig zagging route up the scree, traversing the several hundred metres from side to side a seemingly endless number of times. After an hour I looked over my shoulder to see the rising moon and the silhouette of Mount Mawenzi, its top now not far above our altitude. I stopped for a brief rest, a drink from my water and a glucose tablet. I felt fine, just tired, but no real headache or nausea. At 3.15 am we reached Hans Meyer Cave, recognised as the half way point, and certainly a good spot to shelter in a storm. On this occasion the night was clear and still. We stopped for a rest and drink as I marvelled at the rock formations on the sides of the scree, now visible in the moonlight, with patches of icy snow scattered amongst them. We didn't stop long, lest the cold start to tighten the muscles.

The next two and a half hours became a blur to me. The mind wanders, the legs ache, the breathing gets uneven and the steps get to be so short that on the gravelly scree you sometimes slip backwards further than you step forwards. Our rests became more frequent, a sip of water and some glucose, and a brief "How much further?". The reply was almost always unsatisfactory. I recall him answering "Another hour" and I almost gave in - my legs were turning to jelly, just devoid of energy. "I must make it", I said to myself, "I can make it - I won't be beaten by exhaustion, after all I feel fine in the head." We continued and that last hour was over faster than I could believe. I thought I had only gone another fifteen or twenty minutes when I stopped and the answer this time was "Almost there - look up", Sure enough I could see the end of the scree, the rocks and the snow of Gilman's Point and the sounds of people not far above. That really gives you a surge of energy and within five minutes I had clambered over the rocks and ice to see the people sitting on rocks - I had made it.

It was 5.45 and the sky was gathering that dim glow of an approaching dawn. Dale was first to see me and hugged me. We congratulated each other and Siara did also. Dale felt sick and was heading down with Siara. The others had all gone to Uhuru - I didn't mind - I only expected to make it this far and I was going to savour this place and not rush off through the snow to the real

top. Besides, Robert was feeling sick and I was physically exhausted, meaning neither of us really wanted to go any further. There were about eight or ten people there and some arrived after me, but there was plenty of space to find a nice rock on which to sit and admire this incredible place.

The first thing that hits you as you look beyond is the almost sheer drop off the edge into the volcanic crater, completely covered with snow. Uhuru peak to the left was also covered fully in snow. To the right are superb ice formations and likewise across the crater which is over two kilometres in diameter. Back where we had come from Mount Mawenzi was now crystal clear against the brightening dawn, its top now well below us. The scree below is not visible - it is so steep that it just disappears out of sight below us. Beyond, the view is hazy in the morning light, not that there is much to see. The lights of Moshi can be seen to the south but not much else, although I swear you can see the curvature of the earth, just like being in an aircraft. I was very comfortable - not cold, no real headache or nausea, so I just sat and enjoyed the atmosphere (or lack thereof). The sun rose at 6.20 - a beautiful sight, but within half an hour it was getting quite warm with the sun so strong through the thin layer of air. I was immediately getting out the sunscreen in preparation for the descent during which time you are almost constantly facing the sun. Gert and Steve arrived back from Uhuru soon after sunrise and we chatted, Gert announcing the temperature at  $-12^{\circ}\text{C}$  at sunrise, but now quickly rising.



Photographs taken, we all headed off down. It was 6.40 am. Steve and Gert took the quick route - straight down the scree and were soon out of sight. You must be very careful doing that since ankle and knee injuries are common. With the relatively exhausted state of my legs I decided to meander down the narrow pathway slowly zigging and zagging across the scree. Besides, I was in no real hurry to reach the bottom. It was soon very hot, an incredible contrast to the cold an hour or so earlier. I was removing clothing quickly with the problem of where to put it - parker and gloves stuffed into my pack, jumper around my waist. I stopped after about twenty minutes for a drink, sitting my day back at my feet then all of a sudden my pack rolled over and started rolling

down the scree off the track. I looked in helpless amazement as it accelerated, tumbling in the dusty gravel. My camera within suddenly emerged and was left lying on the ground - at least it had stopped but it looked like my pack might go to the bottom! After maybe 15 seconds it stopped on the next level down of the track. I wandered down and collected my camera - undamaged, and then my pack and set off again being a little annoyed at my carelessness.

After a brief stop at Hans Meyer cave for a photo, I continued. There was a weary walker at the cave fallen asleep - I don't know if he'd been to the top or simply expired there on the way up. I tried to photograph the view upwards but it is simply impossible to capture the incredible slope. I reached Kibo hut just before eight o'clock and had a cordial thrust into my hand by the guides. What a contrast between a one and a quarter hour descent and the four and three quarter hour ascent! By now my headache was getting bad - it was hot and uncomfortable - I took my next six hourly dose of pills, a little late. In the hut, Gert, Steve and Dale were resting and chatting. We soon had our gear together and located our porter who took his load. Gert and Steve headed off towards Horombo, us soon after at nine o'clock. The other three were still coming down but caught us just prior to Horombo. It's a pleasant walk after the severity of the night climb and the hot descent to Kibo. By Horombo we were into misty weather as the clouds rose to meet us. Dale and I arrived ten minutes before midday. Lunch was served soon after and then we rested in the hut as the afternoon became cold and misty. Dinner at five then we chatted in the other's hut before bedding down at seven. It was a fitful night of sleep with the tiredness and exhaustion competing with the altitude and coldness. I was awake several times in the early hours of the morning and was eventually unable to get back to sleep despite my tiredness and my aching legs.

After a six o'clock breakfast we were walking once again at 6.45 am and reached Mandara by 9.30, stopping briefly for a rest and a snack of a hard boiled egg and fruit. We were still above the lower layer of cloud, then continued on with a mostly sunny day developing as we now walked briskly through the forest. At the gate at 11.20 I was a spent force with my legs aching and starting to stiffen and cramp. The others had not been far ahead and after buying the traditional "I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro" tee shirt and getting our official certificates, we were ferried back to the hotel for a welcome shower and to collapse on the nice soft bed at an altitude where you don't have to gasp for oxygen.

We had some sandwiches in the bar area and chatted to another EO group that had just arrived. They had spent some time with our group in Dar and their first comments were "Where's the Frenchman we've heard so much about?" With J-P on the other side of the room we quietly pointed him out and said no more on the subject! The tradition is that you buy the porters and guides a beer after the climb and they were all waiting around outside. Somehow Siara considered I was the leader of our seven person contingent so I was charged with the job of getting them all together. This seemed to take forever, but eventually we were all in the bar at once and asked the nineteen porters and guides in for their beer. As we asked for beers, the barman would ask whether they were for us or them, since the locals like their beer unchilled! By three o'clock we figured we had bought them enough beers and got everyone outside for a group photograph. The remainder of the afternoon was time to relax and try to recuperate.





Dinner was at 7.30 and the other EO group were having a group dinner also. We chatted to them briefly although they were still a bit tense, being only in the third or fourth day of their trip and still getting to know each other. Dale and I arranged to get a lift with the EO truck into Moshi next morning, and negotiated a departure time of nine o'clock with the driver, Phil. After dinner the "group of six" chatted for several hours, leaving J-P to the other room. All except Dale, J-P and myself were heading back to Nairobi so would leave on the early bus from Marangu into Moshi, then to Arusha and on to the border. Steve in particular, while continuing with me and supposedly J-P from Dar, had to go to Nairobi to collect some money that had been sent to him from England, although he ended up not getting it due to some stuff up. Thus, all except Dale, myself and J-P got away early without breakfast whereas us three breakfasted a bit after seven. After showering and packing, Dale and I slipped up to the other EO truck, hoping that J-P would not follow, since Phil had declared there was no way he would give him a lift into Moshi! We assume J-P caught a later bus since we briefly saw him wandering around the bus station in Moshi but he fortunately didn't get on our bus!

The 45 km journey into Moshi took us a little over an hour and we were dropped off opposite the YMCA at 10.30, the EO truck continuing immediately towards Arusha. The YMCA looks like a good cheap place to stay, friendly and secure with spartan but clean and tidy facilities. Dale left several of her bags there for safe keeping until her return a week or so later. We also took the opportunity to grab some morning tea. We then walked to the railway station - the train to Dar only runs on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, but it was Tuesday the 23rd. However, having heard how awful the bus trip is we were prepared to wait the extra day. Alas, the next day's train was fully booked, and I could not wait until Friday, so it looked like we would have to use the bus. At the bus station we soon located someone who would sell us a couple of tickets. I don't claim to understand the system but I think there is a kind of black market in tickets so that what you end up paying is about twice what is written on the ticket. It cost us TSh2500 each or about US\$9 and we were told to be back at the bus station at three o'clock and that the bus left at four.

Next was the Post Office to post some cards and letters then to Chris's Burger Shop for some reasonable and cheap lunch. We then went in search of a supermarket, which we found on the west side of town. Here we stocked up on some supplies for dinner, which would of necessity be on the bus - some bread, biscuits and chocolate. It was one o'clock and a pleasant warm and partly overcast day. The next hour was spent relaxing in Uhuru Park. Dale and I chatted, very relaxed. We had become close friends, having been through fifteen wonderful weeks together. Both Mick and I really liked her company and baiting her over one issue or another. She always liked a good discussion or argument, being an ardent women's liberationist.

At about two o'clock we wandered back to the bus station. The man who sold us the tickets took us to one of the numerous bus companies, each with their own little makeshift office, and we deposited our bags behind the counter. We could thus wander around and buy drinks, since it seemed to be getting hotter as the afternoon progressed, without dragging everything with us. The toilets were among the worst I saw - to be avoided at all costs, with sewage more or less running out the door. The locals didn't even bother to go all the way in side, preferring to just urinate in the entrance! We sat outside the bus company office for much of the time, with people absolutely everywhere, claspig bags of their precious belonging or produce bought at the market. Buses roared into the station in a cloud of dust, filled up and departed. It was a hive of activity with only the slightest hint of any real organisation.

At twenty past four a bus pulled up in front of our spot and reverse parked. There was a sudden rush of people, as if the bus would leave in a minute, but in reality everyone had a numbered seat and there was really no need for the mad scramble. Our ticket seller ensured that we found our way on and we confirmed our worst fears - we were indeed in the very back row, seats 63 and 64. The bus seated 65 in a two, three arrangement with six seated across the back. I stuffed my sleeping bag and pack under the seat. More people were piling into the bus to stand in the aisle, which also had piles of bags. Dale and I were the only two whites and we were crammed into a space that was almost intolerably tiny. The bus moved off in a roar, the engine beneath our feet and the metal windows (yes, metal, glass doesn't last!) clanging with each bump of the obscene Tanzanian roads. People tried to shout at each other, babies were crying, and the bus creaked, groaned and roared at the hands of the maniacal driver. Within an hour of leaving we were on washed out part tarmac, part gravel road. The driver charged on - I couldn't believe that the bus actually stayed together, and considering the noises that came from the suspension I suspect it often didn't. I could get the occasional view of the passing terrain past the less than talkative young black guy on my right, but fairly soon it was dark and we were in a noisy void. We were being thrown about, up and down, and shaken apart, but with not the slightest view of where we were going. We ate some food to try to take our minds off what Dale quickly called "The Bus Ride from Hell."

The night seemed to go on forever. We stopped for about 25 minutes in a small town around nine, and Dale got off to checkout the facilities. Once she returned I was concerned to get off since I could get no sense out of anyone about when we would depart. From there on there didn't seem to be a real stop. We just bounced and crashed through the night - it was a nightmare without sleep. Each time we stopped to let someone off or one we seemed to be away again in just minutes. At one place the stop extended for five minutes and then I thought I would get off. Apart from anything, it was virtually impossible to get along the aisle with bags and people strewn everywhere. Then as I'd clambered over them all the bus set off and I had to return to my seat. By those horrid hours of four and five in the morning we were both zonked. But you simply couldn't sleep it was so rough. In the back row it seemed the tail of the bus was bouncing several feet up

and down on each pothole. Whenever I did fall asleep I was abruptly awoken by my forehead hitting the metal seat in front of me.

Light came around six o'clock and the terrain had changed dramatically. We were down on the coastal plains now - green and lush, villages everywhere, and the humidity was stifling. The road had improved a little and the traffic built up as we moved into the outskirts of Dar es Salaam. We finally pulled into the bus station at 7.35 and within a minute the bus was vacated. I checked my photocopied map to see where to go. Taxi drivers touted us continually - I began with "no thankyou", moved to a simple shaking of the head and eventually got to "piss off!" They were persistent. I could tell I was not going to like Dar, this sleazy capital of this trouble ridden country. We walked by a place where Richard may have been staying but he wasn't, then found a cafe to have a drink and use their toilet - the first for 17 hours! It was then to the New Africa Hotel, one of the up-market places, and from where the shuttle bus departs for the beach hotels 24 km north. We checked the bus times with the man at reception and he told us a different time to the sign - the sign was right! From there we went to the Post Office to collect mail for both me and Steve and then Dale checked out the YWCA where she decided she would stay, so she dumped her stuff there but accompanied me up to see Rich, Mick and Merv before getting the shuttle back into town later in the day.

I hoped to make a phone call to Australia, the previous one being in Kampala three weeks earlier, and of course I knew my parents would be wondering how the Kili climb had gone. I went to the Extelcoms office to check the costs - TSh 5743 (about US\$30 at official rates) for 3 minutes - outrageous. I needed some more cash so Dale and I wandered through shops looking for likely places. The books warn that the black market in Dar is dangerous and I should not have been doing this in my exhausted state. We didn't succeed finding anyone - the non committal "Do you take dollars?" was continually met with a shake of the head. According to the advice we obtained, the shuttle bus would leave at 10 am so we returned there. The bus didn't come. I was annoyed - they then told us it would come at eleven. A black guy was touting us to change money - I initially refused but then weakened. It was a stupid thing to do, I know. You cannot change money in broad daylight because you simply cannot count it. He handed me a bundle of notes, quickly counted, in exchange for my US\$50 note, and had almost instantly vanished, never to be seen again. I sat and counted it - most of the bundles of notes were short - I had been given about 20% less than the official rate! I was annoyed with myself. Dale was sympathetic.

I had enough for the phone call, so went and made it, giving them some news and also the phone number of the Rungwe Oceanic Hotel where we would be by about midday so I told them to call at 12.30. Back to the New Africa and at eleven - you guessed it - no bus. Arrgh! You can't trust anyone around here - it was a hard lesson to learn, but Dar is like that. I checked the cost of a taxi - too much said Dale, and I didn't really have a great pile of local cash either, thanks to the black market ripoff. We bargained at them. I told them I didn't have enough local money. They said they could change some. I told them I'd been ripped off before and wasn't interested. These two guys got persistent - always a bad sign. Eventually Dale and I agreed to a price of TSh2800, about half what they originally wanted. Once in the Peugeot 504 taxi they continued to offer to change money. "We'll just go and pickup some money anyway," they said, "and you can decide later." We stopped at the Skyway Hotel and one of them disappeared inside and returned a minute or so later with a bulging pocket. We headed off out of town to the north.

The next sequence of events was like a badly done scene from a cheap American "cops and robbers" show. I have virtually no doubt we were completely set up, but then again, we were also at their mercy. The guy in front handed me a bundle of local currency, the right amount for US\$50. Dale also needed to change money so took a similar bundle. He said "count it, we're safe



in the taxi, if you want it, just give me your dollars." The count was correct, and we each handed over our US\$50 notes. I was taking this from my "official" dollars, ie. those that appeared on my currency declaration, whereas my "undeclared" dollars were in my daypack in the boot. It was almost immediate that another car pulled alongside us and we screeched to a halt. A big black guy pulled open the door and virtually jumped into the back seat with me and Dale, waving some identity and claiming to be from the police. It was pretty threatening, being told we had been followed and were being charged with black market currency dealing. He told the driver to turn around and that we were going back to town to the police station. There was arguing between them all. I said that I had done nothing wrong. He said to prove it and to show him my currency declaration and money. Of course it was fifty dollars short. He reached across to the guy in front and, can you believe this, plucked my \$50 note from his top pocket. "Here is your money" he said. What could I say - he was right! Dale looked on in amazement at this poor piece of acting, yet in the heat of the moment I was unsure which way to jump. "This is a very serious business," he said, commanding the driver "turn around and drive to the central police station!"

Eventually I said "Can't we fix this here and now?" I made out that we HAD to get to the hotel, since our friends were waiting for us. He eventually said I would have to pay him US\$500. I said "that's ridiculous, I would not have enough money left then to complete my holiday." We agreed on US\$300 in travellers cheques, despite the fact that cash is preferable AND he had seen exactly how much cash and travellers cheques I had. He was either really a policeman or very stupid - he could have taken my cash! I handed over the UNSIGNED travellers cheques - again I thought, he must be stupid for not asking me to sign them. He gave me a short lecture on the evils of the black market and grabbed the guy from the front seat and took him away, supposedly to collect a bribe from him. We were left with just the driver who continued the charade. He dropped us at the Rungwe at 12.10 and still insisted I pay for the taxi.

There was Merv, Mick working on him, together with Rich. I felt like I was home, especially after a harrowing night followed by a more than harrowing morning. It was good to be back with the security of the truck. I explained the incident to Mick. Dale was convinced that none of them were police - all things considered I think she was right. I would have to report the travellers cheques stolen, otherwise my currency declaration would not balance when I left the country. This would be straightforward yet I relished the prospect of going anywhere near the Tanzanian police force! I soon located the hotel reception and told the guy there that a call may come through for me. It did, at 12.30, and I explained to my father to please report my travellers cheques stolen on the Moshi to Dar bus, giving him serial numbers so that they could be immediately cancelled. I would not require replacements, having sufficient funds to see me back to Australia, where I did get them replaced without any problem. I later worked out that on all my Tanzanian currency transactions, including the compulsory exchange at the border, I averaged TSh215 to the dollar, only marginally above the official TSh190. Perhaps one simply shouldn't mess with the black market in this country, where thieves and tricksters abound. Certainly I would NEVER use the black market unless I had a clear reference from another white traveller!

After my phone call I was introduced to Dave, one of the members of the next trip. He was about my age and from London, with a lovely cockney accent. He was to provide us with a lot of entertainment during the next six weeks. It was of course ridiculously hot and humid - worse than Zaire, since here we were right on the water and with temperatures in the mid thirties. The ocean offered little respite - the beach was pretty average to say the least, but worse, the water was HOT, and I mean really hot. If you swam out a bit and dived down several feet you could get some cool water. Later in the day I took a cold shower - but even the cold showers were HOT! It was impossible to cool down. At least there was a ready supply of cold cokes or beers. By mid

afternoon three more members of the next trip arrived - Neal from Washington State, then Raymond and Anita, a young couple from Switzerland. It was interesting to meet these new people with all those memories of the last group, the wondering what the next six weeks would bring, and of course being viewed by them as the "experienced one." Mick also confirmed that the EO office had decided not to take J-P any further - hardly surprising, and when he arrived during the afternoon, Mick told him and we basically never saw him again.

As dusk approached, it cooled down slightly, Dale caught the five o'clock shuttle back to town and I sorted out my bag a little. Mick had a room here as did most of the new comers, except Dave and Rich who had been sleeping outside next to the truck. I would join them, seeing no point in taking a stuffy room if I could sleep outdoors. Around six o'clock the guy in the bar started cooking kebabs so we ordered some of them, since I had barely eaten since the day before. We were all going to have dinner together in the dining room, and in fact did so, but not until nearly ten o'clock since there was a power failure. So we just sat around and talked and drank in the dark! After dinner, Mick, Rich, Dave and myself polished off a bottle of scotch with some coke, as we relaxed on the shores of the Indian Ocean. I was coming back to earth - it had been a difficult week with some great highs and lows. It was now time to relax. I slept well, back on the familiar EO camp bed under the good old mozzie net.



Thursday the 25th would be a day of relaxation. Having helped unpack the trailer, Mick and Dave left for town with an empty trailer - there was some welding to be done on it. It took them most of the day to get the work done. Most of the stuff was loaded into the back of the truck. I deposited my stuff in Mick's room for safe keeping, then had a leisurely breakfast. I was hoping for a phone call from Australia but unawares to me, the line from Dar to the Hotel was down and my farther was busily trying to get through, even to the point of talking to the operator in Dar, but to no avail. So I just lazed about, sometimes sleeping, sometimes going for a swim. Lunch was a huge lobster cocktail for just TSh1000. Dale arrived mid afternoon, just to visit, and we agreed to

meet in town the next day so she could help us do some shopping. Mick, Merv and Dave eventually returned well after six o'clock having picked up four more passengers at the airport - Sally and Becky the English girls, and James and Robyn, both from Sydney but both travelling the world and thus arriving from London. I started to get to know the Aussies, and after dinner we had a fire and sat around chatting for a couple of hours.

In contrast, Friday would be a day of work. Much needed to be bought for the truck and I had agreed to look after all "long term" purchases of canned goods, flour, sugar, cereals, sauces, cordial, etc. The day began earlier than I would have liked when light rain fell at 4.30 am - by now this didn't worry me too much and I casually pushed my bed partly under the truck and went back to sleep. It rained again at 6.30 so I got up and Dave and I soon had the trailer repacked. We skipped breakfast and caught the 7.40 am shuttle bus into town, arriving by 8.30. Dave had decided to give me a hand and we met up with Dale who wanted to help too - maybe she just likes looking around African supermarkets!

We quickly established that there are two kinds of supermarkets - those that cater to the rich and those used by the local people. The former have most of the stuff you would find in any civilised country but the prices are outrageous. The latter are limited on variety and in some cases they just have none of a particular commodity, but the prices are reasonable. In this case I was soon to discover that almost no-one in Dar had sugar and we needed some. Anyone who knows me will understand that I wasn't going to let that be - I like my sugar! Having decided where we would buy stuff, we would wait for Mick to come into town with the truck. In the meantime we treated ourselves to some icecream sundaes at the wonderful "cartoon characters" icecream parlour - an incredibly incongruous feature of a back street of Dar. From there we parted and I went to the police station to file my "stolen travellers cheques" report and met the others back at the Kilimanjaro Hotel where Mick was to meet us at eleven. The police station was no real problem after a reasonably senior officer quizzed me a bit and checked my currency declaration, which needless to say balanced perfectly but for the "stolen" cheques. Then a young officer filled in a standard form as I dictated it to him.

At the Kili Hotel (which has a nice big carpark and is a good place to park the truck) I bought postcards and since Mick wasn't there, walked to the Post Office a few minutes away to get stamps and recheck the Poste Restante. Back at the Hotel we met Mick and said our fond farewells to Dale. She was staying in town this time, hoping to get to Zanzibar on the night dhow with Richard. After Mick had changed some money at his "known" black market source, Dave and I went to the supermarket to buy up big on supplies. It took seemingly forever to count out the money - about TSh20,000. It was now stiflingly hot and humid and I was about to expire. Dave and I bought several drinks on our walk back to the truck, then Mick pulled up at the supermarket so we could load the boxes of supplies and head for the Rungwe by 2.30 pm. It was a reasonably successful day although I still had to get sugar!

After a swim I began to recover and spent a few hours during the later afternoon getting the truck reorganised and the supplies stowed away. Needless to say I knew exactly what we had and under exactly which seat it was! A few other expedition members arrived during the day and Steve arrived on the six o'clock shuttle bus after a harrowing journey from Nairobi that made Dale's and mine look like a picnic! Rich departed on the same shuttle, although we would catch up with him again in Botswana several weeks later. The pre-departure meeting was held in a hall within the hotel and we started to allocate responsibilities. We had eleven new passengers plus Steve, Mick and myself. One guy would join us in Malawi - this was Canadian David who was born in South Africa and Tanzania wouldn't let him in despite his Canadian nationality! We would also pickup two extra passengers in Lusaka who were only doing the final four weeks. Mick covered all the



basic information - a much more relaxed meeting than the one in London. It was clear that the group were going to be fun and very relaxed. I had volunteered to cook the first night since I "knew the ropes", and in many ways I acted as a second in command to Mick for the remainder of the trip, helping with supplies, navigation, arrangements, repairs and even having the odd drive of the truck. Most of us had dinner together in the restaurant after the meeting and then I had to sort out my bag and complete sorting out the truck. The night dragged out and it was midnight before I bedded down in the back of the truck, which was fortunate since there were some more light rain showers.

Saturday, January 27th was the first day of the Safari South, the six week Dar to Harare segment of my trip. It began for me just after six o'clock with a final swim in the Indian Ocean - not only was there no water in the showers but it would be the last time I would see the sea until flying over it enroute to Australia! Breakfast was in the dining room and we were eventually away at 8.45 with me up front with Mick. Most of the morning would be spent shopping in Dar for supplies, so Mick immediately parked in the Kili Hotel. I set off with James, the Australian guy who had volunteered to be my cook partner, as well as Robin and Michelle who were our helpers and would cook the following night. It's quite a walk to the market and there we bought the usual fruit and vegies, eggs and bread. I was planning a pizza since it was easy and would show everyone how to use the oven. We were all loaded up, but I still had to buy the cheese and of course, the sugar.

I dispatched the others back to the truck in a taxi and then kept searching for sugar. I must have gone to at least three or four shops, each one saying "try over there." Eventually a shop said they had sugar - in 50 kg bags! Arrrgh. "Do you have any plastic bags," I asked, and once I had confirmed they did I kept bartering to get a reasonable price for a couple of bags full. Hence I wandered back to the truck with a bag of sugar on each arm, picking up the mozzarella on the way! As I wandered through the hot and dusty back streets of this sleazy city, I took a final look at its character, the strange mixture of blacks, Arabs and Indians, the dilapidated buildings, the scantily clothed children playing in the dust - it was all part of a scene that I was pleased to be leaving. We were due to leave at 11.30 and I was only five minutes late.

Mick insisted he knew the way out of town and yet I knew the way I had come in on the bus, and the two views did not agree! He was sure the big divided road that leads to the airport was a new way and would join up with the main highway to the west, yet I was equally sure that we had to go straight ahead at the crossroads on the western outskirts of town. Anyway, we continued on his route - after all, what did I care? We did have six weeks to get to Harare! We plodded on and it became clear we were on the road to Kisarawe. I showed him and he agreed but then he thought, well perhaps we can get through this way anyhow! "Let's give it a go!" The road turned to rough gravel and we stopped for lunch in some pleasant forest amidst searing heat and stifling humidity, with growing clouds indicating a storm was approaching. We continued at 1.30 for a whole hour as the road became a track and while this was all very interesting, I was convinced it wouldn't go through. We passed through a few small villages and people looked at us in their usual strange way. Then we reached a gate to a mine - the road seemed to have stopped. "Oh well," said Mick, nonchalantly doing a U-turn, "I guess I cocked that up!" Nobody seemed too perturbed as I stood at the back of the truck guiding him to reverse around. We could tell this group was going to be very easy to get on with - perhaps too easy!

The rain hit us about half way back to Dar but it was a short sharp shower that was quite refreshing. At 3.30 pm we eventually left Dar, this time for good! We headed into the coastal hills, climbing steadily through lush green countryside that gradually turns to dryer grasslands. At 4.20 Mick spied a possible campsite up a side road. One spot next to a school looked OK, but then

perhaps not, so he continued up onto a hill. The road ended in an open half cultivated area and some guys were doing some kinds of surveying. Mick spoke to them and they had no objections to us camping there, so we did. We wanted to camp early so he could give everyone the rundown on tent pitching, the tour of the truck and so forth. As we were putting up the cook tent it struck me that we were standing on some small quite dead looking seedlings. Upon closer inspection I could see they were planted in rows - oh dear - we're camping on some guy's newly planted trees!

The cook tent was soon pitched and I had my gear quickly sorted out - this was routine for me. I had dinner on the go and soon had James working, mostly looking after getting the fire done. Pizza dough mixed and rising, topping all chopped and all was in order. Soup was served by six as sunset approached and James got the fire fully burning, ready for the oven. We had the pizza on by 6.30 and then a guy turned up and told us we must move. Hmmm! Mick tried to soothe him but he was unhappy and said he would get the police. "Oh dear, I think we really might have to move." The police arrived at 7.30 and Mick explained that he had asked permission. The discussions continued. I tried to get the pizzas to cook so that we could at least complete dinner before leaving. The policeman was in a bind - he could see Mick's point of view but really had to ask us to move. He checked all our passports, more out of curiosity and to kill time. He was quite friendly, but in the end, he said we must move on - but we could finish dinner first. The pizzas were ready and we ate - people were a little unimpressed by all this but took it well and enjoyed the food. Soon after we had thrown everything into the back of the truck and somehow loaded up the burning hot oven and we were off. It was nine o'clock and it would be difficult to find a spot to camp. I stayed in the back letting Dave go up front and help Mick search for a site.

We were soon back on the highway and heading west again. The road soon became typically Tanzanian - pothole after pothole. We plodded on into the night, with pretty good humour in the back, but a kind of dazed amazement at "being moved on". For the newcomers this was all part of the new experience - and indeed for Steve and me it was a new experience - we had never been moved on before! I was pretty weary and it seemed like Mick would never stop. We seemed to be in hilly country and with a lot of villages, so finding a campsite would be next to impossible. We eventually pulled off the road after an hour and a half. We had just passed under a railway bridge, and as Mick said, there is always an easement beside a railway line so he just hoped this was no exception. There was quite a bit of room and we soon had the cook tent up. Eight people would sleep in there with the rest of us against the truck on the other side. The mosquitoes were really bad and this was aggravated by the fact that someone else had grabbed my net in the rush to set up and I had ended up with a net which was full of holes. I had carefully guarded my new net ever since it was issued to me near the start of the trip, but for that night I would just have to survive without it. Lots of repellent and I didn't score too many bites. I just hoped that whoever had it would treat it with care - they are very fragile! I recovered my own net next morning, easily identifiable as I always kept a clothes peg on it to hang it up! It was still in perfect condition. Fortunately the night was clear and warm with no rain and in the end I slept pretty well, despite the buzzing around my ears.

We were up soon after six and I had scrambled eggs cooking. It was still hot and humid and would get hotter, although the humidity would decrease somewhat as we climbed up onto the plateau. Once away just before eight we motored steadily westward - much of the first two weeks of this part of the trip would be spent driving across the relatively uninteresting countryside of Tanzania and Zambia. We had soon passed the town of Morogoro and then lunched just before midday, now in mostly flat savannah country. It was pretty hot. Soon after lunch we passed through Mikumi National Park, although we did not plan to enter it officially and remained on the highway. There was a lot of game visible, even from the highway - wildebeest, zebra and elephant, and of

course, the newcomers to the group were excited by this. Just beyond the park entrance there was a big herd of elephants right next to the highway and we stopped for some excellent photos.

During the afternoon we entered some picturesque country, going through a narrow pass and winding along a gorge formed by the Great Ruaha River. We could see the running water and it looked mighty inviting. Mick must have been tempted too, since when we reached some flat ground he decided to try to find a campsite and drove off the road for several hundred metres, eventually stopping close to the river. It was nearly four o'clock. After setting up I went in search of an access to the river but it was difficult - very overgrown with thorny acacias. Eventually I found a spot down to the river and returned to collect the hand showers and my shampoo, soap and towel. Neal and Jamie joined me as we proceeded to fill the showers from the river and then shower up on the bank. Once done we refilled the showers and brought them back to camp in case others wanted a shower. Some others had gone the other way down the river and had found another access and returned looking clean after a dip. I relaxed in the somewhat fading afternoon sun, writing the odd letter. The group sat around a good fire that night, chatting and joking. They were good fun and easy going, and had already reached the depths of depravity so far as humour was concerned. It was a clear and warm night as I bedded down, outside as usual.



I was awake on cue at 5.30 and got the fire going and started to get the others moving. Some of this group were slugs - I should know - I am one when I want to be! In fairness, a number of them were a touch off colour as their stomachs were getting used to the food and water of Africa. I had now been on the road for over 16 weeks and I could eat or drink most things - you simply build up immunity after that period of time. Once in Botswana and Zimbabwe I would even drink the water untreated with impunity. We were away at 7.15 and were soon climbing into some pretty rolling



hills. The clear and cold morning soon gave way to a mild to warm day. Now that we were up on the plateau there was much less humidity so it was indeed very pleasant.

We left the highway at ten o'clock to travel into the town of Iringa, which is built up on a hill with a long slow climb to reach it. Mick pulled into a service station to get diesel - Neal was up front with him. As Mick completed the fuelling he returned to the cab to find his brief case stolen. It was nobody's fault but it emphasised how easy it is to become complacent about security. In this case Mick had not drummed into everyone the need to never leave the cab unattended. It would have only been a few seconds for some teenager to get the door open and grab something, without anyone noticing. Fortunately his briefcase only contained accounts and such like, plus a good pair of sunglasses and some prints that Noel and Jenny had purchased at Serengeti and Mick was looking after until Harare. Mick immediately drove to the police station which, fortunately, was adjacent to the market and post office so we could all get plenty done while he went and reported the theft.

Although others were shopping, I still needed to get some supplies that had been hard to find in Dar - perhaps they would have some here. I first visited the post office then wandered through what was in fact a very good market. I was able to get a few more supplies, including, would you believe it, sugar in proper small packages! I also disposed of what remaining TSh's I had since we would finally be leaving this country within a day or two and would likely have no further opportunity to spend anything. Needless to say the currency is worthless outside the country so if you're silly enough to leave with any you might as well keep it as a souvenir! Back at the truck it was time to fill the water for the first time since Dar and I assisted Raymond, who had volunteered to look after it, showing him how much chloromine to add to each jerry can. He was amazed at the trickle of water that was coming from the tap we had located near the police station and thought it must take forever to fill the truck - "that's Africa", I said.

Mick had disappeared with a policeman in search of his briefcase. The police thought they knew who it was and in fact located a kid who said he had seen who it was. Mick described the threatening tactics used by the police to get this kid to tell what he knew. Eventually they found the briefcase on some vacant land, somewhat damaged and its contents strewn about. He recovered most of his papers, but Noel and Jenny's prints were damaged and his sunglasses were gone, no doubt the prize possession of some teenager.

We lunched on the truck once it got to one o'clock as it seemed we would be here for a while longer, since Mick still had paperwork to complete with the police, and in true African style, it was not going to be rushed! Time just disappeared as we sat around guarding the truck and staring at the local kids staring back at us. Then to cap all that off it absolutely pissed down with rain at three o'clock. This was, unfortunately, a bad omen, and we would become rather sick of seeing rain during the next couple of weeks. Mick finally returned at about 3.30 but then Steve had to go and sort out an embarrassing problem - the moral of his story is to be careful passing wind if you think you have the shits!

We finally moved off at a quarter to four, stopping briefly at a bar to try to buy some beer. It was just after four when we rejoined the highway, having effectively lost half a day in this stupid place. It rained quite heavily again as we headed through undulating country with a lot of pine plantations. Just after six, Mick turned off onto a good gravel forest road and followed it for about a kilometre into the plantation and then found a suitable spot to camp where they had cleared a section of the forest. It was cool and drizzling with rain. The scene with the forest roads and pine plantation could easily have been in Victoria, my home state in Australia.

Fortunately pine burns really well and after an hour or so the rain had cleared and we had a good fire going. I had nevertheless pitched a tent, and as would become common, I pitched the tent while James got the fire going - which I didn't mind since I could pitch a tent quickly and efficiently on my own. We sat around the fire chatting until eleven as the night became crystal clear and cool. Away from any civilisation, the sky was just as superb as it had been in the desert, except of course that it was now the Southern Hemisphere - just like home.

With the Iringa delay, it was clear that we would not be able to get into Malawi the next day and thus we aimed to get as close to the border as possible so as to get through first thing the following morning. We still had about 400 km to travel and that would take most of the day. The size of Tanzania was becoming apparent as we were crossing it from east to west. We spent most of the journey on the high plateau which averages about 2,000 metres or 6,000 feet with a high point of 2,900 metres or about 9,500 feet in the Kipengere Range near where we would camp the next night.

As usual, I was first to awake and eventually awoke others and we managed a 7.10 departure on a cool and overcast morning with periods of drizzle. Later in the morning it fined up into a warm day. We headed steadily westwards towards the large town of Mbeya through undulating and quite green countryside. Mid morning Mick stopped with a brake problem, and soon established that a rear brake line was split. It was not a major problem with a split system but he would get it repaired in Mbeya. We lunched on the roadside just after midday and then continued into town arriving at one o'clock. After successfully stopping at a garage to get the brake pipe repaired we propped near the market for almost an hour and a half while Neal and Elaine did shopping. The shops were a bit spread out and it took them quite a while to find what they wanted. We finally left town just after three after getting diesel.



From Mbeya we retraced our steps for a few kilometres to the turnoff to Malawi. The roads had generally been pretty good all the way from Dar with some stretches of roadworks or breaking up

tarmac. This road, however, soon deteriorated into a shocker - something by which to really remember Tanzania. We battled on, bouncing from pothole to pothole, as the road wound its way up into the hills, eventually passing through the town of Tukuyu. It was going to be hard to find a campsite in this hilly terrain but Mick eventually found a flat spot up the side of a shallow cutting and there was sufficient room for the truck and the tents. The view from the campsite was lovely - the rugged Kipengere Mountains to the east and the first view of Lake Malawi down the valley to the southeast.

The night was clear but surprisingly warm with thunderstorms visible all around. I was pleased to have put up our tent while James got the fire going. After letter writing I was in bed at 10.30, looking forward to a new country the next day - after all, I had been in Tanzania for over three weeks, and while I had some great times, I also had some bad memories! I awoke early and lay awake until 5.30 when I got the others up. I couldn't get the fire going - someone who shall remain nameless had forgotten to cut the wood. We eventually didn't get going until 7.30 - the laziness of some members of this group was starting to get on my nerves!

It was a short run down the twisty and crappy road to the border post at the village of Songwe where we arrived just after eight. The officials had that typical Tanzanian officiousness but overall, the transit went smoothly. We were all concerned, since the border has a bad reputation and it is where Roscoe had a fairly large sum of money found hidden on his truck and had it confiscated. We each filed through customs in turn and had our currency declaration checked and money counted. My police report of stolen travellers cheques presented no problems. The search of the truck as we waited in the cool and overcast morning was fairly cursory. After 1h 17m we were able to continue over the Songwe River bridge into Malawi. The sign showed we had done 1005 kilometres since Dar.



## **MALAWI - The Country on the Lake**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 5.

Distance Travelled: 1157 km.

Malawi is a pleasant country, geographically, its weather and its people. The economy is relatively strong and the people appear happy and motivated, in contrast with its depressed neighbours, Tanzania and Zambia. It makes you wonder about the benefits of the relatively repressive, right wing, pro South African regime of Life President Banda!

Population: 6 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 124.

Main Exports: Tobacco.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$180.

Currency: Kwacha, Kw2.40 = US\$1. Virtually no black market.

Languages: English, Chichewa.

Independence: 1964 from Britain.

Government: Presidential "democracy", right wing, pro South African.

Climate: Temperate, with maximum daily temperatures between 20°C and 27°C. Rainy season from October to April.

As we entered Malawi on the last day of January, we turned our clocks back an hour (to UTC+2) so that it was now only 8.30 am. The border post directly across the bridge is only a customs check and they gave an appearance of relative disorganisation, taking about 40 minutes to achieve relatively little other than a cursory search of the truck. I guess Mick was sorting out details about the truck and its carnet. The real border post is at the town of Kaporo about 40 km down a good quality gravel road that meanders through hilly country above the Lake. We reached there just on ten o'clock and were processed efficiently within an hour, each filing through the immigration office in turn and then to the adjacent police station to individually report there. We continued southwards on a good fast gravel road to the reasonable sized town of Koronga, which is on the shores of the Lake. The day was now pleasantly warm and fine.

We first had to change money and most of us filed into a bank. They were remarkably efficient - perhaps we have finally found a relatively civilised country, like Kenya! We were mostly all able to change money within half an hour. As I would be cooking the following night I then accompanied Neal to the market but there was precious little worth buying. There seemed to be lots of nuts and dried beetles (a local delicacy I'm assured) but not much in the way of fruit or vegetables. We left town just after midday without buying anything. Lunch was within sight of the Lake on the roadside. The Lake looks just like the sea since for most of the time you simply cannot see the other side. The road was now good tarmac, and in fact all the roads in Malawi were excellent quality.

After lunch we continued southwards, climbing briefly at times onto headlands into the lake, giving us a view of this pretty coastal area. The mountains on the west side of the lake gradually come closer and as we reach the turnoff to Livingstonia. Here the almost vertical cliffs of the range are right next to the lake as the road winds around the narrow strip of land at the base of

the cliffs. Mick considered the possibility of going up to Livingstonia, which is a beautiful old town set on the cliff tops, 800 metres (2,500 feet) above the lake. However all the books say it is virtually impossible to get a truck up the road and with none of us feeling quite that energetic, we decided to continue on and find a campsite on the lake. As the day was now quite hot, a swim in the lake, which is one of the few in Africa meant to be free of Bilharzia, seemed like a more appealing proposition. Such a spot was found only a few kilometres beyond, adjacent to a small village and right next to the relatively quiet main road that runs parallel to the lake.



It was about three o'clock and we soon had the cook tent set up. I had decided not to bother with a tent, since I was helping to cook and could justify squeezing into the cook tent if it rained, so I was first into the lake. The beach was gravel and the lake bottom seemed to be more like river rocks than sand, but the water was a pleasant temperature - cooler than the Indian Ocean had been, but not chillingly cold. The water is, of course, quite fresh and thus we had no problems refilling our jerry cans directly from the lake. I soon had my hair washed and felt much better for it. The locals were going about their normal business on the foreshore, cleaning and drying fish that they had caught during the day from the lake. They were friendly people and as we started to prepare dinner, a group of onlookers gathered. As the number grew, I soon had to lay out the rope to mark the line that they should remain behind. Later on I spoke to some of them and they were quite interested in where we had been and where we were going. They were better dressed and I suspect better educated than we had seen in Tanzania or Uganda.

Darkness came unusually early as we had changed timezone. As I bedded down outside the cook tent I could see thunderstorm activity around the lake so I kept my options open to move inside. I was awoken at midnight by a thunderstorm "on our doorstep" and decide then to move inside. It didn't rain then but it did piss down a few hours later so I was pleased to be under cover. It was,

nevertheless, fine and warm the next morning with the sun breaking through the misty sky. I was up at 5.15 since it was getting light and soon had breakfast underway. A fisherman appeared from the beach and asked if we would like some fish and with James and I cooking that night we negotiated a price for 10 relatively small fish. James cleaned them there and then on the beach and sat them in a container of water to keep reasonably cool and fresh until that night.

It was before seven when we got moving and the road soon started to climb steeply, although it was an excellent and well constructed tarmac road. The top of the climb was 1150 metres (about 3770 feet) from where we could get a superb view across the lake. A big rainstorm was visible in the middle of the lake as well as the lush green farmlands down below us on the foreshore. We descended slightly and then turned westwards off the main road towards the Nyika Plateau, which would be our destination that day. The tarmac runs along a pretty valley with a white water river beside the road. By nine o'clock we had reached the town of Rumphi where we would shop for an hour. The market was again very limited, but James and I managed to get a few supplies, especially at a well stocked but expensive supermarket.

From Rumphi the road is gravel but a good smooth surface. It climbs steadily through cultivated countryside and patches of forest before reaching the National Park gate at an altitude of 1,646 metres (5,400 feet). It was almost midday and the skies had become overcast with the occasional period of drizzle. Once in the park the road was narrow and climbed steeply in places. Following a brief lunch stop there was a heavy rain shower and then the terrain changed as we emerged onto the high plateau where vegetation is limited. The lush green undulating plateau with its numerous rocky outcrops is set at altitudes around over 2,000 metres (around 7,000 feet) and with the misty cool conditions it was more like Scotland than Africa! The rain had made the road slippery in places but there was no risk of us getting stuck even though the front drive shaft was not on. Mick would fit it later that afternoon in preparation for a game drive through the park next morning. We did wonder whether there would be any wildlife around on these moorlands, but we did see the occasional antelope enroute to the camp. The animals in this park seemed very timid and it was impossible to get close to them.

The camp, lodges and National Park headquarters are set in an undulating area of pine forest and ponds, both of which appear to be man made. We arrived at the office soon after three and Mick tried to get a map of the park and was then directed back to the campsite. We returned there and set up - it was a pleasant spot set in among the pines with good pit toilets and water from a mobile water tanker. The weather was now fine but cool and overcast so that quite a few people went for a walk while James and I commenced preparations for dinner. Neal reported seeing some hyenas. Dinner was ready just as it was getting dark and after the fish and chips, I set about cooking some pancakes which we had with jam or honey. It took forever to cook the damned things on the open fire, continually moving the pan around to get the right temperature, so I handed them out when they were ready. Thus desert was served over a period of about two hours! The night was clear when I went to bed just before ten but I was awoken by thunder around midnight and it then proceeded to rain continuously through until dawn. Fortunately almost everyone had pitched a tent, although James and I were in the cook tent.





The rain looked bad for our game drive, but we were still up at 5.30, packed and ready to go, leaving the trailer behind until after the tour. The only excitement was when Sally and Becky wouldn't get up so Steve "let down" their tent with them in it! It was taken in good humour and the favour was returned later in the trip. The countryside was picturesque and we meandered around the park doing a big loop to the north, going up and down through valleys and across high plateaus. The only problem was that all the animals seemed to have gone on holidays. That fact just added insult to what followed!

It was 8.30 when we reached a narrow bridge and Mick was concerned that it might fall down if we drove over it. Apparently Roscoe had taken his group on a drive through this park at night and had nearly fallen off a bridge and Mick suspected this was the one. After much checking, he did go across without any problem, although most of us were off the truck at the time. We all piled back in and then only a matter of a few hundred metres beyond there was a tight right hand bend with a culvert and the back right wheel slipped off the very soft edge into the culvert. It came down with a fair thud and it was obvious we were not going to be going anywhere for quite a while.

I was first out, and together with Mick, could see that the diff and the right hand fuel tank were both sitting on the road. We would need to dig, jack it up and build up rocks and a mud mat under the wheel so we could pull it out, hopefully getting enough traction from the front wheels. Unfortunately, while the truck has four wheel drive it does not have a locking or even limited slip diff, otherwise the task would have been a lot easier. I went under the truck first, digging the diff clear and getting enough space to put down a wooden base and the jack. Others gathered rocks and prepared the area under the wheel. At first we thought we may reverse out since the rise for the wheel to go forward was impossible. After more than an hour we were ready to try a reverse move but it was not really successful and we would have to go forward. A lot more digging and building up of the road under the wheel followed and eventually after more than another hour we



went forward and Merv hauled himself out of the massive hole. Mud mats were straightened, shovels restowed and we were off - a total of 2 hours and 50 minutes!



It was, as they say, a "character building" experience, although it had also sorted out the workers from the onlookers. I was certainly prepared to work and get filthy, having been through the experience before. Perhaps everyone would be better the next time - and indeed there were plenty of "next times" in the weeks that followed. The track continued to be narrow and treacherous, but we had no choice but to continue since the road where we had been bogged was now virtually impassable due to the gigantic hole left by our wheel and the partially collapsed culvert. We nevertheless reached our camp at 12.30 and I immediately decided, in view of the miserable weather and the morning's adventures, that a hot lunch of hot dogs would be in order. That was well received and spirits were pretty high when we left at 1.30.

We had three extra passengers that Mick had picked up at reception on the way through - some locals who asked for a lift to the park gate and beyond, and since we had the spare seats, he obliged. They didn't seem to speak any English so conversation was limited to sign language. We reached the park gate at about four and two passengers departed. The third got off fairly close to Rumphi but apparently I had been dozing on her shoulder during the journey down from Nyika, much to the amusement of the others on the truck! We stopped briefly in Rumphi to purchase beer and it was virtually dark when we departed and then camped next to the white water river just east of the town. It was just after six and I helped Mick to detach the front drive shaft before dinner, which was pretty late. It was overcast and mild and although I had pitched our tent, it did not rain - just for a change!

I think I was having trouble adjusting to the time zone because I again awoke at 5 am and lay awake until the 5.30 official rising time. We were away soon after seven and headed back to the main north-south road for our long journey down the side of the lake. There were periods of

drizzle around for most of the morning, although it remained fine while we were in the large town of Mzuzu where we shopped for about an hour. We initially parked beside a large modern supermarket and when we moved to the produce market, it was also a surprise being in a properly paved area - really well organised and very clean, in stark contrast to most markets we had seen elsewhere. We left town about 9.30 and headed eastwards back towards the lake, since Mzuzu is located up on the plateau about 50 km from the lake. Just short of Nkhata Bay we turned south onto a gravel road which was smooth and fast as it descended gradually down to the lake. A heavy thunderstorm hit but we pressed on and the obviously well constructed road was not a problem, despite the weather.

The rain continued and we snatched lunch just before one o'clock in a break in the weather, then continued southwards, hoping to reach the tourist resort of Salima Bay by the end of the day. The rain eased up and the afternoon was mostly sunny and warm as we headed along the mostly flat and heavily cultivated terrain beside the lake. We were making good time on the gravel and then the road became excellent tarmac around Dwanga and we would now be sure of making our destination. The only real delay was at the Bua River where the bridge is supposedly a bit unsafe and the soldiers guarding it insisted that we all walk across separately to the truck! It was a long concrete bridge too - I'm sure if it was going to collapse with us in the truck, without us would not have made the difference.

I figured out that we would get to Salima Bay about six o'clock and the long continuous drive through relatively uninteresting country had some of us dozing off to sleep and others just plain bored. I was sitting right at the back of the truck with Dave opposite. The newly purchased beers were on the floor in the middle. Suddenly, at about five o'clock, I said "Dave, let's have a beer!" Well, it took about two minutes and everyone had a can in their hand and we were suddenly not quite so bored. Most got through two or three before we reached Salima Bay, as it was starting to get dark. I had grown to know and like Dave already, he having been the first of the new group that I met. He was always pitching in to help, even though he was a trailer packer rather than a cook. He was just a couple of years older than me but was even less sure of his future. By the end of the trip I could see he was well and truly hooked on travel and would find it very difficult to return to any kind of "normal" life back in England.

The camp at Salima Bay is in the grounds of the Livingstonia Beach Hotel, a fairly high class establishment which is popular with South African tourists. It is right on the beach and adjacent to a small fishing village. Our extra passenger, David from Toronto, soon located us. He was very young. Although he had been at Salima for a couple of days awaiting our arrival, I was surprised at his naivety. For instance, he was drinking the water at the hotel believing that at a relatively high class resort like this they would have to ensure the water was safe to drink. He ended up with Giardia and was ill for much of the next three weeks.

After setting up our tents, we were into the bar for a drink. Hot showers were available in an excellent standard facilities block so we were all clean once again. I also went to reception and called Australia, and then they successfully rang me back. Phoning out was much cheaper than Tanzania but still relatively expensive - Kw16.80 (US\$7) for three minutes. I wandered back to the camp to see how dinner was progressing and while I was away from the bar, apparently someone gave Steve a push and he ended up in the pool. This somewhat annoyed the Hotel staff since only residents of the Hotel, as against the campsite, were allowed to use the pool! There were several other overland trucks in camp, including a Kumuka group, so it was a noisy night with much partying. The weather was hot and humid, quite a contrast from the previous couple of nights up in the hills.



It rained again for much of the night but was fine and sunny when I arose at 6.30 to go and receive a phone call from Australia that came through on schedule at seven o'clock. Most others were sleeping in with sore heads, so back at camp, I tried to get the fire going but more or less gave up since there was no properly cut wood. The black teenagers from the village were offering to do laundry so I gave mine to a guy having negotiated a satisfactory price. He returned them an hour or so later and I hung them out in the sun. It is important to minimise the chances of the putse fly laying eggs on your wet clothing and for the larvae to then burrow into your skin - this happened to Jamie and Elaine and we suspect it was as a result of the washing done at Salima. I preferred to dry the clothes myself by hanging them out in the heat of the sun so they would dry in an hour or less, but the natives tend to lay them out on the ground, which is much more dangerous. The expatriates will tell you to iron all clothes, which kills the eggs, but we didn't have that luxury.



Breakfast wasn't until 9.30 and then I accepted the services of one of the natives to guide me to the top of a nearby hill and show me around the village. I paid him four Kwacha for his work and also took his photograph in front of his house and later mailed it to him. Despite this, he pestered me for the rest of the day saying he wanted a tee shirt as well, but I hadn't promised him this. When I offered him one of my plain ones he demanded one of my printed ones that I had bought in Africa and there was no way I was giving him one of those - they were souvenirs for me! The village was interesting, with lots of natives fishing off the beach and others unloading their canoes from a morning fishing trip. The fish is generally laid out to dry in the sun since they have no other way of keeping it. The huts were all well constructed with mud brick and in many cases iron roofs. From the top of the nearby hill I could get a clear view of the entire village, the Livingstonia Beach resort and right across the lake to Cape Maclear in the Monkey Bay National Park. That area is meant to be worth a visit but we would not have time in our schedule, which for the first two

weeks to Lusaka, was quite tight and could not be extended due to the need to pickup two extra passengers there.

By the time I returned from my tour it was very hot and humid as midday approached. I wandered down to the beach and found some of the others sitting in front of the hotel having drinks so I joined them. Some were swimming and had hired a couple of windsurfers and some were showing their lack of skill in using them. Back at the truck I chatted to one of the girls on the Kumuka truck who was from Euroa in Victoria, quite close to my home town. Their Kumuka trip sounded like a disaster and she was really pissed off. They were going from Harare to Nairobi in about four weeks and so far, she said they had seen almost nothing except the main roads and Victoria Falls. In particular, they hadn't gone into Botswana, which to my mind was one of the best countries on my trip.

We lunched at 1.30 and then leisurely packed in preparation for our departure for Lilongwe where we intended to stay that night so that next morning we could checkout Zambian visas for the few who needed them - the Swiss and Americans. We got away at three o'clock on the 128 km journey to Malawi's capital city, gradually climbing up from the lake through cultivated country and onto the plateau. Some spectacular volcanic peaks could be seen to the south but otherwise the countryside on the plateau was uninspiring. We reached Lilongwe at six o'clock and proceeded to the golf course where we could camp.

It was soon dark with Raymond and Anita cooking some dinner of the fish that they had bought from the village natives at Salima Bay. The fish turned out to be awful - relatively tasteless, somewhat muddy and soggy. I guess it might have been better in a chili sauce but as it was, it was not worth eating. They felt embarrassed by this but it wasn't their fault. Most of us went to the bar in the golf club after dinner and had a few drinks. They tossed us out at ten o'clock but we sat around the fire back at the campsite for at least another hour, in the mild and overcast night. We didn't intend to arise too early next day since the main mission was to do some shopping and visit the Zambian embassy. We breakfasted and packed up before heading straight to the embassy just after eight.

The story at the Zambian Embassy was that the Swiss and Americans should be able to get a visa at the border "on the spot", or they could get one here but it would take nearly a week! That was the kind of African logic that is typical of countries like Zambia. Needless to say we chose the former alternative and indeed they had no problems at the border, having to pay some visa fee. Thus, we went to the market for shopping and while the others shopped I wandered around some of the other shops and also stopped off in a cafe for coffee and some morning tea. I was surprised when I returned to the truck 45 minutes later and they were all waiting for me! Their shopping usually takes at least an hour and certainly there had been no firm agreement of an earlier departure time.

From there we headed back to the business end of town where there were supermarkets, other shops and the post office. Here I posted some letters and then decided I would try for the American Express agents, since while I had reported my T/C's stolen, I still needed to fill in the appropriate form and sign the declaration. I told Mick not to wait and that I would meet them back at the campsite if necessary, where we planned to lunch before departing, then caught a cab to the office of the freight agent company who are the local Amex agents. It was back up the administrative end of town quite close to the embassy where we had been earlier. It was a fruitless exercise - I couldn't convince them of what I wanted and in the end they couldn't find the right form so I departed in disgust. The truck was still in town when I returned there and we soon headed back to the campsite by eleven o'clock.

It being a bit early for lunch, we decided to get out of town, departing at 11.30 and then lunching at 12.30, about half way to the Zambian border which was about 100 km from Lilongwe along a good tarmac road through mostly flat farmlands. It was now very hot with scattered cumulus clouds developing - looked like we would get an afternoon thunderstorm. We reached the Malawi border post just before two o'clock with the formalities taking just on half an hour. The border is pretty sophisticated with a covered area for cars and trucks to park, so when the heavens opened it was less of a hassle. They were polite and efficient. The rain was still coming down hard as we headed off to the Zambian border post, which is several kilometres further down the road.



## **ZAMBIA - All we saw was Water!**

Facts:

Nights in Country: 11.

Distance Travelled: 2109 km.

Zambia is in stark contrast to its relatively civilised southern and eastern neighbours, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Malawi, and much more akin to its northern neighbours, Tanzania and Zaire. The economy is in disarray, the people are lethargic and it is difficult to get supplies or do anything efficiently. While Kenneth Kuanda may have taken the former country of Northern Rhodesia to a powerful independent state, which has been staunchly anti South African, he has been unable to prevent the gradual decline of the country's economy. The geography is uninspiring with Victoria Falls the only highlight. Our trip was further "dampened" by being in the middle of the wet season.

Population: 5.3 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 18.

Main Exports: Copper.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$480.

Currency: Kwacha, Kw19.5 = US\$1 official, Kw47.5 = US\$1 black market.

Languages: English and several tribal languages.

Independence: 1964 from Britain.

Government: Socialist "democracy" led by life President Kenneth Kuanda.

Climate: Set on a high plateau, the climate is temperate with average daily maximums between 16°C and 28°C. The wet season is November to April.

It was still drizzling as we pulled up at the Zambian border post, with the building off the road to the right. It was nearly three o'clock, February 5th. Mick soon established that we all had to walk our way through the procedures - immigration, health and customs, with the latter requiring us to fill in a currency declaration. It was pretty low key - nobody had their money checked. The only problem was Steve who had his Vaccination Certificate queried since he had apparently got some of his vaccinations via a friend at the local hospital in London and the stamp wasn't really kosher. They were particularly interested in the cholera one since, as we were to later discover, Lusaka was in the depths of a cholera epidemic. This was of concern to us all since the cholera vaccination doesn't work anyway and I hadn't had one, despite the stamp. Fortunately the disease is transmitted through water and we always treated ours properly. They eventually let Steve go after we had all been waiting in the truck for ages. The customs man simply handed him a stamped blank currency form, and told him to fill it in later, such was their concern over the use of the black market.

Twenty minutes later we pulled into the sleepy town of Chipata, stopping opposite the Post Office. Mick went in search of currency, others for some food and Dave even managed a phone call to England, having changed some money on the fairly evident black market. One of the problems with using a black market in a new country is knowing what rate to ask for, since even the rate told to you by passing travellers weeks before may now be invalid due to the incredible inflation rates. Thus, when Neal and I were told by Mick to try a shop run by a Pakistani, we wandered in and asked for one figure, which he gave us. Back at the truck, we found some others had been given more so we wandered back and told him we were unhappy with the rate. I guess

you would normally expect him to say "tough luck", but with a fair amount of potential black market business coming his way he obliged and gave us the same rate that Mick had received, Kw47.5 to the dollar, which is about 250% of the official rate.

The town had little else to offer so we soon headed off enroute to South Luangwa National Park. We would have to travel to and from this park along the same road, the only other access from the south being suspect at best and in the current wet season, almost certainly impassable. The dirt road northwest from Chipata was reasonable - narrow and well trafficked, corrugated and washed out in places. Mick found a nice quarry to camp in about 25 km from town. It was mostly fine, with a bit of drizzle late in the evening after a lovely meal of Avocado Vinaigrette followed by steak. A few locals wandered by, since we were in farming country with villages scattered along the road, but they seemed rather shy and did not get too close to us!

It was a slack departure next morning - I was starting to get annoyed with some people in this group who instead of getting more efficient at packing up seemed to be getting slower and slower. Some seemed unwilling to learn where things belonged and relied on me and Steve to pack things away. We eventually departed at 7.25 on an overcast and mild morning that developed into a hot and mostly clear day. We soon reached our first tsetse fly checkpoint where the officials "clean" the truck of tsetse flies which have a tendency to sit on the truck, hitching a ride. I guess the main purpose is to stop the movement of cattle from an infested area into a less infested area. The flies are like horse flies and will give you a nasty bite if you let them, although the disease really only affects cattle.

We reached the Mfuwe airport mid morning, which is where most tourists to this National Park arrive, and from there to the park gate is narrow tarmac. The airport is quite swish - tarmac runway, control tower and terminal building. It was very quiet though, since we were in the middle of the "off" (wet) season. About twenty minutes later we reached the gate to the park, just before the long, high and relatively new bridge over the Luangwa River - the Michelin map shows it as a ferry. The solitary official on the post had little idea about ANYTHING. This park is known for its walking safaris, but Mick established that these were not being run at present. Other than that, the guy couldn't tell Mick where the Park Headquarters were or where the camping ground was, so he would have to rely on his notes.

First we retraced our steps a few kilometres and found the turnoff to what seemed to be the park headquarters. The track quickly deteriorated - deeply rutted and covered in bogs and water, but Mick pressed on. I was certain we would get bogged since Mick had not refitted the front drive shaft since Nyika and thus we were in two-wheel drive. We reached the settlement and it certainly looked like the right place but was very quiet. A few locals were about and Mick eventually found out that it was not the right place and nobody knew where the right place was! It seemed that the park was all but closed at this time of year (or was it Zambia that was all but closed?). Well the inevitable occurred and we got stuck in one of the deeply rutted bogholes on the way back to the main road. It only took us about 10 minutes to get moving again but the thick black mud was exceptionally unpleasant stuff and was made even less appealing by the stifling heat as it was now 11.30. More was to come though. Mick found the turnoff to the lodge, which has a campsite next door, but the road which runs alongside the Luangwa River was atrocious and we ended up being bogged several times in the deep ruts. After three lots of pushing, digging and mud matting in thirty degree heat for half an hour we eventually reached this lodge. Obviously Mick would fit the front drive shaft before we tried that trick again!

The lodge was run down, almost deserted, and to cap it off, half the campsite had fallen in the river in a recent flood! There were no facilities at all, although there was at least some shade from

the very hot sun. Monkeys were about so we would have to be careful with leaving any food out. Fortunately the bank up from the river was steep and about thirty feet, since a big herd of hippos were grazing a few hundred metres away in the shallows of the hundred metre wide river. Their growls would continue into the night! Lunch was at one o'clock and a little after two we headed back towards the main gate, leaving poor David behind on his bed in the shade of a tree - he was very sick and would not improve much for about a week. Mick was still unable to locate the park office and thus we would just have to go into the park and drive around aimlessly looking for any interesting animals.

We entered the main gate at three and had to be out by six, which we achieved with fifteen minutes to spare. In the park the roads were good and well signposted (if only we had a map). The terrain is almost completely flat with many waterholes and flood plains. We saw thousands of impalas, many hippos in the waterholes, a big herd of zebras, perhaps fifty or so, ten or more giraffes, quite a few warthogs, some waterbuck and towards dusk, a small group of elephants some distance off the road. And of course there was a multitude of birdlife.

Back at camp at six o'clock and I was assisting with dinner. Neal was baking a quiche in the oven, which worked out quite well, although we ate late as it was hard to get enough heat out of the oven with all the wood somewhat damp. I was also mixing up a batch of bread for lunch the next day and eventually got that into the oven at about nine o'clock and it cooked for over an hour with much flapping of the fire to keep the heat up. It worked out well - I was getting the hang of this bread baking now, and those who had helped were rewarded by some small hot bread rolls and jam or honey at ten o'clock at night as most others had headed for bed. Mick reported that there was a hose with fresh water around in the lodge, so at eleven o'clock I wandered around there and had a shower under the hose. The night was clear and warm, the sky being rather hazy, and it was a strange feeling to be showering in the middle of nowhere with absolutely no light at all save for my tiny torch! It was nearly midnight when I bedded down in the cook tent - the last for a change!

It drizzled at 4.30 in the morning and Elaine, who always slept outside if she could, came looking for shelter in the cook tent. We aimed to arise at 5.30 and quickly pack up, skipping breakfast, so as to get away at 6.30 for a game drive. This we achieved and were at the park entrance at 6.45 where we detached the trailer rather than dragging it around the park. We followed the same main road through the park, heading southwest towards Chichele Lodge about 25 km from the gate. It drizzled at first and then there was a heavy rain shower, so it was less than pleasant conditions for game viewing. There were plenty of impala and waterbuck, and some elephants along the route. Just prior to the lodge the terrain changed somewhat from the flat flood plains and scattered forest to undulating scrub country with rock outcrops. Mick took a side track to see if we could find anything interesting. After a few kilometres it began to rain heavily and the track became very slippery and steep in places so at the first opportunity he did a U-turn and we headed for the lodge where he organised and paid for a sit down breakfast in their dining room.

It was nearly nine o'clock - the lodge was all but deserted and it took a while for them to get organised to feed us some breakfast. The weather was improving into a sunny day and there was a good view from the lodge, which is set on one of the few high spots in the park, south east to the Luangwa River. Breakfast of cereal followed by eggs and sausages was a pleasant treat. It was 10.30 when we had finished. We eventually left the lodge just before eleven and headed back towards the main gate where we diverted onto a side road. I was napping in the back in the warm and humid conditions and was awoken as Mick did a U-turn, unable to find the road that leads to the north end of the park. Soon after we stopped for lunch next to a lagoon not far off the main road. The bread baked the previous night went down nicely! It was after one o'clock when we



exited the park, reattaching the trailer and heading south east again towards Chipata. We would make it to our quarry campsite comfortably that afternoon, allowing us to shop in Chipata early the following morning.

Enroute we picked up an American guy who was cycling along the road - he had cycled from Nairobi and was a friendly character. Imagine carrying everything you need on the back of a bicycle! Lewis pitched his tent with us that night and ate with us, considering it a treat to have such good food! I was cooking dinner - soup followed by chicken curry with added plantain slices. The fire for some reason was really wonderful - someone had found some really dry wood and it was so hot that dinner was ready in half an hour! The night remained fine despite the developing cumulus all afternoon, which led to a superb thunderstorm display nearby. Most were in bed pretty early after a tiring couple of days, although James, sleeping in the cook tent with me, arose at four o'clock when he was subjected to water torture - dripping condensation from the cook tent right onto his face! At least he had the fire going nicely when I arose at 5.30!

It was overcast and cooler as we departed right on seven o'clock, reaching sleepy Chipata before eight. We would be in town for an hour and a half, allowing time for people to change money officially at the bank, and for food and bar shopping. I was first at one of the two banks and it took seemingly forever to change a travellers cheque with masses of paperwork to be filled in, checked, countersigned and photocopied. Mick joined me and hoped that the guy would improve his efficiency! I managed to buy some bread for lunch but there was bugger all else in this town. The other shoppers returned to the truck disheartened with virtually no food and no drinks since they wouldn't sell us drinks unless we had bottles and they wouldn't sell us bottles. The bottles we had brought from Malawi were the wrong size! You would think a coke bottle was a coke bottle, but not in Zambia!



We departed town at 9.30, frustrated and hot, since the weather was now warm with sunny patches. It was 604 km to Lusaka with not much to see in between so it would be a day and a half of continuous driving. The country is mostly flat and just farmlands, the occasional town and village, but really pretty uninspiring. The tarmac road was not too bad with only the occasional stretch of washouts and potholes. After lunch we were hit by periodic rainshowers, but it was clear when Mick decided to stop in the only interesting area on the road, a low group of scrub covered hills. He found a side track up a ridge - perhaps a fire access road, and we camped about 500 metres from the main road well out of sight of everyone. We were in fact very close to the Mozambique border and just a bit short of the Luangwa River bridge which we would cross early the next morning, less than 100 km upstream from where it joins the great Zambezi River.

The night was cool and clear and we had a good dinner. I wandered down to the road during the evening, an opportunity to be alone, sit and watch the stars for a bit. There was no traffic, no people around - just silence all around. Steve had also gone walkabout - he too was pissed off with some people in the group who seemed unwilling to get involved in all the chores - I hesitate to use the word "lazy", but there really isn't a lot to do if everyone pitches in and helps.

Next morning it was cool and fine although it drizzled later in the morning. We were away after seven and a good feed of crepes for breakfast. We soon had to wait at the one lane Luangwa River bridge for a stream of oncoming trucks. After that the terrain returned to its typical Zambian boring flatness with farmlands all around. The countryside was certainly lush and green with the cattle looking nice and fat! Lunch was at midday in a bit of a quarry only 20 km short of Lusaka. We then continued into Zambia's capital, taking about 15 minutes to meander through the suburbs and to the parking area behind the Post Office where we stopped from just after one until four o'clock.

Lusaka had a strange atmosphere. It was a pleasant enough city with its wide tree lined main street - Cairo Road. Yet there was an unpleasant undercurrent - the people seemed lethargic and unhappy and there was a certain sleaziness - not anything as bad as Dar, but it was there all the same. This was the capital of a country that could have made it - but alas, the country is in economic turmoil and with considerable social unrest against its self appointed leader, Kenneth Kuanda, who presides over this token democracy.

I first visited the large Post Office to collect mine, and several other people's mail. I then went to the Air Zimbabwe office to alter my flight home from Harare. I had booked a flight several days later than the ideal just in case we were running late but it was now obvious that we would be on time into Harare. Then to the Amex Office to try to achieve what I had failed to achieve in Lilongwe but I had no further success. The guy was getting all geared up to replace my travellers cheques, phoning London and so forth, but I said I just wanted to report them stolen and complete the form. He couldn't cope with this so I departed, resolved to having to sort it out back in Australia (which I did).

Enroute back to the truck I stopped in at a supermarket - it was not well stocked - about the same as they had been in Dar, but I managed to pickup some different stuff and thus replenish some dwindling truck stocks. Unfortunately I had to carry it all back to the truck alone - a box full of canned food, cordials and such like. I returned to another general goods shop to try to find some postcards - the selection was pitiful - this country has no idea of tourism! Still, I got a few, wrote them and posted them, also inquiring at the Post Office about the cost of phone calls which required going upstairs into the dingy little telecom office. It was Kw145 per minute to Australia or about US\$3 at black market rates - not all that cheap!

We departed soon after four and headed to Andrews Hotel on the outskirts of town where we could camp on some vacant land. The place was being done up and the hotel looks reasonable, although there were no camping facilities at all. There had been a brief rainshower so we hurried to setup before another one struck, since there were threatening black clouds all around. The cook tent was soon up and I had James' and my tent pegged out on the ground when the thunderstorm literally struck. It was suddenly coming down in bucketfuls! I just grabbed the fly sheet and threw it over our tent so as to at least try to keep the inner tent reasonably dry. Alas my bag was out and I foolishly threw it in the trailer but without the trailer cover on, it kind of filled up with water and it took me days to get it dry again. I jumped in the back of the truck, which was dry, while others stood in the cook tent with the water level soon lapping around their ankles! Then lightning struck a pole about 20 metres away with huge bang - this was a good storm! It eased off after fifteen or twenty minutes and we began to cleanup. The tent was reasonably dry with only a little water getting in - others had not been as lucky. We soon had our tent up and the water mopped up and would at least be comfortable that night! The possibility of lighting a fire seemed at best remote, so we got the gas cooker out so that Sally and Becky could make some dinner. Soon many people had disappeared to the bar while I went in search of the single cold shower that the establishment had made available to us, hidden in a tiny shack at the back of the hotel.

The rain had now set in - not as heavy as before but constant. Dinner was served in the back of the truck and very welcome it was too after we had all been drenched in one form or another with little prospect of getting completely dry for a while. It was still reasonably mild though and I sat in the truck chatting to people for quite a while as the rain just kept on coming down. A little later I managed to call Australia from the hotel phone and have them call me back, so that I only had to pay for three minutes at the relatively exorbitant prices. Bed was after eleven and yes, it was still raining.

It was not raining, thankfully, when we arose next morning, although everything was still very damp. We packed and departed for town at 7.30. We were to pick up two extra passengers here, it being Saturday February 10th, and were to meet them at the Lusaka Hotel. Mick parked behind the GPO and I went to the Telecom office on his behalf to send telexes ahead to Victoria Falls to try and book a rafting trip and to Maun to book the Okavango Delta trip. This worked out fine with the guy typing the telex with me sitting beside him. I then walked to the Lusaka Hotel to meet the new arrivals and immediately located Liz, the Canadian. We waited for Silvia, the Swiss lady, but she did not appear. Mick arrived at nine and showed Liz back to the truck while I waited. He returned soon after and decided to go and Telex London, it now being just late enough for someone to be at the office, and returned soon after ten o'clock with no news. Thus, we had to assume Silvia had some problem and would have to catch us later on. We picked up some morning tea on the way back to the truck and moved off at 10.30. We eventually didn't leave town until after eleven since Mick needed to get some diesel and the station on the way out of town was so crowded with trucks that he returned to one in the middle of town.

There was a cholera checkpoint on the outskirts of town - we had seen the headlines in the Lusaka paper that morning of the cholera epidemic. They wanted to vaccinate us all but Mick convinced them that we had all been done! The road west towards Kafue National Park and beyond to the western province of Zambia next to its war torn border with Angola is good fast tarmac. The terrain is mostly flat with lots of cultivation and, once near the park, scrub country and patches of forest. We stopped on the roadside for lunch at 12.20 by which time it was hot and humid. It was nearly two o'clock when, as we motored westwards making quite good time, we were pulled over by a white guy and what turned out to be his nephew in a small utility. He told us that he runs the



Chunga Lodge and he would show us there and we could camp. Although Mick had got a good map of the park in Lusaka, he wasn't sure where we would be able to go since much of the park is closed at this time of year due to the wet season. Thus it seemed a good idea. He went ahead agreeing to wait for us at the Kafue River bridge.

We reached the official entrance to the park at three o'clock with only a short delay while we checked in. The good tarmac road continued onwards as I noted the gravel road off to the south that we might be able to use to leave this area rather than retracing our steps to Lusaka. We reached the bridge at 4.30 pm and it was inhabited by Chinese who were employed there on some joint development program - they were painting the bridge! We met up with the guys in the ute and followed them for another ten minutes up the tarmac before turning left - I could follow this on the detailed park map since I was up front with Mick. This would take us into Chunga camp from the west, it being located on both sides of the river a little downstream of the bridge. The road was all right for a while but then there was a long stretch of rutted and boggy track across a very flat flood plain. The ute was handling this OK but we were almost getting stuck in the ruts, the road was just so soft. Sure enough, we got bogged in one of the deepest set of ruts and it took fifteen minutes of digging and use of the mats to get out - now I was nicely covered in yukky brown mud.



Well the campsite was not exactly thrilling, being in about three foot high grass! The guy said they would fire up the boilers so we could have a hot shower and I think some people did get one although I believe the water supply was intermittent. I wasn't too concerned - I had had a shower the day before! We set up the cook tent as I matted the grass down to size. Just then Neal got all our attentions and said he had seen some ticks in the grass and proceeded to tell us how they are prone to climb up your legs and burrow into your skin in nice warm and embarrassing places. Needless to say, we were all continually checking our clothing. Jamie still managed to get a couple and had to dig them out a day or so later. They certainly are no fun! It was soon dark and the guy had said he would send over a boat to ferry us to the other side where there was a bar at the

main lodge. This seemed like a sociable idea. Dinner was coreally nice steaks bought in Lusaka, after which the first half of the group headed down to the river to go across the river to the lodge.

There had been thunderstorms visible all around us so it was really no surprise when the heavens opened upon us soon after. The others were mid stream at the time, but despite the teeming rain, the young guy returned about half an hour later and we all ran down to his tiny dinghy in the pouring rain. I was beginning to think I must have lost my sanity as we putted our way across the river and slightly upstream. It was pitch dark although with the flashes of lightning we could see the expanse of the river, probably a kilometre across due to a dam a little further down stream. We were all getting totally drenched, although my Goretex jacket was keeping my head and top half reasonably dry. It was quite warm and as I dangled my hand in the river it too was pleasantly warm. Heavens knows how the guy found his way but we did pull up at a tiny jetty and ran up into the bar where the others were standing around having a "wow of a time".

The ploy had become apparent - the place was a dump, nobody around except us, and the guy was simply desperate for some business. It was hard to believe he ever did really good business - it was certainly no five star resort - perhaps a half a star! The rain continued, we had a few drinks, listened to his stories about the animals, his love for the country and so forth. He was a strange character, wed to this isolated land with a wife back in England that he never saw. At eleven o'clock we decided we should leave, although he tried to talk us into staying - "it's too wet out there" he said, and that was certainly true, but we wanted to be back at the truck. So the young guy went to the boat with the first load but they all returned inside after he was unable to get the motor to start. Just great! "So we're stuck here for the night!"

Mick wouldn't stand for this, despite the guy's repeated attempts to get us to take rooms, and went and helped the young guy to get the motor going. They succeeded after half an hour, both drenched, and the first group ran down and headed off - Mick went too but returned with the young guy after half an hour. All the while the older guy was pleading with us to stay but then Mick appeared and said "let's go", and we were all off into the rain and across the river. It was after midnight by this time and again, I questioned my sanity and that of the whole situation as we gradually crossed the river again in pitch blackness interrupted by lightning, amidst continuous monsoonal rain. I was in my nice secure sleeping bag in my nice dry tent by 12.40, pleased to be back with Merv!

Not surprisingly, no-one awoke too early the next morning, with the still drizzly and miserable weather further encouragement to stay in bed. I arose at 7.30 and we breakfasted at 8.30 by which time it was fine but overcast. Also not surprising was the unanimous decision to piss off out of this place. We were ready to go at 9.30 but Mick had lent his jacket to the young guy the night before and besides, he hadn't paid for the camping, not that it was worth anything. The few black guys were banging the "bell", formed by an old brake drum hung from a tree, and the two white guys appeared in their little dinghy a bit after ten. Mick got his jacket back, argued with the guy about the ridiculous camping fee, and we eventually left at 10.40 after a swarm of tsetse flies had almost eaten us. Sufficient to say that EO won't be going back to that place!

We still needed to negotiate the boggy piece of road that would be that much worse after the overnight rain. Well sure enough, we got stuck a couple of times for a total of about half an hour, requiring much digging and use of the mats, but we were getting more efficient at debogging by now and took it in our stride. We reached the tarmac just after midday and headed for Lusaka, lunching soon after crossing the Kafue River. The afternoon was hot with developing cloud. We were hit by the regular mid afternoon thunderstorm at 3.30, but it seemed to clear up and it was a clear and cool evening as we pulled into Andrews Hotel again at six o'clock. I managed another



cold shower in the well hidden shower at the back of the hotel and then helped with the fire which was determined not to go - after all, the wood was rather damp from the previous few days! I sat in the truck writing but Mick turfed us all out at ten - he must have been tired.

There was no intention to dawdle next morning - it was Victoria Falls or bust. Fortunately it was cool and dry for a change and we were away at 7.15 and headed straight out of Lusaka, through the cholera checkpoint and over the Kafue Dam to the south. The total journey to Livingstone township was 473 kilometres and once we had cleared the slightly hilly country around Mazabuka, I was able to accurately track our average speed and at lunchtime, predicted that we would arrive at four o'clock. The road was pretty good, in fact it was in better condition than the one east of Lusaka. The day was fine and warm and we rolled through Livingstone right on four o'clock much to some people's amazement. As we made the bear left at the end of the main street I could immediately see what we had come here for. The spray of the falls was visible 8 kilometres away, rising several hundred metres into the air. I could hardly wait to see them - Mosi-O-Tunya or "The Smoke that Thunders".



By 4.15 we had pulled up in the camping area associated with the Rainbow Lodge - a Kumuka group were also camped there but were not yet back from their day out rafting. We quickly had the cook tent up and I pitched our tent and sorted my gear for the night, and then I was off. It was a 5 minute walk and I could see this great spectacle. There were numerous vantage points on this side and we would also get to fully explore the other side in Zimbabwe over the next couple of days. But for now I quickly walked around the main spots just to take in this "wonder of the world". There was a feeling of "well this is what I came to see, and I'm just as impressed as I knew I would be." Liz and Neal had joined me and we walked out the Knife Edge which is the point of land sticking literally out into the middle of the gorge with the Rainbow Falls just in front of you.



The spray all around was horrendous and we were soon soaked, but that didn't matter - it was warm and we were at the great Victoria Falls!



The statistics are impressive. The great Zambezi River widens to a 1700 metres at the point where it plunges between 70 and 108 metres into the gorge below. There are five distinct falls across that width - from the Zimbabwe side they are the Devils Cataract, Horseshoe Falls, the Main Falls, Rainbow Falls and the Eastern Cataract. The gorge is less than a 100 metres wide and thus the water depth in it varies enormously since a one foot rise in the river above the falls means about 15 feet in the gorge! The quantity of water varies considerably from a mere 20 million litres per minute in the dry season to an amazing 550 million litres per minute at the height of the wet season - which is when we were there! The power is awesome, the spray continuous and the noise deafening. I would also like to see the falls in the dry season since in the wet it impossible to see very much of the falls at any one time, except from the air, due to the spray.

Back at camp there was the usual problem with the fire, with others giving up and leaving it to James and myself to get it going. Neal did dinner - curried vegetables, with minimal help from his cooking partner Jamie. He was getting to be very annoying in his desire to drink beer and do little else other than express racist views picked up from some expats in Kenya with whom he spent some time before the trip began. He had some things to learn about life, and on several occasions I had cause to verbally assist the progress of his education! I think I was becoming intolerant as the trip was wearing on. I remained in the truck writing letters as many of the others disappeared to the bar at the nearby Intercontinental Hotel. The night was fine and dry and I bedded down in our tent before eleven, looking forward to several days of wonderful sightseeing.

It was apparent that the remainder of this trip was going to be fairly relaxed and leisurely. Having covered over 4000 kilometres in just over two weeks we only needed to cover about 2000

kilometres in the remaining almost four weeks. There was an understandable easing up as the mornings got a little later and the camp stops somewhat earlier. In particular, we would be at Victoria Falls for three full days, so next day would be spent entirely doing chores - shopping and a truck cleanout. We arose late and eventually headed into town (Livingstone) after nine o'clock. James and I were cooking that night and after visiting the Post Office we walked to the market which is somewhat out of town to the east. The half hour walk each day was a bit tiring in what had developed into a very hot and humid day. The most notable aspect of the day was the news, announced on newspaper hoardings, that Nelson Mandela had been released the day before. It was relatively exciting to be in Zambia, the exiled base of the A.N.C., just when Mandela was being released and the A.N.C. unbanned in South Africa. We returned via one of the better hotels where I called Australia and arranged for a callback the following day. Matching up times was always a challenge with the eight hour time zone difference. We returned to the truck just before midday and headed back to the campsite.

With lunch quickly out of the way we got stuck into the truck cleanout, with me as quartermaster doing more supervising than actual work! During the proceedings Silvia, the Swiss lady that we had missed in Lusaka, turned up, having caught the train down from Lusaka after her Zambian airlines flight had been delayed by a couple of days! The cleanout was pretty well finished by three, which was fortunate, since the heavens opened and we had yet another of these incredibly sudden and drenching afternoon thunderstorms. The camp was awash with many of us standing in the cook tent in ankle deep water! At least it was warm. This storm went on for over an hour and then most of the others retreated to the bar of the Intercontinental while James and I started to organise dinner - getting the fire to go was a major challenge! James had bought some meat and we did kebabs, which we barbecued on the somewhat limited fire. It was dark by the time we served and it decided to rain some more so everyone sat in the back of the truck while I carried the food from the fire to them. After dinner it fined up and even cooled off a bit, which suited me - I went to bed early after a tiring day.

An early start was called for the next day, principally because about two thirds of the group were going white water rafting on the Zambezi. I decided not to go as I've never been all that enthralled with rafting, and would prefer to spend my time wandering around the falls and making sure of a flight over them. The others left at seven so I did also, wandering out to the main road and catching a ride into town on one of the local modes of transport - the back of a ute! You simply wave down these utes which seem to ply the route between the Zimbabwe border and the town (8 km) and then pile in with the others. I think there were probably about a dozen people in this one and needless to say, I was the only white person. The trip cost an enormous Kw10 - about 25 cents! Once in town I wandered around a few shops, since one of my reasons for going to town was the Livingstone Museum and it didn't open until nine. I sat for about ten minutes in an open air cafe having a coffee and chatting to a local who was interested in where I was from. The Museum is very interesting with lots of history, natural history and geography. I didn't dawdle and had looked at all the exhibits in 45 minutes. It was then over to the North Western Hotel to receive my phone call from Australia, which came through on schedule. I chatted to the guy at reception while I waited and he was fascinated by the fact that I came from Australia and wanted to know what wild and dangerous animals we have there. He could hardly believe that we had no lions or leopards!

I walked around to where the utes depart for the Zim border but discovered a bus about to go so I thought I'd try that for a change. It was the same price and being full of locals, including screaming kids, it was somewhat less comfortable than sitting in the back of a ute. In any case, it was only a fifteen minute ride rather than the fifteen hour one I had endured the last time I had used a bus.

From the camp I began my walking tour of the Falls, starting at Rainbow Lodge where you get a view across the river to the top of the falls with just the dull noise and billowing spray as evidence of the incredible plunge that occurs over the brink. With camera suitably in a plastic bag, I then returned to the Eastern Cataract where I had first seen the falls, and got some shots looking westwards up the mist filled gorge. It was now after eleven so I continued quickly on to the Zimbabwe border. It is a short walk to the Zambian border post and I had cleared them in 5 minutes with just a quick stamp of the passport. From there it is a fifteen minute walk across the famous road and rail bridge that spans the Zambezi Gorge just below the falls. While you are in "no man's land" between the two borders, it is permitted to take photographs. You get an excellent view of the Rainbow Falls and the Boiling Pot directly below, so named because of the vicious eddies that form as the huge volume of water fights its way down the narrow gorge.

The Zimbabwe border was slightly more complex with a form to fill in and even a money declaration, although I was still through in just 10 minutes. It is then a five minute walk to the entrance to the Victoria Falls National Park where I would return later and another five minutes into the town of Victoria Falls. I had hoped to change some money but it was ten past midday and the bank had just closed, but I would be able to change some at the Hotel, since I had not yet figured out whether the black market was a possibility or not. It was by now very hot and I wandered down to the Victoria Falls Hotel, that famous old world institution. It is in fact a beautiful building, set on a superb location overlooking the gorge. It was immediately obvious that I was in another country - things just "seemed" more sophisticated and in particular, the Hotel was obviously neat and tidy and run as nearly well as any top class hotel anywhere in the world.

Having booked a flight for that afternoon and changed money to pay for it, I returned back to the Post Office in the main part of town. Enroute I picked up a drink of coke and was amazed at the price - 32 Zim cents - this was the standard price throughout Zimbabwe and even at the official rate this was just 15 US cents, half that at black market rates. Basically everything in this country was quite cheap, except the "Flight of the Angels" which was Z\$105 or US\$47 for just 15 minutes - but I was confident it would be worth it. From the Post Office, armed with stamps, I wandered around the corner through a large group of curio shops which sell all variety of stuff from postcards (which were good - quite a change from Zambia) to tee-shirts, carvings, jewellery etc. I then grabbed some lunch at the Wimpy Burger place and sat writing a few quick post cards, which were duly dispatched to Australia. It was then back to the Hotel to leave for the flight, at which time I met up with Liz and Silvia who were booked at a similar time. They book groups of five every 15 minutes and run the minibus out to the small private strip every half hour, although it is only a five minute drive.

We were at the strip at 2.45 pm and there was one group of five waiting to go and a total of eight more to fill the remaining two flights of the day. I suggested that Liz and Silvia go with the elderly English couple and I would wait until the next flight, which would be the last of the day. I hoped I might entice the pilot to spend a little more time! Soon enough the twin engined Piper Aztec taxied in and the previous group alighted and the group of five headed off. He only stops for a minute or so, not stopping the engines, as the passengers are exchanged. That flight returned after 16 minutes including a minute to taxi up to the north end of the strip and do a quick check. Then Silvia and Liz set off at about 3.11 pm so I figured they would be back about 3.26. Instead, I heard the approaching aircraft only 5 minutes later and at 3.19 I heard the tyre noise of a heavy landing and then saw the aircraft dive off the end of the strip into the grass directly opposite where I was standing. Everyone jumped out and was perfectly OK. As the pilot, a young Kiwi guy, approached, I asked what happened and he said that soon after takeoff No. 2 engine had sounded bad so he shut it down. He slightly misjudged the approach and overshot, resulting in the need to



use some runoff area, but there was really no problem. Of course as a pilot I was interested in all this and rather kicking myself for not having been there!

The lady running the show there was suddenly terribly concerned and was telling all the passengers with her very distinctive southern African accent that they must sign statements saying that they were OK and of course there were no more flights today! Her reaction was a touch excessive, since it barely rated as an incident let alone an accident (nothing was damaged and no-one was injured). Meanwhile, I'd joined the pilot and some black guys and we tried to get the Aztec back onto the runway but it was just digging into the soft sand - it was obviously only going to move under its own power. Eventually a large white guy who seemed to be the owner appeared and sent us all off and he started it up and got it back to the apron. It was about then that we departed for the hotel being told we were to be on the first flight next morning at nine o'clock.

From the hotel I walked back to the Victoria Falls National Park where it costs a huge Z\$1 to enter and I spent about an hour walking around the network of pathways that allow you to view the falls from almost every conceivable angle. The whole area is like being in a drizzly rainshower and I had my goretex jacket sitting loosely over my head and backpack, and camera in a plastic bag and only the lens exposed briefly to take a shot. At the far end you can get around the Devils Cataract and look right down the gorge but with the spray the visibility was limited to about 200 metres. Along the edge of the gorge it is less than 100 metres across to the Horseshoe and Main Falls, although the vantage point opposite the Main Falls was so thick in spray that it was impossible to see anything at all. At Danger Point, which is the closest point to the Zambian end of the falls and directly opposite Rainbow Falls, a superb 360° rainbow can be seen in the gorge below. It is indeed a dangerous spot with constantly wet and slippery rocks inviting careless people to disappear off the edge! Further to the right and out of the spray it is possible to get a good view of the border bridge, the Boiling Pot and the Zambezi Gorge downstream of the bridge.

Having walked all the pathways I got to the Zimbabwe border post right on five o'clock and was through in ten minutes after waiting in a bit of a queue. It is a very busy border at that time of the day as seemingly hundreds of local people return to Zambia after shopping in Zimbabwe. Many of them seemed to be sitting around waiting for customs to inspect their huge loads of shopping. I wandered across the bridge meeting Sally mid bridge - she was busy chatting up the black Zambian soldier whom she had enticed out from his little shelter. The Zambian border was also very busy but I was through in five minutes. I had met up with Liz and Silvia again and we waited for Silvia who was delayed. In fact all three of the Swiss people were hassled because of their visas which supposedly didn't allow them to leave the country and return, although going into Zimbabwe for the day is generally considered to be "not really leaving."

Back at camp by six and the others had just arrived back from their day rafting. From all reports it was a great day. Some were a bit sunburnt and most had been dunked in the water. They apparently had to travel a fair way down the gorge before starting and then continued downstream for about ten miles. In the dry season the rafting can start right below the falls in the Boiling Pot and they can paddle up under the falls. After a shower in the quite respectable facilities block, I wandered up to the Intercontinental where we were all having dinner that night. We all sat at one huge table in the outdoor area and it was indeed a very pleasant evening. The meal was excellent - fish quennelles, fillet steak and French pastries. It was a clear and balmy night. Bed was at midnight.

The highlight of the next day would be the flight - it was our last day at Victoria Falls and I, as well as many of the others who went rafting, wanted to get a flight. I was away early, intent on

catching the first flight and I would also book for the others. We all agreed to meet for lunch at the Victoria Falls Hotel. The Zambian border post took just six minutes at the early hour of 7.20 and thence to the Zimbabwe border, which took eight minutes! The morning was still quite misty with low cloud about so I was concerned about the visibility, but we headed off from the hotel at 8.40 and I allowed the others to take the first flight of the morning hoping that the cloud would lift just a touch further. In reality it wasn't a problem since the flight is mostly done under 1000 feet!



I chose the co-pilot's seat, since no-one else seemed interested in the aircraft, although this one had had the dual controls removed - it was a different aircraft from the previous day's, although the same type. It must have been pretty old as it had a roof mounted trim handle - I've only ever flown one Piper Cherokee with one of those and they're a real pain. I would guess it dates from pre-1970. We had soon taxied to the far end of the runway and were away. He quickly trimmed into a low cruise at about 140 knots and he executed his standard series of low orbits over the falls. This is two right hand orbits followed by two left hand orbits, with the final one coming in very low at the falls so that you fly through the spray about 100 feet above the rim of the Main Falls. It is not only a superb view but a very exhilarating experience. From there he flies up the seemingly placid but expansive Zambezi River for about 5 miles at about 50 feet above the water - great stuff! He then climbs to about 500 feet and does a left hand orbit over the Victoria Falls National Park which extends upstream on the Zimbabwe side of the river for a long way. The pilot pointed out several elephants which he had spotted on the previous flight. From there it is back to the field with a long straight in approach and what for me seemed a fairly rushed and somewhat bouncy landing. It may have cost US\$47 but for me it was worth every cent of it, although I would prefer to have flown myself!

Back at the hotel Liz and I sat in the outside area and ordered a cup of tea each. We chatted for nearly an hour as I learned of her discontent with aspects of her work in Calgary. As the trip wore on she found the antics of some of the group increasingly tiring and I often agreed with her,

although I seemed to be more tolerant than her. She was keenly into photography and took about the same amount of film in four weeks as I took in 22. Before lunch I took another walk through the National Park which is just 5 minutes walk from the hotel. With the sun in a different spot, I was able to get some better shots from the Devils's Cataract end of the gorge. I returned to the hotel for lunch, just after midday.

Lunch at the Victoria Falls Hotel is a treat not to be missed. At Z\$20 it is a real bargain - smorgasbord and as much as you can eat. The food was excellent - all varieties of salads, rice, pasta, casseroles, ham, chicken, rare beef, crocodile and lots more. Then there were trifles, chocolate mousse, fruit salad and such like. Most of the group was there and the place was really packed. A show of dancing and singing by local natives tops off the atmosphere.



I departed at two o'clock, wandering once more down the direct track towards the falls past the myriad of locals selling their soapstone carvings and other curios. I was headed for a more thorough investigation of the Zambian side of the falls and was quickly through the two borders, four and five minutes respectively. The only hassle is that each day chewed up a whole page of my passport! It was 2.45 as I left the Zambian border post and wandered along Bridge Track for a view from just below the bridge. I then took the long steep descent to the Boiling Pot where you get a clear view under the bridge straight at the Victoria Falls Hotel and just a slight view of the falls to the right. The track and the rocks at the base of the walk are set amidst dense rain forest, continually drenched by the spray of the falls. Jamie and Becky were also walking down there and after the long climb back out we were pretty exhausted, since the weather was continuing very hot and humid, but took one final visit out to the Knife Edge for photos and back to the camp along the Upstream Track. I can confidently say that I have viewed the falls from every possible vantage point, except perhaps from a raft in the gorge, and at the peak of the wet season, no-one was doing that!



The remnants of the afternoon were spent showering and relaxing before wandering up to the Rainbow Lodge to view the sunset across the falls, thus giving two photographs from an identical location but with very different colours. That was at about seven o'clock and after dinner most of us relaxed, read or wrote letters before turning in before ten in preparation for our departure from the campsite, and the country, the next day.

To allow time in town for shopping and some minor work on the truck, we got an early start the next morning. It was clear and cool for a change and fined into a hot and sunny day with cloud developing by lunchtime. We aimed to leave at seven but some people were having trouble getting their laundry from the lodge and we left a little late and reached town at 7.30. I got some photocopying done for Mick and sat writing a letter in the park at the eastern end of Livingstone, returning for our 8.30 departure. Mick didn't arrive back with the truck until after nine, having gotten some welding done. With others having done shopping, we were ready to get away at 9.20 and it took almost exactly an hour to cover the almost 60 km along the good tarmac road that runs along the north side of the Zambezi, westwards towards Angola. At the turnoff there was a police check, a common practice just before borders, and it took 10 minutes while they checked everyone's passport. The actual border post was a hive of activity, being about 10 minutes further down the narrow road which leads to the Zambezi River ferry. It was 10.45 am as we pulled up in the apparent chaos and traffic jam of trucks and people.



The formalities were straightforward enough with Mick collecting the passports and us remaining on board. The only delay was that it was really busy and we were eventually processed and ready to go by 11.30. The next problem was to get across this rather large river and we soon moved forward to reveal the haphazard queue of trucks. There were some really long semi-trailers, mostly empty, going our way and full coming towards us, since this is part of the main freight

route from South Africa through Botswana to Zambia, Angola and Zaire. The ferry could only accommodate one of these long trucks or two or three of our size, so it was going to be a bit of a wait. When the ferry next arrived on our side it took three smaller trucks and perhaps we could be next but there was a long semi to probably go first. The next trip brought back a huge two trailer semi and then the long semi beat us to the ferry and it could not fit any more. By the time the ferry next returned it was 1.20 pm and we'd been waiting nearly two hours, having grabbed some lunch on the truck. But then, would you believe it, the ferry was stopping for lunch!

After about half an hour the ferry man looked like he might be resuming but in the meantime the clouds had grown darker and a huge thunderstorm was heading at us. Sure enough, it hit us and there was lightning all around (big electrical transmission lines also cross the river here and were making good antennae for the lightning) and the rain teemed down in bucketfuls. The wind was ferocious for a short time and I was suddenly pleased to not be on the ferry mid river! The whole scene was a fitting farewell to Zambia where we had been subjected to more rain than at any other time in the entire trip. The storm abated by three o'clock and we boarded the ferry, together with two other smaller trucks. Then the ferry wouldn't move - it was stuck on the bottom! The trucks all had to move forward as far as possible and eventually we were off. The ferry has diesel engines on each side, one side at the front and the other at the back, and a peculiar system of steering seemingly requiring the co-ordination of the two operators at each engine. The crossing took about seven or eight minutes for about 800 metres and then we were driving off into a new country.

## **BOTSWANA - Okavango and Kalahari**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 19.

Distance Travelled: 1851 km.

Botswana will undoubtedly go down as one of my favourite countries, perhaps because of its similarities with much of outback Australia. The country is almost totally flat, but has fascinating game reserves, the famous Okavango Delta and the Kalahari Desert, which is more akin to an Australian desert than to the Sahara. The people are friendly and the infrastructure and facilities for tourism are unusually good by African standards. The races work well together and the economy is among the strongest on the continent.

Population: 0.8 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 3.

Main Exports: Diamonds.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$620.

Currency: Pula. US\$1 = P17.5, no black market.

Languages: English and Setswana.

Independence: 1966 from Britain.

Government: Parliamentary democracy.

Climate: Mostly hot and dry with some rains from December to April (although we saw relatively little).

It was several kilometres from the ferry landing to the Botswanan border post. It was immediately obvious that Botswana was in a different category to most of the countries we had visited. The border post was a clean new building, the officials were all neatly uniformed and very polite, and the whole crossing took a total of 49 minutes, mostly because someone decided to ask if they should put their camera on the customs declaration and then everyone did. I doubt that they were really interested. As we reached the turnoff to Kasane, there was a dip that the truck had to drive through and then each of us had to walk through in our shoes - something about controlling the importation of foot and mouth disease. We reached the small town of Kasane soon after and booked into the camping area that is part of the Chobe River Lodge. We were set up by five o'clock and soon had some early dinner, since we had not really had any lunch. I then grabbed a warm shower - the facilities here and pretty much throughout Botswana were pretty good.

We had pitched our tents overlooking the Chobe River and we sat around watching the sun sink into the west. It was a lovely spot, despite the fact that as the evening wore on the mosquitoes became thicker and thicker. The birdlife across the river was superb and some local fishermen enticed one of the fish eagles perched in a tree across the river to swoop over and pluck a dead fish from the river right nearby. In the outside bar some of us sat and had a few beers, others sat even longer and had numerous beers. It was a pretty civilised place - I could tell I was going to enjoy Botswana, not only because of the friendly people and the relatively sophisticated infrastructure, but also because it was nearing the end of the trip and I was thoroughly relaxed. The stars were shining brightly that night and I recall having some deep discussions about astronomy, while fending off the mosquitoes! I nevertheless was in bed reasonably early while



others returned from their raging at the bar around midnight, still raging, and hence awaking me and the others who had already bedded down.

The trip was taking on an even more relaxed tone now as we had plenty of time to complete the remaining travel. Thus, the early morning rises would be less common, usually only in order to go on a game drive. February 17th was a slow start with shopping to be done in town and the bank to be visited to buy some Botswanan Pula, delightful little bank bills, rather like monopoly money! We walked to the bank at 8.30 and they were efficient and thus I headed off to look at some shops. Kasane is a spread out village and I walked about a kilometre up the road to one shop before eventually returning to the shop near the camping ground. The shops were reasonably well stocked, at least in comparison with Zambia, although there were still certain commodities that were hard to locate. In any case, I was able to restock some of our dwindling supplies. Prices were, however, quite high with the Botswanan currency being amongst the strongest in Africa, arguably stronger than the Rand.

Back at the camping ground at 9.30 and we were entertained by some monkeys and a warthog that had wandered in from the adjacent National Park. It's incredible that every warthog I'd seen through Africa was shy and would scurry off at the first sight of the truck yet this one just sat there, nonchalantly munching on the grass. It was by now hot and clear and we waited an hour for all the others to complete their shopping for drinks and food. Once we departed it was just ten minutes drive to the entrance to Chobe National Park and after twenty minutes Mick had paid the fees and we headed off. The sign indicated 15 km to Serondella, where we were to camp that night and 172 km to Savuti where we would camp the following night.

The northern part of Chobe is mostly scrub country with sand dunes which then give way to grasslands down on the flood plains of the Chobe River. There is a maze of tracks but we headed initially along the main track seeing plenty of gazelle, impala, several elephants and a flock of vultures overhead, indicating that there may have been a kill nearby, but we couldn't locate it if there was. We reached the campsite just after midday and immediately had lunch. It was a pleasant spot set among acacia trees with some rudimentary facilities. By one o'clock we decided to relax for the afternoon as it was very hot and there would be little point in going on a game drive for a couple of hours. As we lazed about, a family of banded mongeese wandered through our campsite. They seemed very tame and were unconcerned about coming within inches of us. The young are particularly cute!

We headed off on our game drive at 2.30 pm, initially heading west along the edge of the river flats then turning south into some very sandy scrub country. There were plenty of gazelle around the flood plains and later we saw some very big elephants in amongst the scrub, although it was impossible to photograph them. As the afternoon wore on we headed back to the flood plains and Mick explored a track that meandered out onto the flood plain along the top of small sand hills. We nearly got stuck several times and eventually he decided to turn around. Then there was a very brief shower of rain that we almost missed, but it did create a beautiful rainbow. Enroute back to camp as dusk was approaching we came across a herd of about 25 elephants and stopped to gaze at them for some time. Closer to camp was a troop of baboons and I wondered whether we would be bothered by them at the camp, although we had not yet set anything up and they would have had no joy with the locked trailer which is all we left behind!

It was almost seven o'clock by the time we reached camp and we proceeded to set up in the dark. The spot lived up to its description in the Shoestring with lots of noises all around - baboons squealing, elephants grunting and so forth. After dinner as we had settled down around the pleasant camp fire we heard the crack of a tree breaking close by and with our torches we could

immediately see a huge elephant munching on a tree just 30 metres from the campsite. The elephant seemed unperturbed by our interest and continued chomping at the tree. What a superb place and a superb night!

Despite a late night we were up bright and early next morning for a game drive, getting away before dawn at 5.50 am. We had left the tents up but had packed away all the food into the truck to avoid attracting baboons. This time we headed east along the edge of the river flats and before the sun rose we saw impalas, a jackal, a wild cat and some giraffes. After sunrise we stopped to watch some hippos in the river then headed back to camp for an eight o'clock breakfast. On approaching camp there were some baboons around, including one sitting cheekily on top of one of our tents! They soon scurried away once we arrived. It would be a reasonably comfortable day's drive down to Savuti so we had a leisurely breakfast and departed just prior to ten o'clock, after we had been visited by a pack of relatively timid warthogs.

For the first hour we negotiated the narrow and sandy road that winds through the national park to its western boundary where it joins the main road from Kasane through to Namibia. Once through the park gate we immediately turned southwards, but still on a reasonable gravel road that leads to the small village of Kachikau. The country is arid with low scrub and cleared areas where the local people run cattle. Water is obviously scarce. After the town we were faced by a somewhat confusing intersection as the road all but ended, but a local confirmed that the narrow sandy track ahead was the correct route to Savuti. The terrain for the next 50 km or so was undulating scrub covered sand dunes, reminiscent of the Little Desert in the north west part of my home state of Victoria. There was no real risk of becoming stuck unless one of the hills was a bit steep, but it was nevertheless quite slow going in the hot dry conditions. It must have been over 30°C, dry and clear.



We lunched on the top of a rise and in the middle of the road at 12.30, although two 4WD Landcruisers came towards us and had to drive around us through the soft sand. It was a quick



lunch, principally because the flies were quite bad and were annoying people no end. You could tell we were in cattle country - flies had rarely been a problem elsewhere. It was almost another four hours of slow going to reach Savuti, initially through the sand dune country then out onto flat sandy terrain with mostly dried up mud flat with some muddy puddles. Even before we reentered the National Park we saw several big elephants beside the road and a large herd of giraffes. Once into the park we passed several waterholes which hosted lots of birdlife and more elephants.

At Savuti Channel (the channel has largely dried up) we stopped at the office but the place was largely deserted and we certainly had the place to ourselves. Mick spent some time driving around the various campsites on the deep sandy tracks before settling on one, needing to checkout which ones had water. There is a huge overhead tank that provides water and I guess it is pumped from an underground bore. The amenities were reasonable and I certainly took the opportunity to have a cold shower before dinner. Sunset wasn't until nearly seven o'clock since we were still on UTC+2 but a long way west. In fact at our furthest point west in Botswana (Tsodillo Hills) we would be at the same longitude as Lisala in Zaire. It was a crystal clear night, completely dry and very reminiscent of Australia, except that during the evening a couple a large hyenas came and tipped over the 44 gallon drum dust bins in search of scraps! It had been a long day and with another early morning game drive planned, I was in bed soon after ten.

The entire next day would be spent in the immediate vicinity with plenty of wildlife and other things to look at. We arose at 5.30 am and were away just after six intent on getting well out onto the Savuti Marsh before dawn. The marsh is a vast area that was at that time pretty well completely dry and forms a huge grassland where many animals graze. A track heads east from the camp location, initially through about 5 km of very sandy scrub country and thence onto the marsh where several choices are possible. Here it heads southwards and eventually we reentered the sandy scrub country well south of the camp and followed a good sand road northwards past several large rocky hills back to camp. The morning drive was true to form - relatively little game - just a few giraffes towards the end. We were back at camp just after eight and the cool clear morning had by then given way to a hot and clear day.





A long leisurely breakfast of pancakes followed, then it was time to laze about or do some laundry. The elephants we had been unable to locate on our two hour drive came to visit us just before midday, fifteen of them wandering within 50 metres of our campsite, apparently unconcerned by our presence. Rather than lunch at the camp we decided to go and visit some rock paintings on one of the rocky hills we had passed and thus, soon after midday, we headed south again. Just near the hills we found a group of sable antelope although they were quite shy and we couldn't get very close. We also found more elephants including a couple that were fighting each other. At the hill we found a bit of shade and had some lunch then wandered off in search of the paintings. The hill was perhaps only 100 feet high but we enjoyed the opportunity to climb and did find the rock paintings, presumably of bushman origin. I wandered right across the top of the hill and back to the truck and then we returned to the campsite by three o'clock.

Mick was keen to continue the search for game and so decided to immediately head off again. About half the group decided to stay behind at camp and relax, being a little despondent at not having found the elusive lions that were meant to be in this area. We initially headed northwards back up the road from Kasane and found plenty of birdlife and several herds of elephants in the waterholes not far from the camp. We continued north to the airstrip but then returned to camp, briefly to give the others a chance to join as as we were headed back out onto the marsh for the last drive of the day. It was 4.30 when we departed again.



Again we meandered through the sandy scrub country and out onto the marsh, but this time took a longer loop around the eastern and southern boundaries of the marsh. We saw many hartebeest, some ostriches and, in the distance, a herd of very big elephants. With some boredom setting in, Mick decided to let anyone who wanted to have a drive of Merv do so, and thus a few of us did so. Several had a go and some were OK, the gear changes being a bit difficult. Nobody seemed to be getting up through the gears or to have gained any real speed! Finally they looked at me - I hadn't driven anything for almost five months and had never driven a truck, although I

had observed Mick's technique and certainly knew where the gears were. So I had a go and it was remarkably easy. I soon had the changing down pretty well mastered with the necessary doubling of the clutch and matching of engine revs. I was working up to a reasonable speed in fourth gear, changing down periodically for some slower corners or the occasional puddle. We scurried through one quite deep boghole without problem. I was having fun!

Just then, Jamie spied those elusive cat's ears protruding from the grass to our left and I quickly pulled up. Sure enough, they were lions. "At last", we thought, although it was now just twenty minutes before sunset and pretty dull, so photographs wouldn't be much good. Mick was sufficiently thrilled that he took over from me and just drove off the road and over to the lions, perhaps 100 metres from the road. They just sat there as we pulled up right next to them. There were seven of them, just lazing about on the grass, including a male with his distinctive mane. They are such majestic animals and it was really satisfying to have found them. As the light faded we were all ecstatic and the almost hour long drive back to camp became a further thrill as Mick threw Merv around the corners and through the dips and bogs. It was quite exhilarating as in the back we had handed around the warm beers and were celebrating our sighting!

It was eight o'clock and quite dark when we arrived at camp and I don't think the others were too appreciative of our lateness, let alone the fact that we had found some lions. Still, they had decided to stay behind! Some other campers had also set up not too far from us. I was helping to cook dinner and we also got the oven going in order to bake some bread. Dinner wasn't finished until quite late and thus I didn't bed down until almost eleven o'clock after another long day. It was another clear night although some thunderstorm activity could be seen in the distance. That didn't concern us since we were all in tents, due to the fact that we were in a game park.

We decided to leave early the next morning so as to be able to reach Maun within the day. It was also planned to take a new route that we had noticed during the previous afternoon's drive. This would take us onto the marsh and then southwards rejoining the main track to Maun near the park boundary. It was already clear and warming up by the time we departed just after seven o'clock. There was quite a bit of game on the marsh in the early morning - giraffes, warthogs, wildebeests, ostriches and zebras. By eight o'clock we were into new territory and the track was looking a little less than perfect with quite a few patches of dampness and the odd boggy patch. The black sandy "cotton soil" is very soft when it is damp and sure enough, at about 8.30, we became stuck in a long boggy stretch. The slimy black mud was a pain to walk about in and I eventually just opted for bare feet, being able to brush off the mud once it dried. It took us 25 minutes to extricate ourselves from that bit of mire.

We plodded on for another twenty minutes but the track was becoming worse with lots of boggy patches and the going was quite slow. Then we were stuck again. This one wasn't quite as long but Mick decided we had better turn back and take the main road since it just looked worse ahead. After fifteen minutes we had extricated the truck again and Mick did a careful U-turn some distance ahead and then plunged back through the boghole, just avoiding getting stuck again. We also managed to get through our previous boghole by attacking it with sufficient speed. It was after ten o'clock when we turned southwards again onto the main track, only about forty minutes drive from our campsite. Still, we should still make Maun if there were no further hold ups.





The main track south was a bit better, although it showed signs of the recent rains. There were many quite deep puddles and boggy patches, but generally the track was more solid and we didn't look like getting stuck. It wound in and out of the scrub in places and thus the going was quite slow indeed. We passed the other track coming in from our left after an hour and a half and soon after left the National Park. The sign there indicated it was 133 km to Maun. Just a few kilometres down the road we stopped for lunch, it being midday, and a very hot day it was too. We headed off again at 12.45 and soon came across the biggest herd of zebra that I have ever seen. Whilst we were not in the National Park, there were several hundred zebra spread over a distance of about 500 metres and all around us. A little further on were some giraffes.

It was 1.30 when we landed in a big long bog. The track seemed to be crossing a marshy area and there was either soft muddy cotton soil or surface water all around. There really was no way around it, but in any case, the truck was well entrenched. To complete the scene, it was extremely hot, perhaps 35°C, and this time I had to wear thongs since the ground was too hot to walk on. There was no shade with just low scrub and grassland all around us. It took us a full hour of digging, moving a bit, digging more and so on until we eventually decided we would have to detach the trailer. I had surveyed a solid area to the right of the track where, if we could extricate the truck, we could reverse in close enough to tow the trailer through with the hawser. Without the trailer, Merv came out of the long boggy stretch with relative ease and we then proceeded to carefully reverse him back as close to the trailer as possible. The trailer simply falls forward when detached, unless the dolly wheel is used, but in this case the plan was to attach the hawser and have four or so people on the back of the trailer to try to counter balance it. Within fifteen minutes we had the trailer out also and spent a further fifteen minutes reattaching the trailer,



accounting for all the shovels and mats, and then rehydrating ourselves with lots of drinking water. The bog had delayed us by an hour and a half.



I was quite enjoying this day of challenges although it started to wear thin when we encountered another bog just twenty minutes later. Mick stopped before this one and we surveyed it on foot. It was probably worse than the previous one and quite long. We spent fifteen minutes locating and clearing a solid route off the track to the left, having to chop down the odd shrub to make a pathway, but it was certainly preferable to at least another hour of digging and mud matting. That was the last really bad bog we saw and by four o'clock we had entered some sand hill country covered by thick scrub. This was completely dry but the sand was very deep in places and we became stuck several times for five minutes at a time. Each time we all jumped out, dug away the sand in front of the wheels with our hands, and put the sand mats in place. The scrub prevented us from running along side, as we had done in the Sahara, but in most cases we got going again quite quickly. Only on one occasion did we have to walk a long way carry mats after Mick decided he had better not stop until the top of the rise, several hundred metres ahead.



It was 5.30 pm when we emerged from this sandy area and reached the first signs of civilisation, a small native village. From here the track looked better and more trafficked, although still quite sandy. It was clear that we could not make Maun before dark so just after six Mick drove into a clearing in the relatively thick scrub and we set up camp for the night. We were all pretty stuffed after a long and very hot day with a lot of physical effort. Alas, I was cooking, and opened up a big can of hamburgers. It was a clear and mild night and it was good to relax by the fire. I must have been feeling energetic as I cooked up a batch of muffins ready for breakfast. It was after eleven when I bedded down in the cook tent. We were really looking forward to a shower in Maun!

For some reason I awoke very early next morning, and unable to get back to sleep, I arose just before five o'clock and started to get the fire restoked and the muffins reheating ready for others to arise in half an hour or so. It was a clear morning, subsequently a hot day, and we were away on time at seven o'clock looking forward to reaching Maun. The road was reasonable but with some long sandy stretches. As we passed through a Foot and Mouth Disease checkpoint after about half an hour, the sign indicated 59 km to Maun, and we eventually pulled into town just after 9.30, with shopping to do. The small supermarket of this quite pleasant tourist town was well stocked although fairly expensive. I also collected mail from the post office, which was efficiently run. We departed town at eleven, calling briefly at the airport to check on the prices for flights over the Okavango, and thence continued back out the road on which we had entered, taking the turnoff to Island Safari Lodge which would be our base for the next week or so.

The lodge is a relaxing place, set among many trees and adjacent to a lagoon that still had water in it despite it being the dry season so far as the delta is concerned. There are many individual bungalow style units, a swimming pool, bar, restaurant and a camping area with good amenities. The place is well run, as was everything we saw in Botswana. Another overland truck was there,



from Exodus I think, and they were out on the delta for a couple of nights as we would be soon. After setting up I had soon prepared lunch and was sorting out my own laundry as well as having that long awaited shower. It was then a lazy and hot afternoon as most of us sat around the pool, drinking cans of coke (the first time we'd seen those!) and writing postcards. Mick had also arranged that some of us could do a flight later in the afternoon, the remainder the next day.



I was looking forward to the flight and we departed with the pilot and his wife in their vehicle at 5.30, and headed into the airport. Maun has a reasonable airport with a long tarmac strip and a control tower. Quite a few commuter airlines operate into there. Our pilot was an Australian, and we headed to the aircraft, a Piper Saratoga, which is an aircraft with which I am quite familiar since my flying group in Sydney has one which I occasionally pilot. It's a single engined, six seater with the four passenger seats facing each other and accessible via a door on the left. It has a cruising speed of about 155 Knots. We had soon done checks and were off just before six, returning almost exactly an hour later.

The flight not only gave a good impression of the expanse of the Okavango Delta but was also very exhilarating for me, sitting up front in the co-pilot's seat. Most of the flight was conducted at very low levels, ie. under 100 feet above the ground, and at 150 knots, that's a real fun experience as we pulled up periodically to ensure clearance of trees. We saw plenty of animals out on the mostly dry flood plains, including herds of elephants, ostriches, zebras and lechwe, the relatively rare species of antelope found only in this area. We covered an area within 70 kilometres to the north of Maun, mostly in the Moremi Wildlife Reserve. This was in contrast to where we would go a couple of days later when we travelled by boat about 50 km north west of Maun. Our return was at a slightly higher altitude, with a lovely view of the sunset and then a low level pass over the Island Safari Lodge before climbing again to approach Maun airport. The pilot had, very early in the flight, noted that the Air Speed Indicator was not functioning properly and thus his approach was somewhat faster than ideal. There's plenty of runway and thus he just held it off until it



wanted to land. Piper's really are a delightful aircraft to fly, myself having learned exclusively on the PA28 Cherokees, the little brother of the PA32 Saratoga. Once we alighted we could immediately see that the pitot tube cover had not been removed (oops!), thus explaining the failing ASI.

We were soon back at camp and dinner was being made - chops! The meat we obtained throughout Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe was always superb. After all, they are all cattle producing countries. By ten o'clock we headed across to the bar - it was a beautiful clear and mild night. I met up with a local expatriate and his wife. They were school teachers and were friendly and very interesting to talk with. Somehow the night wore on and two bottles of South African red wine (very good, too) managed to disappear. It was somewhat after midnight when I went to bed and I found the wine next morning when I awoke at a very late eight o'clock, in the form of a splitting headache and hangover. Fortunately the day was to be spent relaxing since we were not leaving for the delta until the following day.

Some others went into town on the truck at about nine, returning at midday, but I just lazed about on my bed under the shade of some trees. I started to recover by lunchtime. The afternoon was spent beside the pool with the occasional dip to cool off, as it was very hot and sunny. The others left for their two flights at about 4.30 with one flight scheduled for five and another for six o'clock. I thus expected the first flyover at just before six and I waited patiently outside the bar facing the direction from which the aircraft would approach., drinking coke and chatting to some others as the afternoon cooled off. The Saratoga flew over, low and fast, but not until after 6.30 so it seemed there had been some problem with the flights. It turned out the aircraft had been back late from elsewhere and thus they could only fit one flight in that day. The remaining five would get their chance a few days later.

The fliers returned after seven and dinner was then quite late, but again some lovely local meat in the form of kebabs, together with ratatouille and rice, followed by fruit salad. I was still feeling pretty weary after the previous night and was definitely not going near the bar, and was in bed before ten. Next morning we arose before seven and after breakfast, prepared for our departure to the delta. We had to take everything with us since basically all the lodge provides is the transport and the guides who virtually live out at the camp where we would spend two nights. Thus, tents, food, cooking gear, beds and our sleeping bags, mozzie nets and clothes all needed to be carted along. Several four wheel drives arrived at nine o'clock to take us and all our gear to the boats about ten kilometres away. When the water levels are higher the boats can depart from the lodge but at that time they needed to take us to a spot where the water is deeper. The twenty minute drive was some narrow sandy and very bumpy tracks through scrub country.

At the boats it took about twenty minutes to organise things, everything needing to be packed into the front of the three boats that would carry us about 40 kilometres into the heart of the Okavango Delta. These "speed" boats with their outboard motors were great fun as we sped through the narrow channels amongst reeds and water lilies. It was as I imagine the Everglades of Florida to be. Much of the time it was like driving in a narrow and twisting tunnel with the boat pitching from side to side as the black driver negotiated the turns. All the while the birdlife was plentiful and as we would come around each corner egrets, herons, pelicans, storks, ducks and many other birds would be disturbed and would fly off. In a few spots we could see other wildlife on the plains including lechwe and waterbuck. Periodically we would pause while the driver lifted the prop out of the water to clear the weed that would entangle itself. Most of the time the water is no more than two to three feet deep. Just after eleven we reached the campsite on one of the numerous islands that exist in the delta. We almost scored a head on with the boat ahead of us that was returning from the camp having dropped the first group off.



The campsite is set amongst large trees and was pleasant enough even in the hot part of the day. Here we would set up camp and live for almost two days. It would have to be one of the most relaxing places on earth, with plenty of time to just sit and think, write or take in the wonderful surrounds. We chatted to some other campers who were in the process of departing and then we had the place to ourselves, except for the guides who lived in their own camp about 100 metres away. After a leisurely lunch we lazed about until mid afternoon.

The Okavango Delta is the world's largest inland delta. The Okavango River flows for a thousand kilometres from Angola and in Botswana it splits into a huge delta of 15,000 square kilometres. The peak of the incoming flow is in June following the wet season in Angola. Within a month the flood waters push through the reedbeds and channels of the delta, covering flood plains and creating tiny islands. The water then largely disappears into the sands of the Kalahari Desert or briefly fills some of the salt pans south and east of Maun. Much of the delta remains permanently flooded with navigable channels and huge areas of papyrus reeds. In these channels and lagoons, hippos, elephants and buffalo revel while on the open plains and in areas of scrub and forest, antelope, zebra and giraffe wander. All around, birdlife is prolific. Not only is the delta an incredible haven for wildlife but it also has a certain peacefulness and charm. Relatively few tourists get to see it, although there are several semi-permanent lodges built on islands in the delta, as well as many campsites, some with facilities and others, like ours, with no facilities at all.

At three o'clock we decided it was time to go for a canoe (makoro) ride and perhaps a swim. We located some guides and they poled us in about five canoes further up the channel on which we had arrived. Myself, Becky and Liz were in a canoe with a black guy who seemed to be the head guide. He was a wiry man, dressed in torn shorts, a shirt with a rip right down the back, an old cap and worn out desert boots that seemed several sizes too large for him. He spoke virtually no



English but would point at things and say the name only - lechwe, giraffe, warthog, waterbuck. They seemed to be the only words of English he knew. We were expecting to go for a swim as it was still very hot, and certainly I was only wearing my thongs.

Thus, we were surprised when he peeled off from the rest of the group and he lead us ashore and began walking off into the scrub. We must have walked for about half an hour, through grasslands, patches of scrub and forest, and past beautiful palms. We saw the odd antelope but he was intent on showing us a hippo, and eventually we reached a small waterhole surrounded by an area of very spiky grass that was just about going through my thongs. Becky was also going crazy at the guy saying we wanted to swim, not walk! Anyway, there was the hippo, barely visible as it grazed in the waterhole, and after the guide had rolled and smoked a cigarette, we walked back to our canoe. Our guide then poled to an area where the water was slightly deeper, perhaps four feet, where we could have a dip for a few minutes before returning to the camp, just after five, still hot, foot sore and weary. By the way, the Okavango is reportedly free of Bilharzia and thus swimming is supposedly safe. Certainly the water appears to be beautifully clear and clean.

The others weren't back but returned soon after, reporting being taken to a large pool where they could swim. Dinner was served as the sun set at seven o'clock and the subsequent washing up in the dark was difficult. We rely on the fluorescent lights of the truck and without them we were ill prepared for doing anything at night. After dinner people variously sat around the fire or retired to bed. I wandered down to one of the boats and sat there for a while, since that was the only place where you could get a view of the crystal clear sky and the southern stars with which I am so familiar. Bed was fairly early since we would be away before dawn next morning for a long game walk.



When we arose at about 5.30 am it was clear and cool. We departed in the canoes just after six, brunch being planned for when we returned. Poling through the dawn light and the incredible



stillness of the delta was a superb experience with just the first rays of sunlight giving an eerie atmosphere. We poled for nearly an hour through a myriad of channels that our guides knew well. We then began walking, although it was already getting quite warm and would be very hot by the time we returned to the canoes over three hours later. The terrain is very much like parts of outback Australia - grasslands, areas of scrub and small clumps of larger trees. There is the odd termite mound and some beautiful palms. We walked seemingly for ages and I guess we covered about five kilometres each way as there are no hills and the going is thus fairly easy. We saw quite a lot of game really - lechwe, sassaby, giraffes and wildebeest, but in all cases it was difficult to get close. The animals are incredibly adept at sensing your presence, whether it be by smell or by their keen eyesight, so whenever we got within a few hundred metres they would gradually wander a bit further away. It really gave me some appreciation of the skill of a native hunter that can stalk and capture any of these animals.



It was nearly 11.30 when we reached the camp again, after another hour of pleasant poling. Some in the group were less than happy with the long walk, feeling it was a waste of time as we saw relatively little game, but for me it was great to be out walking in this wonderful country. During the worst of the heat of the day most of us just sat and read or wrote. Elaine provided some entertainment of the gruesome kind when she extracted a putse fly larvae that had burrowed into her skin. The washing back in Malawi was suspected, but in any case, it brought home to many of the group just how careful you need be with some of the hazards of Africa.

After three we once again headed off in the canoes and this time I made sure I was with the group that was going swimming. A few decided to just go looking for birdlife and they returned almost an hour later than us. The spot where we could swim was about half an hour's pole away and was a large expanse of water, some too deep to stand up. Some of us just sat in the beautiful cool water while others were playing various games including doing somersaults into the water. Some of the cooks were in the group that returned late and thus dinner was not ready before sunset,

which made it more difficult as darkness set in. We eventually ate at about eight o'clock and I was in bed by nine, looking forward to another walk first thing next morning. Many were not planning to go, so a night of drinking and debating set in. The hot topics of South Africa and Apartheid generated some noisy debating well into the night.

Only Neal, Sylvia, Liz, James and myself went for the walk next morning. We departed in a couple of canoes before dawn and watched a beautiful sunrise with a clump of palms silhouetted against it. We walked from the same spot that Liz, Becky and myself had gone from on the first day, but went further, and returned to the canoes almost three hours later. We had probably walked about 5 kilometres each way. We saw sassaby, kudu, warthogs, giraffes, reedbuck and a colony of baboons in one of the clumps of scrub. When we returned to camp at 9.30, many of the others were still only just waking up and thus we had breakfast with them, then proceeded to pack everything up ready for our departure. Once packed we relaxed, read or slept before eventually loading the power boats and setting off at one o'clock.

The trip back was just as exhilarating with lots of birdlife to watch. It's difficult to get photographs from a fast moving boat but I carefully chose a few and by using the continuous automatic focus I got some reasonable shots. We had to stop several times to clear the weed from the prop but eventually landed after an hour and a half. The boat behind us was delayed even more with engine problems and arrived fifteen minutes later. The 4WDs were soon loaded and we set out on the bumpy and hot half hour drive back to the camp where the Danish truck of Kurt's, with Noel, Jenny and Richard aboard, had arrived during our absence. After setting up and showering I wandered over to the bar to share a drink with my friends from the London to Dar trip. We would be eating in the restaurant that night so we just kind of lingered on in the bar going from afternoon drinks, to pre-dinner drinks, to dinner wine. It was a pleasant night, a good meal, and some good wines - Nederburg Paarl Riesling and a Cabernet Sauvignon. I was being careful not to drink too much since we would be heading off the next day and I didn't want another hangover. It was another beautiful clear and mild night and bed was not until well after midnight after I had returned to the fire to restoke it and get some water boiling for coffee and tea.

People were understandably slow when we arose a bit before seven next morning. We would have to spend a fair bit of time in town shopping and thus we would only get about half way to Tsodillo Hills that day, so there was no point in rushing. We were in town at nine o'clock with some shopping and others like me checking the post office and assisting to pack the food and drinks under the truck seats. We were ready to depart at 10.40 but the truck wouldn't start. It seemed the oven, which sits quite close to the battery, had been put on upside down and had shorted against the battery. Mick wasn't sure what damage this may have done to the electrical system or the battery but once corrected, we push started the truck. That probably sounds pretty awesome, but in fact the diesel will start very easily with just the slightest kick from the wheels. In fact you can push start it by just rocking the truck back and forth a couple of feet and dropping the clutch at just the right moment which I did when Mick found it necessary to do some pushing.

We headed out of town just after eleven and were soon onto the gravel road that runs south west from Maun deep into the Kalahari Desert. We stopped for lunch on the side of the wide and dusty gravel road just after midday and with no shade whatsoever it was bloody hot. Mick was now trying to diagnose the electrical problem that had become apparent - the charge light was on but had the alternator died or was the battery damaged? People had some difficulty gathering enough energy to push start Merv again after lunch so I sat in the cab while Mick pushed. The gravel turned to sand as we left the Ghanzi road and somewhat later, 97 km from Maun, we turned north where there is a long stretch of perhaps 100 km of tarmac. We were still on the tarmac when Mick stopped, just after four, being conscious of the electrical problems. We might

have to get the cooking done before it became dark, and in any case, Mick wanted a chance to at least change the alternator in order to eliminate that as the source of the problem.



The day had been hot and there was a bit of thunderstorm activity about resulting in a very brief shower of rain that barely settled the dust. Dinner was prepared and eaten before sunset. It was a clear night and it was good to be sleeping out in "the desert" again. Sure enough, the battery was dead and there was no light from the truck, only our torches or the fire. Still, we sat around the fire chatting until almost ten o'clock. There were even a few mozzies about but a lot more flies - we were in cattle country.

It was a bit dewy next morning and we arose late - 6.30, expecting it to be an easy day's journey up to Tsodillo Hills. We left before eight and soon the tarmac ended and the road was mostly wide sand through to the small town of Gomare and beyond. We reached the turnoff to Tsodillo Hills just after ten - it was a narrow sandy track and Mick's notes, which were from Roscoe, indicated that the sand became much worse after a water tank about 20 km from the main road. We stopped for about 15 minutes along here to collect wood and eventually reached the water tank at 11.25. The sand was indeed deep and within minutes, Mick stopped to let the tyres down almost to half. They usually run at 110 PSI but he let them down to 60 PSI, with several of us helping by holding in the valves. Mick was already concerned about the temperature of the truck - the engine seemed to be overly hot, almost boiling, and with the mid thirties heat and hard going in the sand, Merv may boil and seize. Without a battery we would have trouble getting it going again.





The going was slow but we at least made progress for the next ten minutes before we got stuck in the sand. The track was very narrow, with plenty of small prickly acacia shrubs right next to the track, so it was hard to get the mats under the wheels. The heat didn't help matters. We matted for ten minutes, which is about three lots of digging and fitting mats before we got out of that short stretch of deep sand. Ten minutes later (probably about 2 km at the slow speed) we entered another long stretch of deep sand which had us digging and matting for fifteen minutes. At the end of that we seemed to rise ever so slightly onto a harder piece of track so we stopped for lunch figuring we could restart the truck from there. We got going again just after one o'clock in searing heat.

With only a couple of further kilometres covered, we got stuck again. This stretch was the worst we would see - perhaps 2 km of continuous digging, matting and pushing. People were starting to get exhausted and I stopped several times to get a drink of water. Jamie had flaked out in the back of the truck from heat exhaustion and others looked like they would do likewise soon. It was the hardest day of the trip in some ways, yet I was quite enjoying it. As people started to run out of steam, Mick asked me to drive a bit while he pushed and egged people on. It is hard work driving in the sand, as you have to work the steering back and forth to try and cut a path through the sand, although it's incredible what a difference it makes. One of the biggest hassles in that the trailer wheels are a different track to the truck and thus the trailer really is like an anchor. When Roscoe had come to Tsodillo Hills the group was smaller and they had left the trailer in Maun. It was a full hour before I encountered some slightly harder sand, although we were still crawling along in low gear, engine screaming and ever so hot. I was able to continue for several hundred metres without getting stuck and to stop in a spot where we were not stuck. The others, exhausted and hot, trudged along behind carrying the hot sand mats.

Mick took over the driving again and we managed a couple more kilometres before being stuck again, it now being 2.30 pm. Then it was more of the same - another hour of hot, exhausting matting, with Mick and I sharing the driving as we tried to make progress through the horrid hot grey sand. If people had not been exhausted before, they certainly were now. The track then improved slightly and we managed a little speed, which was not only good because we were making progress, but it also generated some breeze which cooled us down. We could even get our first glimpse of our target, the Tsodillo Hills, perhaps 15 km away, although we were seriously doubting our sense in wanting to go there. Then Mick stopped with a rattle up front. Some thought we might be bogged again but the track was reasonable. Mick thought it might be a fanbelt so we would have to stop and switch off anyway. He quickly ascertained it was the water pump so we decided we had to camp, right there. We were lucky to not have broken down in deep sand or we may have had a real hassle getting Merv started again.



It was four o'clock and still very hot, although starting to cool down slightly. We were all exhausted but James and I were scheduled to cook and received good help from Robin and Michelle. We had plenty of time but still wanted to complete everything before darkness so I soon had the beef chow mien cooking - dehydrated mince with cooked cabbage. Some of the girls were making some highly potent drink for which we all had to contribute from the bar funds. Two cups of the punch and you were pretty happy. The bees also liked it and there were quite a lot of them about trying to get into everything and anything sweet. The insect onslaught was added to by someone finding some ticks in the long grass so we were all once again checking ourselves carefully for unwanted fellow travellers.





There was little choice for a spot to sleep - either in the long grass or on the track - I opted for the latter. There was no need for a mozzie net in this dry country. After dinner and cleaning up, Dave and I helped Mick with the truck, holding torches and parts as he tried to get Merv back together. The array of plumbing is quite messy, especially in the dark, when it is easy to get a radiator hose up the wrong way! The girls had baked some carrot cake and once we had finished the truck at about ten we settled down to a few beers and some cake. It was the end of a tiring day yet a very satisfying one. The group was in good spirits, pleased to be meeting the challenge of reaching this out of the way place. We chatted around the fire for a while and it was nearly midnight when we bedded down.

I arose after six to a cool and slightly dewy morning. We weren't in a big hurry, wanting just to complete the remaining ten kilometres or so to the hills before it heated up too much. We got away at 8.15 and despite some more deep sand we didn't get stuck and thus reached the village near the hills before nine. I swear the early morning dew helps to make the sand more tractable! Certainly damp sand is always better than completely dry sand. At the village Mick spent some time inquiring as to the layout of the place. We were still a kilometre from the hills at a village of natives who run cattle - not Bushmen. They directed us to a well about 500 metres away where we could replenish our severely depleted water supplies. There was a complicated system to get the water out and in the end we used our own bucket and rope. Some local women and children were watching on and also wanted water, which we helped them with. A donkey standing about also got in on the act and was duly given some water. It was already very hot and very dusty and arid with just low scrub and the odd larger tree - very much like inland Australia.

I walked for a bit towards the hills to see if the track continued or whether we needed to retrace our steps to the village. I found the airstrip and the track sort of continued but very indistinctly. A native was moving a herd of cattle through the scrub and dung beetles were flying about or crawling on the ground, not to mention the constant annoyance of flies.



We departed after ten and went straight to the Bushmen camp, right next to the first of the hills. The camp was squalid with Bushmen people sitting about under the shade of a tree. They were immediately recognisable as being Bushmen - unlike the Negroid natives who have very black skin, the Bushmen have a more yellow skin and in fact are believed to be of Espanic origins. They are small, wiry people, as anyone who has seen "The Gods Must be Crazy" would know. They didn't speak much and certainly no English, although when they did you would hear those clicking sounds that makes their language distinctive. I believe some scenes of "The Gods Must be Crazy" were filmed at Tsodillo Hills.

The apparent chief of the tribe immediately introduced himself to Mick, shook hands and brought out his visitors book which Mick had to sign. The last visitors had been a Guerba group about a month earlier. The little guy, scantily dressed, smoking a cigarette and carrying his little bow and arrow, spoke no English, but he seemed to understand the arrangement that he show us around the nearby rock paintings. He happily sat up front with Mick as some of us pushed the truck back and forth in the sand until it started. It was a short 5 minute drive up the track into a pass between the two rocky hills. We stopped in a pleasant shady spot at the narrowest point between the hills and right next to a cave on one side. Here a sign announced the Tsodillo Hills as a National Historic Site. The track continues on to the north rejoining the main road at Shakawe on the Namibian border.



It was almost eleven and quite hot as we set out with the Bushman to walk to see a variety of rock paintings. It was mostly amongst scrub and trees, which protected us from the sun. The walk wasn't far and over a period of about an hour we were taken to three or four lots of paintings as well as having an opportunity to photograph the Bushman as he showed off his bow and arrows. There are supposedly in excess of 2000 rock paintings in the area dating from 200 to 1000 years old. They are a fascinating and mystical people, not only because of their appearance but also their incredibly simple way of life. Back at the truck we lunched for about 45 minutes as the

Bushman happily sat around watching us while some of us tried to have a meaningful conversation with him.

From there it was a short drive back to the Bushmen camp where for 1 Pula each (about US 60 cents) we had complete freedom to walk about their camp, photographing anyone or anything. The camp was roughly fenced although most of the twenty or so Bushmen people were sitting out the front under the shade of a large tree. One woman, who didn't look 100 percent Bushmen, was trying to sell a variety of artifacts - jewellery, bow and arrow sets and such like. I've never been a great collector of such things although some members of the group were certainly partaking. The group out front seemed to be mostly women, some with small children being breast fed. The small huts were not dissimilar in style to those I had seen of the Pygmies in Zaire - small round rough constructions covered with leaves and grass. Inside were small cooking utensils, pots, and small squat beds.

We returned to the spot where we had had lunch and set up camp there, deciding to stay the night among these pleasant hills and then attack the sand first thing next morning. It was about two o'clock and very hot so most of us just set up our camp beds and laid down for an hour or so. At 3.30, I decided to climb the nearby hill to the south known as the Male Hill. The complex to the north is the Female Hill. They are all about 800 feet high and very reminiscent of areas of the Flinders Ranges or Kakadu National Park in Australia. Raymond and Liz joined me on the climb, which took over an hour. The last part involved considerable rock clambering and chimneying up small crevasses and Liz decided not to risk the last part. From on top, Raymond and I could see all around - it is incredibly flat and featureless in all directions with these hills abruptly protruding from the plain. The descent was even more treacherous and at one stage I ended up stranding myself on a ledge and having to jump a metre or more across a crevasse. Then we cut through the scrub back towards camp and ended up in amongst a dense area of prickly acacia bushes. It was 5.30 when we reached camp and dinner was soon served.

At 6.30, having just finished dinner, I climbed the nearest part of the Female Hill to get a view of the sunset. It too was a treacherous climb, especially considering I would have to retrace my steps in the twilight on the shaded side of the hill. Jamie also climbed up to join me. From our vantage point we could look almost straight down on the campsite with its fire going and also to the west where the brilliant orange sun sank into the hazy horizon just on seven. While waiting for the sunset we saw a vehicle go by on the track - it was a small 4WD, and once we descended we saw that a few guys in a Landrover had set up camp a little way from us. At least one of them was Australian and we briefly chatted about where we'd been and where we were going. The frustrating part was that the relatively narrow track Landrover would have nicely destroyed our tracks through the sand so it would be that much more difficult to get back out again.

I sat with the others by the fire for a while and Robin and Michelle had baked a cake, which we quickly ate. The night was obviously going to wear on but I was just too tired and ended up bedding down about 50 metres away before nine. Many of the others partied on until midnight and were heavily into songs of all varieties, including Rugby songs. It was little wonder that I was first to wake at five the next morning, although it was still dark. I laid there until 5.30 and then started to wander about, packing my stuff and seeing if anyone else was awake. The campsite was a bit of a mess, with empty cans all around and sleeping bodies in all variety of positions. No-one had pitched a tent - not even the cook tent. Dave, as a trailer packer, was usually first to wake and often had fun waking others singing "Good Morning - Good Morning - the World is Bright and New - Good Morning, Good Morning to You" at the top of his voice but this time he was sound asleep. I couldn't resist and wandered to his bed, shone my torch in his face, and sang it too him. He was

not impressed! But how better to be awoken on a new day, and a new month - it was the first of March.

It was important to get away early and get through the sand before the day became too hot and indeed we managed to depart just after seven despite the sore heads. It was clear and mild as we headed into the sand, although the first few stops were for poor Robin who was feeling very ill so sat up front with Mick where she could ask him to stop if and when required. The return journey of the 30 or so kilometres to the well where the road improved took almost three hours. We matted about half a dozen times with the worst stretch involving continual digging and matting for 30 minutes. At one stage one of the sand mats which were hanging loosely on the side of the truck became caught on a passing tree and fell off so that was another short delay while we ran back and picked it up. Certainly the journey was an effort, but nothing like two days earlier, mainly because the temperature was much lower and we were much fresher. We stopped at the watertank and straightened the mats and attached them properly and from there on it was plain sailing.

We passed through Gomare at midday and then stopped for lunch soon after. Here Mick reinflated the tyres which is easy enough from the truck's compressed air but does take quite a while. Robin was feeling a bit better but had the appearance of dehydration and I fixed her a drink with gastrolyte. Soon after lunch we reached the long tarmac stretch and made good time for the next two hours, then back onto the gravel all the way to Maun where we arrived just after five. We didn't stop but pressed on to Island Safari Lodge and by six o'clock we had taken some group photographs and had set up tents since there were threatening thunderstorms about, although it didn't rain. After showers and dinner we hit the bar and I shared another nice bottle of South African wine with a few others. The night was sociable enough although we were all pretty tired and most went to bed by eleven. We had decided to stay over an extra day and relax after the tiring Tsodillo Hills excursion, since Mick wanted to get Merv's electrical problems sorted out. Besides, we had about five days to reach Francistown which would still allow us a full day to explore the Nxai Pan National Park.

It was a clear and warm day again with the main item on the agenda being the solution of Merv's electrical problems. After arising soon after seven and doing some laundry, a few of us went into town with Mick at nine o'clock. He had confirmed that the problem was the battery after attaching the battery from Kurt's truck. Kurt has more serious problems with his Mercedes truck - the engine was in pieces and he was going no further. Noel, Jenny and Richard were planning to fly to Victoria Falls and thence to Harare where we would meet them again. Kurt was leaving the truck in safe keeping at Island Safari Lodge and planned to return home to Denmark to get parts before returning to rebuild the truck and sell it.

In town we first went to the garage where Mick purchased a new battery and I assisted him in fitting it. That certainly fixed the problem. Then I tried to sort out if I could make a phone call, as well as getting some photocopying done for Mick. These were at the same place, Maun Office Services, which has stationary, photocopying, phone calls, faxes etc. There wasn't enough time to make the phone call then so I got the details for the next morning, since it would be my mother's birthday in Australia. We almost left town at 10.40 but stopped at a curio shop near the airport while a few went in search of souvenirs. They were taking quite a while so in the end they said they'd stay in town and we headed back to camp. Mick had to return an hour later, having promised to give Noel, Jenny and Richard a lift to the airport. After lunch the hot afternoon was spent lazing beside the pool, until a bit later when it threatened to rain, although we only got a few spots. Dinner was lovely steak and then we headed to the bar by eight o'clock for a fun night.



I again shared a couple of bottles of quite good South African wine. There were two other overland groups there, a Guerba and an Exodus as I recall. The night became rowdy and I could see we were in for some fun. The bar area has a high roof supported by a central pole - about six inches in diameter and quite smooth wood. It was soon agreed that we would have a pole climbing contest. I guess it would have been twenty feet or so to the top. Overall, I think we lost although both Mick and Jamie made it to the top. I could only manage about four feet short of the top and just didn't have enough grip and strength to get there. Mick went right to the top and then from there, led us in a chorus of Rugby songs. It was about midnight when things got a bit out of hand and people started flinging beer at each other so I departed the scene to go and set up some coffee back at the fire. I returned to the bar to tell the others that coffee was on and found Mick being harassed by the female driver from the Exodus truck - she was really wild about something and was trying to kick and punch him. I don't recall what her problem was - too much beer I think. The others returned to camp by one o'clock, some showing signs of having been pushed into the pool. Steve and Becky were still in the pool! We had coffee and some more frivolity before getting to bed just before 2 am! It had been a good fun night!

With only about 150 km to travel to Nxai Pan N.P. the next day, we arose quite late and eventually departed just after nine o'clock on a partly overcast and mild morning. We would be in town for almost two hours as others did shopping. I checked the Post Office and then headed to Maun Office Services to place a call to Australia - it was March 3rd, my mother's birthday, but alas, she was not home and I didn't get another chance to phone until Bulawayo. It was warm and quite humid as we headed out of town just after eleven onto the fast, wide, dusty gravel road that heads 300 km east from Maun to the main tarmac north-south road through Botswana. (I used this road again six years later and it was by then all tarmac). We lunched soon after midday and it had now cleared into a typically hot day.

We reached the turnoff to Nxai Pan, 136 km from Maun, at 2.45 pm after a stop for firewood enroute. Here we turned northwards onto a narrow and sandy track. The going was quite slow through the deep sand together with several stops to allow oncoming vehicles to pass without us getting stuck. The terrain is largely flat and featureless, with patches of salt pan. The afternoon clouds were building up and by four o'clock it became quite dark and then a heavy thunderstorm hit us. It was refreshing really and made the sand a little more tractable. During the storm, Mick took a wrong turn and ended up U-turning when we reached a damp looking salt pan. Continuing northwards, we reached the entrance to the N.P. just after five o'clock and, after a brief stop, continued to the camping area a further twenty minutes to the north. It was still drizzling a little and threatening to rain again but eventually fined into a warm and overcast night. With a game drive planned for next morning and most people still recovering from the previous night, bed was fairly early for most. We had pitched tents both for the threat of rain and the animals, and indeed hyenas were heard during the night.

Next morning we arose at 5.30 and after an attempt to have a hot coffee on the dwindling fire we headed off just before dawn at 6.30 am. There was still some cloud about but it soon fined up into a warm morning. With the trailer left at camp we took a big loop to the northeast finding plenty of small antelopes (dik dik), giraffes, zebra, and some gemsbok (oryx). Back towards camp just prior to ten o'clock we found a couple of black backed jackals. At camp we had brunch and then lazed about and leisurely packed up in readiness for a departure at 12.45. Som one had found a scorpion in the cook tent, which generated some interest! African scorpions are not especially dangerous.

We took a long loop to the west before eventually leaving the park at 2.45 pm. The day was now clear and hot and we saw plenty more gemsbok, zebras and ostriches, as well as springbok. We

also saw some other tourists wandering around in another vehicle. Ten minutes back down the deep sandy road from the gate we stopped for a late lunch of a few sandwiches and then continued south. Mick had in mind to camp at a spot called "Baines Baobabs", located about 15 km east of this north south track so we headed south to the turnoff and then headed east. The country continues mostly flat with a variety of depressions with salt pans and the occasional patch of scrub. It is incredibly similar to an area known as the Mallee in the northwest corner of my home state of Victoria. The track was reasonable and we covered about 12 kilometres before coming towards a large salt pan that had water in it. There was no way we were crossing it and there didn't seem to be a track around it. We could see the baobabs to the southeast, perhaps 2 km away. Mick checked the track into the pan and it was clearly quite soft so he immediately decided to camp on the area of long grass just off the track.



I'm not sure whether it was really a great spot or whether the fact that this would be our last rough camp made us all feel that it was a great camp. After setting up the cook tent, matting the grass into submission, and putting up our own tents, various people went walkabout. Some walked to the Baobabs whereas I decided to relax with a beer. Before sunset I walked around the north side of the salt pan to get a photograph looking back towards the camp and it was indeed a particularly beautiful sunset with the reflections off the water. That was just before seven o'clock and then I returned to sitting atop the trailer with Mick, Michelle, James, Steve and others, having a beer and taking in the fact that this would really be our last camp in the wilds of Africa. The next day would get us into Francistown and from there on the train to Harare. The end was indeed very near and a good fun evening over a beer was necessary. Dinner was good, the night was clear, except for a few thunderstorms in the distance, and we all felt pretty good about life. A few animals wandered close during the evening - probably hyenas. We bedded down around eleven as it had become quite windy.

I awoke early next morning - partly habit and partly a few mozzies in the tent - they were thick next to this pan. I arose at 5.30 - it was overcast and drizzling - quite unpleasant really. At about six there was a quite heavy shower but we got away on time at seven, intent on getting to Francistown. We retraced our steps and reached the main road by eight o'clock after the heavy going of the sandy track. Once on the wide gravel road, dust somewhat settled by the morning drizzle, we made steady progress eastwards. Steve and I were up front with Mick - the three who had come all the way from London with Merv! Soon after joining the main road we came across a group of about eight giraffes wandering across the road. It was eleven o'clock as we reached Nata where we turned onto the good fast tarmac road that would lead us south to Francistown. Even by that point the countryside is a little greener, there is more agriculture about and as we headed south, the road reserve was filled with many eucalyptus trees. It is pleasant country and while I had not actually noticed how rare it was to see rubbish on the roadsides, I was surprised to see a gang of workers at one point walking along the roadsides picking up odd scraps of rubbish.

We lunched briefly on the roadside and continued into Francistown, 189 km from Nata, arriving just after two o'clock. We stopped in town for more than an hour and a half while some people shopped, others went to the post office and Mick went to make phone calls and send a telex. The town was like a bustling country town in outback Australia - wide streets, a bit dusty, but clean and tidy, good shops and services - really quite civilised. By four o'clock we headed to the Marang Hotel on the outskirts of town - a reasonably good class of hotel with a pleasant camping area amongst trees and with excellent facilities. We unpacked, setup and showered and after a dinner of Chili Concarini from Liz and Sylvia, we headed for the outside bar area to spend the profits of the bar. As had happened back in Arusha, any money left over in the bar was put into a pool and the drinks were "on the bar". I shared a couple of bottles of South African wine, a Rhine Riesling and a Gewurztraminer, with a few of the wine drinkers. It was relaxing sitting in the clear and mild night but the bar closed at 11.30 so we headed off to bed.

Our last day with Merv would be a day of work. We awoke late and headed into town by nine o'clock. As luck would have it, I not only got to cook first on this six week trip, but also last, meaning that I had to cook once more than everyone else. In addition, I wanted to get some extra supplies if possible, just to lighten the burden on the next group who would have to get into the swing of things, including some restocking of the truck, once they arrived in Francistown. James helped me with most of the shopping, and it was made all the easier because there were two good supermarkets. We got most stuff at the first, although their fresh produce was limited, and then I wandered around to the second and ended up buying some more stuff. We were done by ten o'clock and I sat in what amounted to a small shopping mall drinking a coke with Mick and a few of the others.

Back at camp by eleven and we started the truck cleanout. On this occasion we would not repack the truck, since it is not secure, but would pack everything into the lockable trailer. The next group would unpack the trailer back into the truck. This included almost everything that was removable. I carefully did a stocktake on all the food and prepared a full list for the next quartermaster, including a list of recommended purchases of things I knew we were low on or out of altogether. The truck was fully cleaned, although we stopped for lunch for nearly an hour. There was plenty of time and we took things pretty leisurely, especially as it was once again very hot. The remainder of the afternoon was spent organising my own bag, showering and relaxing until about four when I began preparing dinner of sweet and sour chicken. It's a good easy dish when you have time since you just get everything chopped and then slowly cook it. Most of the others were at the bar and I sent James to retrieve them for a six o'clock dinner. After cleaning up we finalised the



packing, including donating a few remaining bits of fresh food to some Aussies who were also camping there.

The evening at the bar was relaxed and sociable. After some G&Ts the night had worn on and Mick and I had some liqueur coffees with icecream - wonderful stuff! We would be up very early to get the train so it was to bed a bit before eleven on a clear and mild to cool night. We arose at four o'clock, pulled down tents and finally locked up the trailer and headed off in just the truck, all our baggage and us jammed in, by five. At the station, Mick asked me to get the tickets as he was driving the truck back to the hotel where a friend of Becky's who lives in Francistown had offered to give him a lift back to the station. We were all standing around or lying about on the platform with our baggage all piled together as I tried to find the ticket office. The only official there said the ticket office didn't open for a while, yet the train was at six o'clock - African time, of course, which meant it might arrive anytime that day! By 5.30 the ticket official had arrived and told me to go around the other side to the booking office and about then, Mick returned, and together we managed to get the second class tickets to Bulawayo. Back on the station, we just relaxed and waited as dawn was approaching.

The train comes from Johannesburg so I guess it could be excused for being a bit late. It finally pulled in at 6.55 am as it was just becoming light. We located the second class carriages (there is no first class) and loaded all our stuff in and distributed ourselves amongst a handful of compartments. The train shunted back and forth a few times, presumably adding or removing carriages, and eventually departed town at 7.20. The Botswanan immigration and customs officials travel on the train and the former came through first stamping our passports, the latter at about nine o'clock, not long before we reached the border town of Plumtree. The day had by now become clear and hot and the countryside was flat and relatively uninteresting - much agriculture in this arid terrain, and many passing villages. There was no obvious sign indicating where the border was so it was an uneventful farewell to Botswana.

## **ZIMBABWE - Getting back to Civilisation**

### **Facts:**

Nights in Country: 5.

Distance Travelled: 1278 km.

Zimbabwe is one of the more recent countries to attain independence after the ousting of Ian Smith in 1980, and thus the country has a very westernised feel about it. The economy is reasonably strong but there is discontent as the one party rule of Robert Mugabe gradually entices the remaining whites to depart. A strong black market and the beginnings of lethargy among the people are signs of the decline that we had seen elsewhere. It is a picturesque country much like the tablelands of N.S.W. or Queensland and has a pleasant temperate to hot climate. The capital, Harare, is a pleasant western city which reminded me very much of Adelaide.

Population: 7 million.

Average Persons/Square Kilometre: 46.

Main Exports: Chrome.

Annual Income Per Capita: US\$480.

Currency: Dollar. US\$1 = Z\$2.23 official, Z\$4.20 black market.

Languages: English and Shona dialects.

Independence: 1980 from Britain.

Government: One party parliamentary democracy.

Climate: Temperate with daily maximums in the range 22°C to 30°C in summer and 13°C to 20°C in winter, especially in the eastern highlands.

The train pulled into Plumtree station at 9.20 am, March 7th, and we were thus definitely into Zimbabwe. The diesel locomotive that had brought us from Francistown was duly detached and a Zimbabwe Railways steam engine took its place. It was a delightful experience to be on a steam train, although I wasn't looking forward to a long overnight train ride to Harare with the steam engine - fortunately that train was diesel powered! Various passengers were coming and going and it seemed we were never going to leave. I think the problem was that the Zimbabwe customs officials were working their way through the train and eventually reached us up towards the front. Soon after that and a full hour after we had arrived, we started to move, but in fact we had to do some shunting first to detach some carriages and attach some others, so finally we departed at almost 10.30.

The countryside is pleasant and many long sweeping bends gave us a good view of the steam engine up front. The day was fine and warm. Small villages continued to pass by and we passed another steam train at a siding shortly after leaving Plumtree. The only real stop before Bulawayo was at Figtree for 10 minutes and we eventually pulled into the large Bulawayo station just before one o'clock. The steam train was fun, but neither fast nor smooth, having taken almost two and a half hours to do the 100 kilometres from Plumtree.



On the platform there was much chaos and confusion as people tried to queue to get through a further customs check, and eventually an official called our group through separately and we headed off to the cloakroom to deposit our bags for the afternoon. This cost a huge Z\$1.10 and it was a relief to not have to either look after or drag my bag around. Mick was busy confirming and paying for the tickets for the train to Harare, which was a hassle since they wouldn't take US dollars yet Mick hadn't had a chance to change money, but he worked it out in the end. We all departed the station at about two o'clock, agreeing to meet for dinner at Buffalo Bills Restaurant at six o'clock or whenever it opened, or to be at the station for the night train at nine o'clock.

I walked into the centre of town, figuring on making a phone call home and in fact I was considering using a public phone, but there were very few of them and there was always a queue. Instead I headed for the Selbourne Hotel, which was near this restaurant and booked a call there at only a slightly higher price and they agreed to have Australia call me back. The three minutes to Australia cost Z\$15, which was a bit pricey at official rates, which I had to use, since I had no idea of any black market dealer. The only one we were sure of was in Harare, and in any case, I needed to change some money officially in order to make my currency declaration look kosher. My father talked to me for ages when he rang back and it was good to be getting close to "home" where I would be in less than a week.

From the hotel I checked out the car rental places, since I planned to rent a car in Harare and visit the Eastern Highlands. Liz and Elaine had expressed an interest in going and a couple of others were still considering it, so the costs could be split. I went to Hertz and Avis and it became immediately obvious that there would be a problem - not only were rental cars very expensive and charged for largely on a per kilometres basis (unlike in Australia where unlimited kilometres is the norm), but there was a real shortage of them and neither of these company's could guarantee me a booking. Hertz sent a message to Harare to try and book but it was not confirmed and I would have to go to the office there as soon as I arrived next day.



After an icecream and drink in one of the many cafes, I walked around the shops. Bulawayo is a very pleasant town, rather like the large provincial towns we have in Australia. The shopping area is quite large and most of the wide streets are lined with trees. As the shops closed I wandered over to the garden area at the town hall opposite the Selbourne and sat chatting to Jamie who was in turn chatting to an elderly black guy. Somewhat before six we joined some of the others for a drink in the bar of the Selbourne where women weren't permitted (quaint). Sally and Becky were bating Steve through the window and he eventually joined them in the lounge area around the corner. James wandered in and announced that he had located some friends and would be staying in Bulawayo for a while and not travelling with us to Harare. He had hoped to catch up with us a few days later but I didn't see him again. He was planning to continue travelling through Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia.

Buffalo Bills is right next door and those who were eating moved in there at 6.30. It was an odd place, right out of America's mid west, complete with Buffalo Bill paraphernalia, American flags and so forth. Notwithstanding that, the meal was excellent value - a set menu of soup, a roast and desert for Z\$13. We finished about eight o'clock and commandeered two or three taxis for the ride back to the railway station. The train was already in the platform and the noticeboard showed the allocation of sleeping compartments, with males and females duly separated. We had soon collected our baggage and had located our carriage and Neal and I made claim to a three berth one rather than a six berth one, figuring on getting a quieter life. Steve and Becky had claimed a compartment to themselves, temporarily at least, and this caused much amusement to the black porter who wandered along asking in each compartment whether we wanted blankets. As he opened the door to their compartment we could hear him say "Do you want any .... Oh. Sorry!" and quickly shut the door!

The train was in good condition, still with the Rhodesian Railways insignias on the windows. The compartments were comfortable enough with vinyl upholstered fold down beds and a small wash basin and fold down table. At nine o'clock sharp the whistle blew and we slowly pulled out of the station. At least they're punctual! The ride was smooth and relatively quiet. For a little over an hour we watched the suburbs and villages go past. The night was mild and clear with a nearly full moon. I bedded down soon after ten and had a good night's sleep despite quite a few stops and starts.

I awoke as dawn was evident and arose and dressed just prior to a lovely sunrise out to the right of the train. "Where are we?" I wondered to myself and soon enough, at 6.15 am, we pulled into Chegutu for a brief stop. A quick check of the map revealed that to be the last major town before Harare but that we still had over 100 kilometres to go. At seven o'clock several porters wandered through selling coffee and biscuits, but nothing more substantial for breakfast. We passed through some hilly country to the south west of Harare and then entered its suburbs, eventually pulling into the station at 8.30 as the day was becoming typically clear and warm.

Eventually we had all gathered on the footpath outside the station and there was a grab for taxis. It's moments like these that it's better to not be in a big group. As we were waiting, Roscoe appeared and helped us get taxis. It was good to see him - the last time had been at Bechar in Algeria! Soon enough we had made the five minute ride to the Russell Hotel up the north end of town and I was already starting to get a feel for the layout of the city which is a simple grid. Mick soon had us all booked into the Russell with Neal and I taking a room together. Most of us were in a separate block of apartments, one block to the west of the main hotel and we wandered down there and deposited our bags. The rooms were spartan but perfectly comfortable and at the main hotel there is a pool, although I never seemed to find the time or the need to use it. At a huge

Z\$28 (US\$7 at black market rates) it was a bargain. The first room we got didn't seem to have hot water so Neal and I moved to another room the next night.

By ten o'clock I was heading off into town, a pleasant 15 minute walk. First stop was the Post Office to collect mail and thence to Hertz to investigate a car. They were unable to offer anything but recommended I try across the road at a car yard where they apparently do commercial leasing and sometimes have some vehicles available over weekends. Since what we wanted was just a Saturday and Sunday that seemed like a possibility and in fact they were very friendly and helpful. The lady thought she would have something but said to call back around lunchtime on Friday, the next day, and if available, I would be able to pick it up at four o'clock. It would cost Z\$68 per day plus Z\$0.70 per kilometres, plus fuel. It was the per kilometre rate that was the killer, but there are ways and means of reducing that! Fuel was not too outrageous, costing about Z\$1 per litre.

I was back at my room by eleven o'clock in order to receive a phone call from Australia, and after reading mail and unpacking my bag, I went in search of some lunch. There is a local shopping area just a couple of blocks south east of the Russell and I headed that way, meeting up with Mick and Kurt from the Danish truck. We bought some drinks since it was now pretty hot and then looked for somewhere to eat. There was a good restaurant upstairs - a bit posh actually, but we headed in there and had a good solid meal including a nice steak. Together with some South African wines, it cost Z\$26 which was pretty reasonable.

For much of the afternoon I lazed about in my room, falling asleep for a couple of hours, then wandered around to the outdoor bar of a nearby hotel to find many of the others. Noel and Jenny, the Kiwis, were there and we had a drink together since they were about to head off to the airport for their Qantas flight to Sydney. We wandered back to the hotel with them and helped them down to reception with their bags and dispatched them in a taxi at six o'clock. I returned to my room intent on a bath, but there was no hot water, so I washed, prepared for dinner and completed the calculations for the costs of the forthcoming weekend so that Liz, Elaine, and hopefully David, the Canadian, could confirm they were coming along. Liz had already been to the National Parks office and had booked a lodge in Inyanga National Park. The N.P. lodge system in Zimbabwe is great - well organised and all bookings are done centrally in Harare. We could only get a seven person lodge but were not concerned since it was only costing Z\$70 for the night and divided among four, that was a mere US\$4.15 each!

Mick had booked dinner at a restaurant in the same shopping centre where we had lunched, but a different restaurant. As he had booked it for 8.30, most of us gathered in the nearby bar for drinks beforehand. Many of Roscoe's group were there also, about to set off the following night on the train to Francistown and to pick up Merv for a reverse trip to ours but only back to Lusaka. Mick was taking several weeks leave and was planning to travel around Zimbabwe - Hwange N.P. and Lake Kariba in particular, with Kurt and several others from our trip - Steve, Michelle, Dave and Richard from the first trip. We sat in the busy bar in the balmy night having several drinks until a fight broke out between a couple of locals and we all decided to depart the scene. It was after eight so we headed to the restaurant and by 8.30 most of the others were there, together with Richard and Kurt. The dinner was excellent - I had mushrooms and prawns followed by carpet bag steak. The wines were interesting - Zimbabwean rather than South African. At Z\$12.50 per bottle, it was not a great expense, but nor was it a great wine.

The party got lively after a while but then Mick had paid and left. Just before eleven I headed off with Dave, Michelle and Robin in search of Mick but he wasn't to be found. We think he must have gone for a long walk, the equivalent of sitting in Merv's cab listening to music, but now Merv was over 600 km away. We checked his room and in the bar of the nearby Bronte Hotel but to no

avail. Thus we gave up, and with no other ideas for action, we headed for bed just on midnight. That was, to all intents and purposes, the official end of the EO trip. It was exactly 153 days since Mick, Steve and myself had left London! The first Africa A-Z was complete!

Next day I would explore Harare, as well as finalising arrangements for the weekend trip. Neal, who had gotten to bed a bit earlier than me, managed to get up at six and made it to breakfast which is served in the hotel dining room between 6.45 and 7.30. I decided to lay in a bit longer and eventually arose at 7.45. Neal had returned and reported that I had probably been wise in avoiding breakfast! We had agreed to share a room the next night and he would then be catching a plane home to the States on the Saturday. We arranged to change rooms and moved our bags across to the new one before I headed off into town at 9.15. I first walked to the Zimbabwe Air office to confirm my flight home (while it was a Qantas flight, I had a Zim Air ticket). By ten o'clock I had to have something to eat and had an omelette at the Wimpy in the centre of town. I met one of the guys from the Kumuka truck that we had met in Kisangani and we briefly exchanged stories on where we had been during the intervening months.

The day was fine and warm so I decided to walk up the Kopje from where you get a good view across the otherwise flat city. It was a pleasant half hour walk, despite the hot weather. The road loops around the lookout so I decided to walk up the left hand fork but two thirds of the way up I came to an army post and the soldiers told me I couldn't go that way. They were friendly enough about it and one walked me back and showed me a track that cuts up the hill to the top. The view is excellent - the city on one side and the western suburbs on the other. Several other tourists were about and I chatted to some Americans. A young local guy inquired about my nationality and what I thought of their country. He walked part way down the hill with me and offered to change black market money for me but I had my known source so was not tempted.





At the bottom I headed back into town stopping at the car rental place where they confirmed that a car would be available for pickup at four. With that confirmed I could go and change the correct amount of cash at the shop which Noel and Jenny had told us about. Inside the shop I quietly turned to the Indian man sitting just inside the door and handed him my greenbacks, him reaching in a drawer and counting out the correct number of Zim dollars. Almost nothing was said. We were told not to attempt an exchange if he had anyone with him! Others were able to change travellers cheques at a doctor's surgery - Doc Ian discovered that one and had written to Richard telling him about it. The Zimbabwe black market is mostly driven by people wanting to export their wealth so that they can leave the country. The doctor supposedly has an airline pilot who smuggles the currency out and deposits it in an overseas bank account.

After wandering back to the hotel I relaxed and took a bath - there were no showers, just lovely big bathtubs! By the middle of the afternoon I needed to get some groceries for the weekend - bread, tea, coffee, jam and such like, just so that we could have breakfast on Sunday morning, and with this purchased I headed into town again. I had arranged to meet Elaine at the Post Office at four so she could come with me when I picked up the car. They wanted a large deposit but would accept an Amex card imprint in lieu, and Elaine had an Amex card! I certainly didn't want to leave a cash deposit since I didn't want to change the money (you can't change it back again). Elaine duly arrived and we picked up the car, a Mazda 323, and drove back to the hotel. I would do all the driving, not only because I'm a terrible passenger, but also because Liz, Elaine and David are all used to driving on the right of the road! The car was pretty clapped out and made some odd noises, but didn't look like it would actually stop. I quickly reached under the dash and disconnected the speedo cable having told the lady at the rental place that we were only driving locally around Harare and expected to do about 150 km - we did closer to 700 km!

By five o'clock we had once again gathered at the local bar for a drink and then Neal and Liz joined me for dinner at a cafe in town. We wandered back towards the hotel by about 8.30 but decided to go in search of some dessert and a nightcap at the nearby restaurant where I had lunched the previous day. They had some trouble accommodating us when we said we only wanted dessert and a drink but in the end they agreed. As we were planning to get away briskly the next morning I decided to get to bed before ten. Mick and several of the others had gone to a rock concert so we wouldn't see them that night.

I was up at 6.15 next morning ready and eager to get touring again. Breakfast, as Neal had predicted, was pretty awful. The other three all turned up on time and after depositing our bags at reception and ensuring we had some rooms for Sunday night, we headed off at 7.30. David needed to stop at some friend's place and we waited there quite a while for him - he wasn't feeling too well (which was not unusual for him). An elderly woman came down to see him off and asked where we were going. I said to Inyanga and perhaps to climb the mountain and she warned us that it was a very strange mountain and that people often disappear there. As we headed off, Dave explained to me that she was very superstitious and to not take her warnings too seriously! By eight o'clock we were out on the good tarmac highway, heading southeast as the fine sunny day was warming up. The car went fine and we were able to average about 90 km/h, somewhat better than old Merv. It felt good to be driving a car again after such a long time!

We reached Rusape just before ten and turned left onto a narrower and twisty tarmac road that heads somewhat northeast. The countryside is very picturesque with rocky hills all around. We stopped for photographs at one spot and then continued the gradual climb up into the highlands. By eleven o'clock we had entered the National Park and I went straight to the N.P. office where there was a map which, I could take a rough copy of, since they didn't have any available to take away. I was thus able to plan our route for the day taking in the various waterfalls and lookouts.

From there we went into the town of Nyanga to buy fuel and to then try to locate a shop to get some drinks. This took some doing as the town is spread out over a large area but we eventually found a bar of sorts where we could buy some drinks, including a small bottle of gin that would keep me happy in front of the fire later that night. Then it was straight to the Inyangombe Falls, which are located down a gravel road some 5 km from the main road, passing our group of lodges on the way. The falls are about 200 metres down a steep walking track and after wandering around the falls we sat next to the pool and ate our lunches.

It was extremely relaxing lazing about in the sun next to the falls and it took some effort to drag ourselves back up the hill and head off to the next spot. There were quite a few other tourists around, some of which we repeatedly saw at different spots throughout the afternoon. We next headed to the east side of the main road and stopped briefly at the Rhodes Hotel to see if it was a likely spot for dinner, but Liz and Elaine quickly established it was not - they required a jacket and tie! We continued southeast to the far end of the park down a lovely but dusty gravel road that runs largely along a ridge and provides good views of the rocky hills to the west. As it ran through tracts of pine plantation, I felt close to home as it was very similar to the terrain in northeast Victoria, my home state. It was about 45 minutes drive down to Mtarazi Falls where about one kilometre of walking takes you to the incredible escarpment and the associated very high waterfalls. I would guess the falls to be over 1000 feet high.

As we returned along the same road we stopped off at the various other lookouts - Honde View where you get a clear view across the border into Mozambique, and a little further on the lookout for Pungwe Gorge. It was after four o'clock when we reached the lodge and checked in. The lodges come in various sizes and are set well apart in some beautiful country overlooking a lake with a backdrop of mountains. Inside almost everything is provided - there were two large bedrooms with beds and bunks, a bathroom, kitchen, dining area and a large central lounge which had a fireplace, all ready to fire up later in the night. This was unbelievably good value and I would certainly use the National Parks lodges if I visit Zimbabwe again. Having unpacked our meagre amount of gear we headed off up the nearby range intent on catching sunset from Worlds View and hopeful of finding a suitable eatery in the town of Troutbeck.

It is a long climb up to Troutbeck on a good wide and well made tarmac road. The views to the northwest are superb. The village is set amongst forest and has a lovely atmosphere. We first investigated the Troutbeck Inn but this turned out to be a posh country club. Liz ventured inside and while it was obvious that we would not be eating there she managed to get directions to another place back in Nyanga Village. Thus, we headed up to Worlds View, using a narrow, twisty and steep road that initially winds through pine forest at the back of the Troutbeck Inn, and we could see the expanse of golf course, ponds and so forth that make up that fancy establishment. Although we reached Worlds View at twenty to six, sunset wasn't until 6.12 so we had a wait during which time we could take in the wonderful view out to the west. It was very windy and getting quite cold - after all we were up around 2000 metres in altitude.

The sunset was "so so", certainly not to be compared with the ones in the Sahara. The view as we drove back down to Nyanga was in fact prettier as streams of sunlight from the fading sunset shot upwards from the horizon. We reached our dinner destination at seven o'clock at the Holiday Hotel, a middle of the range establishment with friendly staff and a great value meal. The place had a somewhat old world and country feel about it but was clean and tidy. The black waiters wore neat white jackets and strange Fes style hats, and the service was very good. The three course meal of a fish entree, a roast dinner and then icecream and topping cost just Z\$11 (US\$2.60) and we also had a couple of bottles of local wine which were OK and certainly very cheap. The atmosphere was enhanced when one of the waiters wandered through the dining

room with a freshly caught fish in a net - at least we knew the fish was fresh! We were served coffee in the lounge area and then headed back to our lodge by about nine o'clock.

David was tired and soon went to bed but I got the fire going and sat chatting to Liz and Elaine, drinking my Gin and Fanta's. It was a clear and starry night, and very cold. The three of us had a great discussion on many issues from women's rights, racism, politics and so forth. It was easy to get Elaine wound up - she was a great lady, small and energetic, and always pitching in to help whenever she could. The night wore on and we eventually turned in just before one o'clock.

Despite the late night, I still awoke at 5.30 - my body clock must have really been well and truly trained! I didn't actually arise until after six and then got some coffee made and shared it with Liz. The others hadn't stirred so I returned to bed for a while. We all had breakfast of toast and coffee just prior to eight and followed that up with a short morning walk around the immediate area checking out the lake and other lodges, almost all of which were occupied by various tourists. It was a lovely sunny morning yet again. We departed at 8.40 and headed first for the National Park office where you are required to report in and out if you are planning to climb Mount Inyangani. Having duly signed the book, we headed towards the mountain, some 10 kilometres to the east over some narrow and rough gravel roads but through lovely high country with heath and rocky



outcrops. I put my boots on, checked my pack for water and some food, then we headed up the climb at 9.30 am.

Mount Inyangani is a striking peak with an almost sheer western face but the track heads up a pass to the north and thence across a plateau approaching the summit from the northeast. The terrain is mostly heathland with many rock outcrops. It is easy to see how people could get lost in bad weather since the track is quite indistinct in places especially where it crosses large areas of rock with the occasional painted arrow on the rock to point the way. The summit is well marked and is at an elevation of 2,592 metres (8,500 feet). I was pretty weary and found the going a bit tough. Liz and David disappeared ahead of me and were waiting at the top - Elaine wasn't too far behind me. The climb took me 75 minutes. The views in all directions are superb, including way across into

war torn Mozambique to the east. It was pretty windy and that cooled us from the otherwise hot sun. The descent wasn't much quicker as it requires some careful footwork especially down the final very steep part. David and I walked down together and waited for about 20 minutes for Liz



and Elaine. We were beginning to wonder if they had been taken by the evil spirits that haunt the mountain, but they had just been admiring the wildflowers and had wandered off the track a bit.

It was 12.45 and we wanted to reach the large town Mutare for a late lunch so we kept moving, reporting in at the N.P. office enroute. Once on the tarmac we made good time down towards Mutare through lovely rolling hills and forest. We pulled into Mutare at 2.30 and looked around for somewhere to eat - the place was almost deserted it being a quiet Sunday afternoon. We eventually settled on a kerbside cafe that was able to do hamburgers and milkshakes. David was planning to leave us here as he had friends in town and soon found a telephone and rang them. He had to settle up with me for the costs of the weekend and as his friends had arrived we said our goodbyes. He was a friendly guy and it was a shame he seemed to be ill and often quite tired and lethargic for much of the five weeks he had been on the trip.

The three of us were ready to leave town by 3.30 but decided to top up with fuel and try and wash the car in daylight, rather than doing it in the dark back in Harare. It was certainly in a disgusting state, full of dust and covered in mud after being bashed around the National Park roads with a maniac at the wheel. If I returned it in its current state they would surely not believe that I had only driven it around Harare! The guy at the service station was very helpful and loaned us a bucket and some cloths, but the job wasn't all that good and we would still need to have another go at it in Harare next morning. Thus, it was almost four o'clock as we headed towards Harare, stopping for a picture of the pretty town from the road, which climbs through a pass as it heads westward out of the town.

It was well and truly dark as we entered the outskirts of Harare. We had made pretty good time, with only a brief stop midway where I reconnected the speedo cable so as to register an appropriate distance when the car was returned. After refuelling we arrived at the Russell by seven o'clock and quickly got a room and rushed to the dining room for a quick meal, since dinner finishes at 7.30! By eight o'clock I had eaten and was soon enjoying a lovely soothing hot bath in my room. The gang arrived a bit before nine and banged on my door, demanding to enter, so I had to quickly dry off and wrap a towel around me and let them in. As it was my last night on the continent they all wanted to share a drink with me - Mick, Steve, Michelle, Dave, Richard and Kurt. So we went to the local bar and had several rounds of drinks, eventually packing it in by eleven o'clock. Steve and I returned to our room and I spent a while sorting out my bag then bedded down, just prior to midnight.

The car had to be returned before eight o'clock so I arose at six and breakfasted with most of the others. Liz gave me a hand to give the car a final wipe down and then I drove it into town, no questions asked, then walking back to the hotel by 8.30. It was yet another superb sunny day. Liz departed soon after, destined for Calgary via some incredible sequence of flights that would take several days, including a stopover in beautiful Lusaka of many hours. I recommended she get a new travel agent! Mick then turned up in the just rented Land Rover - one of those really old but super reliable models, and after many fond farewells and me taking pictures of the gang in front of the Land Rover, they headed off on their ten days of touring. I wished I had been going with them, and it was indeed very sad to see them go, especially Mick and Richard with whom I had shared so many terrific times.

Having moved my baggage to Elaine's room, I had officially checked out and by 10.30 I was off to the Botanical Gardens. They are a pleasant 30 minute walk to the northeast corner of town and in a quite posh area including the Golf Club and the President's residence. The Botanical Gardens are reputedly among the best in any city in Africa and were certainly worth a visit. There are areas for the trees and other plants of many areas of Africa and the world, including Australia. The

expansive lawns made a relaxing setting for me to sit and contemplate the preceding 22 weeks and what it had meant to me. From there I walked back to the local shopping centre to pick up some lunch and a drink, and thence walked into the main part of town to do a final check of the Post Office and to just wander around the mall, looking at the shops and the people. The city really reminded me so much of Adelaide. However, it would be strange to be in an Australian city the next day and to not see a single black person, whereas in Harare you were surprised when you saw a white person.

Back in Elaine's room I took another bath and did some final packing. Elaine turned up a bit later and we went to the local bar for a final drink. I grabbed a taxi when I saw one and he waited while I fetched my bags and by five o'clock I was enroute to the airport which is located some distance to the south of the city. It was still very warm. The checkins had not yet opened although there were a handful of other travellers around that looked like they were heading for Australia. Checkins opened a bit before six o'clock and I was probably second to checkin, getting a nice forward window seat in the front row of economy class. It turned out the flight was only half full and I had the three seats to myself all the way to Perth, although one of them was occupied between Perth and Sydney.

While I had gotten rid of my bag, the Qantas lady was having trouble finding both the man who collects the departure tax and the customs and immigration people. Africa was running true to form, with typical inefficiency. She was on the phone as passengers were starting to build up in the checkin area, unable to proceed any further. A bit after six the guy arrived in his little glassed in booth to collect the US\$10 departure tax - payable in hard currency, but it was a further fifteen minutes before the Immigration official arrived so we could get the passport stamped one last time. Customs was a non event - the official there couldn't have cared less and just took my currency declaration and tossed it away. Needless to say I still had quite a few undeclared US dollars hidden on my person! In the departure lounge there was little to do other than buy the odd drink - it was a balmy night, and checkout the duty free shop which was not particularly cheap.

In due course the Qantas 747 arrived - it was like a piece of Australia had come all the way to Africa to pick me up! There would be at least an hour turnaround so I sat down and waited, chatting to a middle-aged Australian couple who had been visiting friends in Harare - they were suitably amazed at where I had been. Boarding started at 7.15 and I, being towards the front of economy, was amongst the last to board. Of course there are no flash air bridges - just a pleasant stroll across the apron in the mild night air - it was crystal clear with just a light breeze blowing. I was settling into my three seats quite looking forward to the nine hour flight to Perth, yet feeling just a bit nostalgic about finally leaving the great dark continent.

Of course it wouldn't let me go quite that easily and as a parting gesture, the final departure was delayed for almost another full hour. The doors had been closed at 8.50 pm but the captain explained that he did not yet have the load sheet - Harare is one of the only destinations to which Qantas flies where the load sheet is done manually. A man ran towards the plane to deliver the said document at 9.13 and we were soon on our way across the Indian Ocean to Australia.

## PERSPECTIVES

It was about eight o'clock the next evening when I emerged from customs in Sydney, dressed for full effect in my Kilimanjaro tee shirt and Zaire flour sack shorts, which together with my six months of hair and beard growth, made me appear a somewhat different person to the one that had left Australia 163 days earlier. But was I really a different person? I was certainly a calmer, more relaxed and generally easygoing person upon my return. My attitudes to the world in general and people in particular had been mellowed. I had consciously strived to become far more tolerant and I believe I succeeded, and hope I can maintain that change as I reenter the pressure cooker that we call western civilisation. Perhaps the biggest change was my questioning of lifestyles and a determination to undertake similar trips again in the future. Perhaps this was not so much a change as a releasing of my latent desires!

In Africa one sees the lifestyles typical of third world countries around you day after day. People are poor but happy. They do not know any other lifestyle - they live from day to day. We virtually never saw people who were starving, even though they were in poverty, and thus unable to travel, or in many cases to do anything to change their lifestyle. They were trapped in that lifestyle, neither with the knowledge of anything else nor the ability to change it. We, on the other hand, have the ability to learn from other people's lifestyles, and to choose to live however we like. What I find particularly frustrating about so many people in western societies is that they allow themselves to be just as trapped in their lifestyles as people are in third world countries. So often people just live from day to day, not especially happy, chasing goals they would perhaps prefer not to have, and unable to get off the treadmill.

A lifestyle that cuts across this argument is that of the overland traveller. It is a lifestyle that I enjoyed for almost six months, and although I do want to do more trips, I think that six months of that lifestyle at any one time is enough for me. Others in the group were travelling for longer periods and of course the overland drivers choose this lifestyle on a semi-permanent basis. It is basically a fairly relaxed lifestyle, with few worries or pressures. It is made interesting by the day to day uncertainties of travel and of course the ability to observe the people, culture, geography and natural history of the places enroute. On such a trip, one soon develops a relatively carefree attitude to problems since nothing is really that much of a problem - a delay, trouble getting a visa, hard to find food, etc. are all just part of the game and they work out in the end.

One of the great advantages of travelling with an overland group and especially with a reputable company like EO, is that it largely protects you from the real problems that can confront the independent traveller. The first of these is security - in much of the third world, and certainly in Africa, people do not really appreciate the concept of ownership and thus theft is an ever present problem. The theft of something important, like your passport, money or camera, can really ruin a trip, and so it is important to make sure it doesn't happen. Travelling in a group allows belongings to be better guarded, although it is no guarantee. Add the overland truck and you have a pretty high level of security, especially with EO and their lockable trailer. Stuff locked up in the trailer is literally more secure than on your person, although I had no hesitation to almost always carrying my money belt around my neck under my clothes. And by ensuring proper awareness of security within the group, there would always be protection of the truck and its contents.

Another advantage of being with an overland company is the negotiation of borders and other officialdom. The other side of this coin is that border crossings invariably took longer because the whole group must be processed, but the advantages of being in a group outweighed this. The company knows the procedures so there are no big surprises. And the officials, while appearing to



flex their muscles on occasions, would be unlikely to really hassle a tourist group. Most countries have some awareness of the value of tourism, but the independent traveller often does not appear to be a tourist and thus may be hassled virtually as if they were a spy! Various people in our groups reported having problems with border officials before or after joining the trip.

The other problems that are removed or reduced by being with an overland group are just the day to day hassles of finding food and somewhere to sleep. As my story tells, even the group would sometimes have trouble finding somewhere to camp, but this was minor compared with the hassles people travelling alone would have finding a hotel room, and most of those that I saw were decidedly dingy. That's one of the reasons it was always preferable to camp out in the bush as against in a town campsite - at least you knew the bush was reasonably clean! The proverbial hole in the ground was almost always preferable to the facilities in towns, with the exception of the relatively civilised countries of Malawi, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

Health and hygiene was also a constant consideration and being a group only guards you against the risks to a limited extent. EO's procedures were the best I saw, including their chlorination of the water, which is preferable to boiling which unfortunately does not kill everything. Once away from the truck you had to be very careful what you ate and drank. I guess my relatively trouble free run was because I eased myself into it, starting out very particular and gradually becoming less picky as my resistance to various microbes was enhanced. The only times I needed to drink water away from the truck was up Kilimanjaro, where the water is crystal clear, and in Zimbabwe where the water supply is nearly as good as in any western country. Nevertheless, it is really worth using common sense and a reasonably conservative approach, since a bout of sickness is not only unpleasant but can really spoil a trip if it persists.

One of the great things about overland travelling is the wonderful friends you make. Travelling always brings you into contact with interesting fellow travellers, yet you rarely get to know them that well. It is always interesting to chat for a while to passing travellers, exchanging stories and information. You see people in Africa from all around the world, and travelling on all variety of budgets and in many different ways. Some had private vehicles, from 4WDs to bicycles. Some were travelling on public transport, but that requires a great deal of time and patience. And of course, there were the other overland groups. Yet the real friends you make are in your own group with whom you literally share your lives. Many of these will be life long friendships with regular exchanges of letters and hopefully visits to each other's home countries.

What of Africa? Many people ask me what I now think of Africa and Africans. Many seek my views on South Africa, although I cannot speak directly on that since I have not been there. However, I think having seen a broad cross section of black Africa I can appreciate the problems of South Africa a little better. Let me say at this point that discrimination on the basis of race is totally unacceptable, and the whole apartheid system is abhorrent. At the same time, one must not be fooled into believing that the other African states that have so called "majority rule" are without their problems. Some of the repressive regimes in other countries and the atrocities that have occurred since independence demand just as much international condemnation as the South African system.

The various problems of Sub-Sahara Africa are well documented in David Lamb's excellent book, "The Africans". I read much of the book before going to Africa and finished it off while I was there. I would recommend it to anyone who is travelling to Africa or who wants a better understanding of the social and political problems there. Nothing I saw caused me to dispute most of his analysis. The criticisms are not racial, and indeed one could do a critical analysis of many problem ridden countries around the world without it being racially based. As Lamb points out, many of the

problems of Africa have resulted from them being colonised by various powers who dissected the continent into countries rather haphazardly, and then handed back power in the independence flurries of the 1960s. The tribes of Africa had not only had their cultures drastically corrupted but their traditional tribal boundaries were suddenly surpassed by international boundaries that took no account of tribal areas. In some senses, it is little wonder that a great deal of turmoil ensued in many of the newly independent countries, including violent inter-tribal wars and tribally based genocide.

The root of the problems can also be traced to the psyche of the African, if one can possibly develop such a stereotype. The people in many of these countries are relaxed and easy going. I hesitate to use the word "lazy", but in many cases it is appropriate, particularly to the men. The African economy is largely agricultural based, with the exception of the internationally funded resource projects, and certainly it is the African woman that you see working the fields, carrying the water and carting the produce to market. Yet the African man, stereotyping again, is proud and often aggressive. This has given rise to a variety of military governments and repressive regimes. Most of the countries have no real form of democracy and their Presidents have generally installed themselves for life. Democracy is probably not the answer for most of these countries where the people are too poor and too isolated to be concerned with political issues. In such circumstances it is often easy for power to be gained and held by a privileged few, with power only changing when there is a coup, and there have been plenty of those. Alas, farsighted presidents such as Jomo Kenyatta are few and far between. More often the likes of Zaire's Mobuto or the now defunct Idi Amin are the ones that gain power. Perhaps the relative stability of the French backed regimes of Niger, Cameroun and C.A.R. are preferable, even if corruption and repression are still the norm.

Amidst this depressing scene there is hope. Botswana and Zimbabwe were both countries that impressed me. The latter certainly had some significant problems but despite this, both countries had reasonably strong economies and people who were happy and motivated. In both cases there was a continuing coexistence of the races to the mutual benefit of both. It would seem that these countries have found a reasonably good solution such as has eluded South Africa, and it is perhaps too late for South Africa to pursue a similar course. The situations are, of course different, with South Africa having the whites entrenched in power. There is much to be lost and gained in that struggle and thus the outcome will be painful in one sense or another.

I should not close this discussion without mention of the earlier part of the trip through the Arab countries of Morocco and Algeria, and the Muslim influenced country of Niger. There are some real contrasts among these countries with Morocco a strong westernised economy, Algeria a seemingly failed experiment in socialism and Niger with its economy propped up by the French. Leaving aside the economics and politics, I cannot help but pass comment of the culture of these peoples. In many ways these peoples live no more happily and indeed no less in poverty and squalid conditions than their much poorer black neighbours to the south. Their men are again the lazy ones, although in this case they are the wheelers and dealers. But above all, I find the Muslim treatment of women abhorrent - they are treated as chattels and are virtually never seen on the street. Such sexual discrimination is equally as unacceptable as racial discrimination.

For me, the trip was not only a great adventure, but an opportunity to learn a great deal about the world and myself. It gave me time to think through many issues - lifestyles, attitudes, awareness and "the meaning of life". Travelling to Africa was the fulfilment of a long held ambition and also allowed me to resolve so many issues about myself. I will certainly travel again because I believe that I can get the most from life and can contribute the most to life by learning about the world and the people in it. I am especially grateful to the support of my travelling companions.