

# To the end of the world



Joachim von zur Gathen

Chapter 1: Africa

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“Golden woman” in Mopti



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Version 1.2, August 2019

The cover images and the frontispiece are from 1978. See Figure 22 “Africa has soul” on the front cover, Figure 20 “Golden woman in Mopti” on the frontispiece; she is also the singer in Figure 17. Figures 12 “hanging on to the bus” and 33 “getting high on millet beer” are on the back cover.

Printed by Happy Printers, Bonn.

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# Foreword

Throughout the years, I have lived three lives in parallel: family, work, and travel. Neither of them is finished yet, and I still have four more lives to go!

In 2015, I retired from my administrative and teaching duties as a professor at the Universität Bonn. But not from the aspect of my work that I always cherished most: research. I continue writing scientific papers and attending conferences, sometime being involved in their organization.

Once freed of some time-consuming tasks, I started thinking of how I could tell my family and friends, especially my grandchildren, about some of my travel adventures. So I began writing this text in 2015, at first relying on my memory, but later consulting my travel diaries. Frankly, I had the trip of my life in writing this, in going through about 20 000 pages of my hundred old diaries, alone one thousand pages for our *Grand Tour* in 1988/89, and looking at the scans of about 50 000 color slides, most of them long forgotten.

My task is far from over now. Even when this text is finished, there is still a lot to say about my family and work.

**Caution.** The current text, prepared in 2019, covers only Part I Africa. The other continents will take a few more years to describe: America (Mexico and further south) with Antarctica, Asia, and Australia with the Pacific. The result will be voluminous and take some perseverance and courage to read. Maybe I will later have the courage to compress it for general consumption. For now I skip Europe and North America to reduce the volume somewhat.

# Vorwort

Warum schreibt der Mensch das auf Englisch, wo doch Deutsch seine Muttersprache ist? Das wird sich mancher fragen. Der Grund ist einfach: ich habe deutlich mehr Freunde, die kein Deutsch sprechen, als solche, die kein Englisch können. Wenn ich mal bei einem Glas Wein Dönekes (Remscheider Platt für “Geschichten”) von meinen Reisen erzählt habe, haben immer wieder Freunde angeregt, ich solle das doch mal aufschreiben. Die haben aber meistens Englisch, Spanisch, Französisch oder anderes Kauderwelsch gesprochen und ich kann sie jetzt nicht enttäuschen. Außerdem ist ein wichtiger Grund für meine Schreibe, dass meine Enkel später mal erfahren können, was ihr Opa so alles an Unfug getrieben hat. Und für die Hälfte von ihnen (Stand 2019) ist Deutsch auch weniger geeignet als Englisch.

# Introduction

Travelling is you white men work  
JAMES ADOGUYA, 1978 <sup>1</sup>

At the tender age of seventeen, I contracted an incurable disease. It was on my first trip outside of Europe, to Central America. I have suffered from it throughout my life. I have not found a cure so far, only temporary relief of the symptoms. When the ache got too much, I persuaded myself to spend money, sometimes little and sometimes more, to ease the pain. No medical insurance ever paid for those expenses. My disease is known as *morbus peregrinandi* or *wanderlust*. On the following pages, I recall some of my adventures on all those voyages that I undertook to cope with this overwhelming desire.

**The art of traveling.** A successful voyage is a work of art, say, like a painting. It all begins with a vision, an image, a dream—and often just “because it’s there”. For me, these were sometimes the stories of other travelers (like an excrement fine in Togo), the sound of a toponym (like Ouagadougou), or a place that I would read about in a different context, like “fifty-two days to Timbuktu”. When you pronounce euphonious tongue-breakers like Ouagadougou, Surabaya, Balikpapan, Chichicastenango, or Gualeguaychú with the right intonation, they will creep into your mind just like a beautiful melody and do not go away even after you have been there. I always enjoyed visiting sites of historical or archeological interest, and also those within my scientific fields of computer algebra, mathematics, and cryptography; but of the latter, most were in Europe and do not appear in this text.

Then comes a planning phase, where you assemble a rough image of your painting in your mind, or, in my case, of an approximate route and some fixed points that I want to visit. Little is determined at this stage. Next I assemble a group for the voyage—this is not usually done for a painting. My favorite travel group has always been my family Dorothea, Rafaela, and Désirée, and we have taken wonderful trips together: the Transsiberian train and China, the Maya sites in Central America, our *Grand Tour* of driving from Canada to Tierra del Fuego (Fireland), around Australia, and visiting South Pacific islands, and cruising around Indonesia. Too numerous to mention in detail are my lovely trips with lovely Dorothea. I enjoyed traveling with good friends like Frank and Maria or with my motorcycle companion Anton. But I also took many solo trips because nobody had the freedom, courage, interest, time, and money to come along. Then I

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<sup>1</sup>See Figure 47.

sometimes hooked up with locals or other travelers for a few days of going together. In the text, *friend* may have the above meaning, but the semantics is different in other parts of the world. It may be someone whom you know a bit, or someone you just meet, or someone who wants you to think that he is a friend in the above sense.

I have systematically shunned organized travel, except for two student trips (to Istanbul and Egypt), when I did not have the self-confidence to do this on my own. But I get impatient with all the wasted time in convoy travel, unavoidable in that mode, and I prefer to blame myself on things gone awry rather than other people. On three occasions (Bhutan, Galápagos, North Korea), organized travel was the only option, but fortunately the groups were of manageable size, two passengers in Bhutan (with one of whom I got along well, the other traveler was a bore) and one only on the other two trips.

A painter next chooses his tools: brush or pen or crayon, wood or canvas, and so on. For traveling, this means wonderful evenings of planning routes, places, modes of travel, maps and guide books, obtaining visas. Sitting together with your travel companions and dreaming about the next months on the road is a wonderful preparation in homely comforts. A rough sketch of the trip appears on the canvas, details to be filled as we go along.

The most useful tool on travels is to speak the local language(s). Acquiring them is a long-term, maybe life-long, project. I had some great teachers in high school who not only taught well, but instilled a fascination for languages, for the subtle differences in what you can express in one but not in another one, the different sounds, tones, and melodies in languages. Enhanced by frequent and long visits abroad, this honed my skills in English, French, and Spanish. Many native speakers, except some linguistically skilled ones, cannot tell easily whether or not this is my native language. And when they learn that it is actually German, their compliments warm my heart. I have taught university courses and given scientific lectures in those four languages. It is so much fun to conduct intelligent conversations with locals, and I regret that I do not speak more languages.

The most difficult linguistic challenge for me was Swiss German, a dialect of German with similar vocabulary but rather different grammar and pronunciation.

In some other languages, I get along but am far away from being perfect: Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, Russian. These always require a few days in the country to come back.

Whenever I visit a country, I try to pick up a few words of greeting, thanking, and numbers. Already such a minimal effort generates sympathy among the locals. After returning home, I usually forget them quickly, but they may return on a later visit.

And then there are some rather useless languages. In high school, I learned Latin and spoke it with my father—a linguistic genius—at dinner table, if only to annoy my mother and brother who could not follow. The only practical use was with a priest in Poland with whom Latin was our only common language—and he explained me my route very clearly. My dad also taught me ancient Greek, useful for understanding foreign words in English or German. But when I ordered wine on my first trip to Greece using the classical οἶνος (oinos), the waiter did not understand that the modern κρασί (krasi) is

what I meant. Rudimentary Quechua helped on my long Andean hikes, but my smattering of Mandarin only in Beijing; on my next stop in Xi'an, nobody understood a word of my badly pronounced Chinese. Totally impractical was my knowledge of ancient Egyptian. I never had an opportunity to ask a pharaoh or a scribe for the way to the next bus station. But at least I could, at a time, read some of the beautiful hieroglyphic inscriptions.

After all these preparations for a voyage comes the main step, the execution. You board a plane, get into your car or onto your motorcycle, and off you go. With every city or ruin I visit, more details take a precise shape on the canvas, unexpected pleasures or delays add color, each bus, train, or boat ride sharpens details, and in the end the work of art is completed: a trip like a painting. Most things are roughly like you dreamed them to be, but you could never have thought of all those colors and details in advance.

Back in the comforts of my home, the final varnish is put on the painting. Sorting thousands of Kodachrome color slides in the old days, today editing and arranging even more digital images. Then the *vernissage* of showing your photos and sharing your stories with your friends—at least with the few who are interested. And this book is something I have not done before, like preparing an exhibition of your collected works of art at a museum.

Many people suffer when they come back home after a long voyage. Not me. I have always enjoyed traveling and also enjoyed being at home. No blues on return, because usually there is so much work to catch up, so much varnishing on my past trip to do, and then, of course, the joy of planning the next one. I would only be down if I had no next trip to plan, but that has never been the case.

Incidentally, my professional life as a researcher in mathematics and computer science also knows these phases. Building a new theory or new objects starts with a vision, with some vague ideas that you have. In the planning phase, you think about the tools you have and the literature to study. However, usually you do not know in advance where the work will take you, where you will succeed and where not. The execution phase means that you put together a string of intermediate results that might work together, then link those steps with formal demonstrations. This can be painful because of the strict demand in serious math to deliver rigorous proofs. And, in fact, sometimes it just does not work out. The varnishing is fairly standard: typesetting the work in  $\text{\LaTeX}$ , submitting it to a conference in the area and/or a journal.

Billions of people have educated children, some better, some worse. There are presumably millions of scientists, some successful, some not so. And there are thousands of multilingual adventure travelers who have gone to the end of the world, each in her own sense. But the demands of any of these three goals in life make the other two difficult, and I am happy that I had a chance at all three of them. Whether successful or not—that is for others to judge.

Often I talk to friends about my travels and they ask: “Isn’t it dangerous to travel in country X?” Well, there may be snakes, mosquitos, tarantulas, scorpions, murderers, thieves, corrupt military, and air plane crashes, but the major life-threatening thing is car



traffic. I have been a victim of so many taxi and bus drivers' aspiring to become a Formula 1 driver (with me as a passenger), narrowly escaping collisions with animals, children, trees, and other vehicles, that clearly this is the most relevant danger for traveling. And that applies in your home town as well as abroad. The only difference is that it is more exotic to be eaten by a lion than to be run over by a bus, but not more fatal.

Throughout my travels, large tracts of the world have been inaccessible. Until 1990, I could not travel freely in the communist countries. Wars in many parts of Africa made regions too dangerous, and today some countries in the Near East are off limits. But inaccessibility changed from time to time. The only possible exceptions are South Sudan and North Korea, always difficult to go to; see pages 280 and 997. *Gnade der frühen Geburt*<sup>2</sup>: I could still travel in many areas for which no travel guide book existed, where you had to find your own way and make your own experiences. Try these days to find routes off the beaten tracks of *lonely planet*! They exist, but are not easy to find.

I recount my travels in a linear fashion, the way I traveled. Someone else might be tempted to say "I have been everywhere", but that is of course impossible. The surface of the world is two-dimensional, but travel is basically one-dimensional. Thus no matter how much you travel, you will not be able to cover the whole world. (Not even mathematicians travel along plane-filling *Peano curves*.) In science, every problem you solve poses new unsolved problems. In traveling, with every region you visit you learn about new and interesting places that you have not been to and for which you do not have the time on that trip, but maybe sometime in the future.

The tales in this book are mainly based on the diaries to which I devoted many a night's lucubration during my travels. They cover about three meters of shelving, and it was much fun re-reading all those adventures that I had, sometimes, forgotten. Almost half of their text is made up of detailed descriptions of food, sometimes delicious and sometimes yucky, of accommodations, sometimes gorgeous and sometimes grotty, of cost and prices, and of money exchanges, sometimes tricky in the presence of black markets. These are interesting challenges while traveling, but most of it is left out from this writing.

**Modes of traveling.** The main decisions to take on a trip are transport, accommodation, and food. For long-distance travel, airplanes are often the only reasonable choice. I loved my first few hundred flights, but now am increasingly bored of the time wasted waiting at the different queues. On the other hand, I have taken some exciting local flights on unusual routes and airlines (Malabo, Somaliland, Robinson Crusoe islands, Laos, Papua Niugini) that were highlights on those trips; I even hitch-hiked a plane once from an airport (Angel falls). After crossing the Atlantic several times on board a freighter, I would prefer to never fly again, but freighter trips are hard to arrange and require a lot of flexibility. In the Caribbean, South Pacific, and elsewhere, ferries used to be the main form of transport, but have largely been abandoned in favor of airplanes. Whenever still existent, I took them. Many train rides were pleasant, and some

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<sup>2</sup>Literally *the mercy of early birth*, originally with "late birth" referring to Germans born after the Nazi times, but here before the advent of travel guides.

were highly uncomfortable (Sudan, Myanmar). Overland, the main form of transport are buses. Most of them were uncomfortable, sometimes painful (Karima, Indonesia), but some were pleasant (Porto Alegre - Montevideo, Santiago - Antofagasta). A nice thing about them is the easy contact with locals. I often rode in “taxis” or “bush taxis”. These are not the fairly expensive vehicles we know from Western cities, but in many parts of the world, dirt-cheap replacements for otherwise nonexistent public transport. Typically, they wait at some fixed place and start when full, often meaning five passengers, but sometimes many more and with interminable waiting. They usually follow fixed routes, in cities and upcountry, and drop you at your destination. I have often taken them for hundred of kilometers; no alternative is available in many places.

I have driven some longer distances in my own car, from Switzerland to India, from Canada to Tierra del Fuego, and three times into the Sahara. This mode gives you individual freedom to visit places that would otherwise be inaccessible or expensive to visit on boring organized tours. On my early trips, being in a car also provided a sense of security and of closing off the dangers of the outside world. It took me years to learn that the outside world is important to experience and not something to be afraid of. Motorcycling (China, South America) is even more fun and does not shield you from the outside, but rather bestows a sympathy bonus on you from most outsiders. As a student, I hitchhiked a lot in Europe, and in some parts of the world, for example the Arabian peninsula, it used to be the only way to travel long distance unless you had your own vehicle. Two travel adventures included hitchhiking unusual conveyances: a freight train in Botswana and a small airplane in Venezuela. Although I like bicycling, I have not done international tours on a bike. On the other hand, hiking on foot is by far the most satisfying of all modes of transport. Often you are all alone on your way, you get to see things slowly and up close, you meet people, you work out your body to get the best out of travel. Several of my narratives include long and beautiful hikes in all parts of the world.

As to accommodation, there is often a wide range of options. I have attended over one hundred professional conferences, meetings, workshops, summer schools, etc., all around the world, staying in high-class hotels paid for by some organization. Those are the most boring places, anonymous, bleak, impersonal: “Are we in Brussels, Beijing, Baltimore, or Buenos Aires?”. No soul. The meetings are vital for scientists to exchange ideas and results with the leading colleagues, but this is not travel in the sense that I take it. I have had to suffer through enough of those places on my business trips, but even for conferences taking place in ritzy hotels and paid for, I have taken to staying in small guest houses nearby, with a personal and local atmosphere. The spic and span accommodation in luxury hotels is boring—if I want that, I’d better stay at home. Rather I want a change of scenery, even if that is physically and psychically challenging at times.

On my real travels, outside of professional ones, I have usually stayed in acceptable locations, but never in grandiose ones. With nice hosts, as is often the case, this is a great pleasure and you get to learn a lot about the country. I appreciate the complete

change of comfort, or rather its absence, and have also, unfortunately, stayed in many obnoxious places, dirty, uncomfortable, loud, damp, cold, with creepy-crawlies and buzzy-buzzies all around, or just slept on the bare earth. And then I can dream of my wonderful clean bathroom at home and appreciate that so much better after seeing the unpleasant alternatives. Sometimes there was no alternative to such abominable places, but usually I could have paid for a better hotel for any single night. However, it is a question of principle: if I did that repeatedly, the limits on my budget would oblige me to curtail my travel time. The choice is: less comfort and more travel vs. more comfort and less travel. The reader will easily guess which option I choose. After a while, this habit gets engrained, and still today, I tend to look for inexpensive options. And usually I am happy with the result.

Adventure travel means to get away from it all, to give up the mod cons at home. If in the morning you know where you will sleep in the evening, that is not really adventure traveling.

Further discomforts have included carrying a heavy backpack in pouring rain, getting completely lost on a trail, or being thrown into jail. Such adventures can end in disaster, but I have always been lucky and was able to extricate myself. And those are then the highlights of a trip: first the down part, then the up part, when you feel like a king after having survived the impending disaster. This is what you remember from a trip.

In terms of food, I choose the opposite option. I never mind spending good money on good food and drink. I try to avoid hotels or international restaurants, but usually like the local food, from the wonderful steaks in South America to Asian rice dishes and Rwandan fondue bourguignonne. Culinary low points include fufu (millet) in West Africa and ful (beans) in Sudan—but I still love traveling there.

One important thing that traveling has taught me is relativity theory. Space and time are relative. On the road, small distances may become very large with appropriate obstacles. And flying shrinks large distances to a day's voyage or so. Time is even more relative, from the unhurried Latin American *mañana* to waiting for several days for transport.

A trip to South East Asia with Dorothea and our friends Frank and Maria changed my mode of travel substantially. Until then, I had traveled aphotographically and have almost no pictures from trips before 1974. I only carried a small Kodak Instamatic camera, which produced blurry faded pictures on which you could hardly recognize anything. Dorothea likes to remind me of how I said, somewhere in Algeria (page 70): "What, you want me to take another picture? But we already took one this morning." After returning in 1974, Maria showed me the photos she had taken with her Canon camera. I was dumbfounded. Crystal-clear pictures, you could recognize everything. I simply did not know that this was possible. Immediately, I invested in a then top-of-the-line Canon EF with good lenses and at times carried around a heavy load of two cameras, one for black-and-white which I developed and printed myself, and one for Kodachrome color slides. Over the years, I have bought other cameras and taken a lot of pictures on my trips, very few of which

appear in this book. Some of them are from my collection of about 50,000 color slides taken over thirty years, the others are digital. This change took me some years to adjust to, but now I appreciate the facility of managing and editing those files.

In order to keep this writing to a manageable size, I leave out the places where I lived most of my life: Europe and North America. That is, Canada and the USA; sorry, my Mexican friends. Although I have seen some adventures there, usually a rather boring option to get from one place to another exists in contrast to other parts of the world.

Why am I writing this? For whom? Firstly, for my grandsons. Cayden (born 2010) and Tyler (2013) live far away from me in Canada and I see them rarely. My other grandchildren Carl and Paul were born in 2018 and are in Switzerland. I will tell them stories when they grow up. I hope that this will present a memory of their granddad, who loves them very much. Secondly, for Dorothea and our two daughters. Much of this involves them, but some of my more adventurous travel does not. This book is mainly for them and our happy (and other) memories, and for my grandchildren, so that they get an idea of where I was roving around. Thirdly, for my friends who repeatedly urged me to write this. Many thanks go to Georg (Schorsch) Dieter, Mark Giesbrecht, Susanne Giesen, Joachim Müller, Daniel Panario, Volker Strassen and Alfredo (Tuba) Viola for encouragement and corrections.

**Notes.** Names of people and places are usually spelled according to local usage. Times of day are denoted in airline fashion; thus 14.00 is 2 pm. All photographs are © Joachim von zur Gathen 2019, except Figure 580 from wikipedia. The text was produced with L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X, and the sketches of itineraries with the `stepmap.de` software. The page numbers in the Table of Contents for chapters following the present one will change as I continue working on those other continents.





# Africa

## North-western Africa



Rough sketch of my travels in the north western parts of Africa.

## Mauretania, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, Bénin 1978

*The stories in this text are neither in chronological nor in geographic order, and I start with the most important African trip. In 1978, Dorothea and I go on a trip to West Africa that is going to have a major impact on our lives: we get married; see page 61. We take this decision at the end of our voyage, after many wonderful (and often strenuous) adventures; a train trip in an empty iron ore wagon, a confrontation with Muslim zealots, a night in jail for lack of an entry stamp, a picturesque festivity in Mali, an adventurous hike along an escarpment, a reasonably comfortable boat ride to Timbuktu, followed by incredibly uncomfortable truck rides to Niger, and much more.*



The first plan for this trip came up in December 1977, for driving through the Sahara on the Tanezrouft route with Frank, meeting Dorothea and Maria in West Africa, and then traveling together. Alas, things did not work out that way. Our application for an Algerian visa in Geneva was refused. The embassies in Bonn and in Paris said they would have to consult with Algiers, which we did not even try after this experience. Change of plans: I fly to Nouadhibou, Mauretania, and meet Dorothea in Bamako, Mali. Her

workplace did not give her holidays for all the time, and I leave two weeks before her to Mauretania. My attempt to obtain a Mauretanian visa in Bonn fails. Dorothea and I ride on my motor bike like hell to get to the Ghanaian embassy on time: arrival 15.55, they close at 16.00. No visa, of course. But after talking a bit to the embassy secretary, we eventually get the visa. Rush to the embassy of Mali in Bonn. They close at 18.00, but after some gentle persuasion, we also obtain that visa. I send my passport by mail to the embassy of Mauretania in Paris, and about a month later, on 1 September, get it back—without visa. I have already bought my ticket for 5 September. On 4 September, I take the early morning train from Zürich to Geneva and go to the Mauretanian consulate. I am extremely nervous, because if they also refuse, all our plans are void. And the ticket lost. They explain to me that in principle, they do not issue visas. Some sweet-talking, and everything goes quickly. I get the visa, am incredibly relieved to have the trip salvaged, rush back home to Zürich, get a train the next day to Paris. At the check-in counter there, my return ticket vanishes but later turns up at a different counter by miracle. And I am off to Nouadhibou.

Rarely have I done a trip with that many initial obstacles. But then it turns out to be a wonderful and important voyage. My good luck is that I don't believe in bad omens—I would have given up the trip long before its first leg.

My flight over Spain, Gibraltar, Morocco, and then the Sahara is beautiful. Sand, rocks, sand, rocks, all brown, the blue Atlantic in the background and no living thing to see. Long queues wait at Nouadhibou immigration to Mauretania early in the morning. I fill my currency declaration rather nonchalantly, because I do not feel like counting my treasures in front of so many prying eyes. Big mistake. At the next checkpoint, a soldier counts my money exactly and finds an amount of 5000 CFA (Central African francs, about 50 US\$) that I had “forgotten”. Talking does not save me, he threatens to take me to his boss, and I realize that there is much more money that I forgot. So I cave in and let him keep his loot. I learned something, at a price.

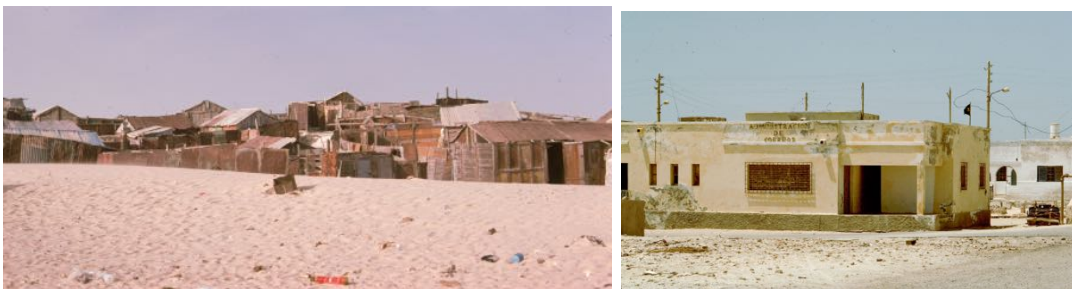


Figure 1. Nouadhibou center and the old Spanish post office in La Güera, gunshot wounds now plastered over.

There is only one hotel in town, quite expensive. Two guys take me to the *Sweep Night Club*. It is cheap, not too uncomfortable, with a lot of noise from the bar next door.

After all the excitement in getting here, I sleep well. In the afternoon, I walk around the village, but there is not much to see. Nor is there much to eat in this place except some rice with fish sauce. Rather depressing.

It is a short walk into La Güera, once part of the Spanish colony of Western Sahara (see page 150) and ravaged in the long independence war. Most buildings show bullet scars or are demolished. A sad sight.

50 years ago, there was nothing here, just a runway on the Casablanca-Dakar line, used by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944) of *vol de nuit* (and *Le petit prince*) fame, and some fishing. In 1978, and presumably still today, the “city” lives on the exportation of iron ore that comes from the rich mines 700 kilometers north-east in Zouérate and F’Dérick. The longest train in the world, four locomotives pulling 220 cars with a weight of 17,000 tons and a length of three kilometers, brings the ore into Nouadhibou. It is emptied in an fascinating operation, where the complete train cars are turned upside down to empty their cargo onto conveyor belts. The ore then travels on freighters to all over the world, and the train goes back empty.



Figure 2. The train and tracks stretching far into the desert, and one loaded car being turned over.

Besides a difficult  $4 \times 4$  track along beaches, this train is the only land connection to the mainland. Everybody rides it, and so do I. With three friends whom I met at the station, we enter one of an endless row of ore wagons.

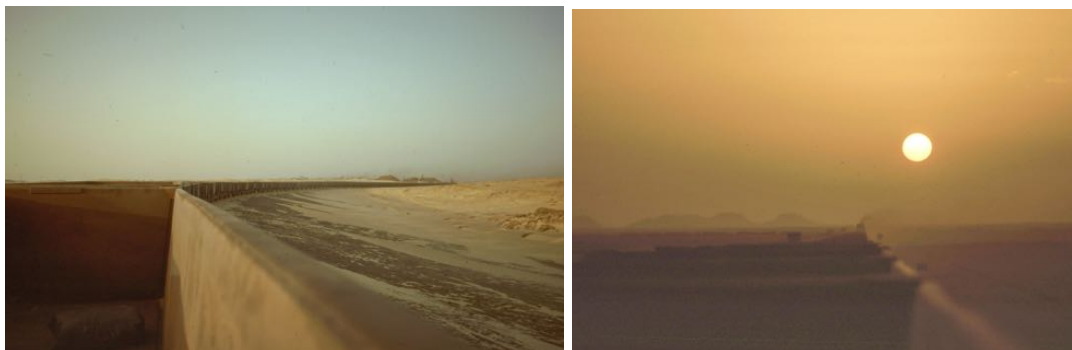


Figure 3. Inside the train at dusk and at night.



These cars are quite high, and standing upright (not easy when the train is making its erratic way over the badly maintained tracks), you can barely look over the sides. The car is covered in red rusty dust from its load, and I come away with a deep red tan, but this washes off at the next occasion, five days later. It is a beautiful train ride through the night under a starry sky in an open freight wagon. Years later, they even added a passenger car to the train.

The next morning, the train slows down briefly without really stopping at Choum, a nondescript village. The tracks then make a sharp bend to the north and continue along the border with Western Sahara to the ore mines of Zouérate. At the “station”, all passengers, about a dozen of them, jump off the train. I throw my backpack over the wall of the car and climb out of the moving train. Quite some height.

A heavily loaded decrepit truck is waiting to take passengers to Atar on the Adrar Plateau, via the Te-n-Zāk pass. It carries bags, mainly of foodstuff, to more than capacity. The twenty or so passengers ride on top of this load, fresh air in the early morning, getting unbearably hot later in the day. The truck breaks down repeatedly, all passengers have to get off, and then we push the vehicle until the engine starts again.

Atar lies at an elevation of 270 meters, Choum essentially at sea level. After leaving the coastal plain, the truck chuggs and stomps along the steep bad dirt road, until once again the engine fails. This time, there is no chance to push it upwards. I ask the driver why he does not roll backwards in reverse, to engage the engine. The reason he gives is illuminating: the truck’s brakes do not work. So of course he cannot roll backwards. It gives me the shivers to think that I have been riding a heavy vehicle without brakes along a steep mountain road.



Figure 4. My friends on the train and the truck at Choum—not my friend.

Worse is to come. Not far from the broken truck, there is a hut with people sitting in it. I ask to enter and am given a friendly reception and some fresh goat milk, still warm.



But then some islamistic hot-head turns up and incites these hospitable people against me: “You are not a Muslim and do not deserve to be here.” Knives come out. An ugly situation, worsened by the fact that they only speak Hassaniya, a local dialect, and we have to talk in broken Arabic from both sides, including quranic citations from myself. I remind them of their own rules of hospitality, and that I am also “a man of the book”, meaning Thora, Bible, and Qur’an, which is not quite as bad as just being a heathen. I can barely avert disaster and am happy to get out of this inhospitable place.



Figure 5. No brakes and deeply eroded tires, not a rarity here.  
A survivor at Atar.

After hours of waiting, finally a pick-up truck takes me to Atar. I fall into my bed in a small guest-house, completely exhausted physically and mentally. The place is depressing: no shade, no green, only sand and brown. Perhaps due to the exertion, I do not feel well the next day. It may be a heat stroke, not implausible after walking in the hot sun with over 40° C in the shade—if you find any. I lie down, drink a lot, but it is a miserable day.

After a long wait in Atar, the bus to Nouakchott, the capital of Mauretania, is not comfortable but a huge improvement over that hellish truck ride from Choum. We stay overnight in Akjoujt, a copper mining town. The wind keeps blowing sand in my eyes. But the next day, a sandstorm produces a complete white-out (rather a brown-out), 20

meters of visibility. Luckily, the driver is quite careful, different from other experiences in Africa.

In Nouakchott, I can buy delicious apples and oranges to my big surprise, which completely cure my heat stroke. I take my first shower since Zürich, urgently needed. The sand has turned my hair into strands of concrete.

I travel via Ksar to Rosso, the border village on the Senegal river. Children play in its light brown, slowly moving waters. The ferry to Senegal carries mainly camels, loud belching and bleating, the deck is thickly covered with camel dung. A wonderfully soft carpet. Strange border formalities. The Mauretanians note my name in a book, no stamp in my passport.



Figure 6. Ferry across the Senegal river in Mauretania.

On the Senegalese side around noon, the immigration boss is away drinking: “he’ll be back in a few hours”. Nobody knows exactly when. Well, thank you, Yours Truly is not inclined to wait for this incapable and incapacitated official nor will I be back in a few hours. So I enter Senegal without an entry stamp in my passport, a clever move that saves me from hours of waiting at the miserable immigration hut in Rosso and as a bonus procures me free accommodation for one night; see below. Yet another open pickup truck takes me to Saint Louis, the famous fishing village on an island in the Senegal river. It is the oldest French colonial town in West Africa and was a base for Saint-Éxupéry’s postal airplanes. I stay in a rock-bottom hotel, a sweltering rathole with hardly enough space for my backpack. The rubber foam mattress has obviously seen a lot of action in its long life. My friend Vieux Badiane, a student despite his name, takes me to the military officers’ mess, where you can get drunk very cheaply. I do not, but stumble home for an early sleep after a long day. My sleeping bag protects me from the soiled mattress.

The next day, I take a long walk along the *Langue de Barbarie*, a stretch of sand about 100 meters wide and 25 kilometers long. On one side flows the river Senegal, on the other side is the Atlantic Ocean. Kids swim in the sea, some surf on wooden planks. The seamen's cemetery is an impressive site. On hilly sandy terrain, rows of graves are decorated with a few wooden sticks and fishing gear, and fenced in with nets. An interesting tradition the like of which I have seen nowhere else, with the exception of a cemetery in Tonga decorated with empty beer bottles, see page 1012.

At 16.00 I take the train to Tivaouane, full of people, bags, cartons, chicken, and what have you. The local Wolof tribe has an amusing way of saying goodbye, a long dialog of tit for tat, obviously often funny, because the bystanders laugh a lot. They express agreement with an interesting clicking sound of their tongue.

In Tivaouane, I am looking for some accommodation when a policeman stops me. He asks to see my passport, the only time in towns that this happened to me on this trip.



Figure 7. Fishermen's cemetery at Saint Louis.

Maybe they know about their lazy colleagues by the river. He leafs through it, then again, frowning, because he does not find my entry stamp. No surprise, since I have none. I am arrested and escorted to the *préfecture de police*, a beautiful colonial building with white columns, a covered veranda, red tile roof and a large garden. This looks much better than any of the dumps called *hotel* where I have stayed so far. They take my passport away, but I am pleased when they tell me I am arrested for the night, saving me the hassle of looking for accommodation. Of course, you do not want to make this kind of booking for longer holidays. They allow me to take a shower and have dinner in a nearby restaurant. Georges Lamy, the friendly *gardien de la paix*, has taken out an old rusty iron bed for me. I throw some of the larger bugs into the fan that he has also provided—you can imagine the sound when the bug hits the fan. After that, a peaceful night under the stars, me smiling all the time at my luck in finding this fine accommodation.



Figure 8. Pleasant outdoor accommodation  
at the Tivaouane police station.

The next morning, refreshed from an open-air night, I have my usual West African breakfast of *café complet*, a buttered baguette with nescafé served in a tin can. The friendly policemen allow me to stroll through town. In one mosque, I join a band of kids climbing to the top of the minaret—marvellous view. Tivaouane is the capital of the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood and pilgrims flock to the tomb of leaders like El-Hadji Malick Sy. Around 10.00, I go to the police station to pick up my passport and to move on to Dakar. No problem until the *commissaire* arrives, a mean-spirited fat man. He mistreats his own people, and now revels at the opportunity of showing a foreigner his importance. An interrogation, aggressive from his side, then a telegram to Dakar: “the answer will be here by 12 noon.” Of course, that does not happen. My next stroll through town is in the close company of a plainclothes policeman. Eventually I can leave, but have to promise a visit to the Ministry of the Interior immediately on arrival in Dakar. Which I do—that is, the promise, but I have no intention whatsoever to spend a whole day in some dreary offices, possibly with ill-humored officials. My first action in my Dakar hotel is to scribble a fictitious *Rosso, 11. 9. 78* into my passport; Figure 9, at left. To my own surprise, that works; see below. Pleasant stroll through the modern part of town, nice food and cold draft beer. Totally relaxed.

The next morning, my ferry to Île de la Gorée takes 20 minutes. First occupied by the Portuguese in 1444, the small island was later held by the Dutch, French, and English and served as a major collection stage for black slaves until the 19th century. They were brought here after being captured in the interior, carrying heavy wooden logs around their neck. In the *maison des esclaves*, one can see the holes in which they were held before being brought to America by ship. Rather frightening to think of all the blood, tears, and urine that have flown here for the profit of a few slave traders. My knowledgeable guide



tells the stories with much detail and emotion. The small town is a pleasant contrast, with lively kids everywhere, interesting colonial architecture, and imposing baobab trees. On a hill in the south, passageways, bunkers, and large guns have been rusting peacefully since the Second World War.



Figure 9. My own forged entry note “Rosso 11.9.78”, and a genuine “Vu au passage à Bandiagara”.

Dorothea left yesterday evening from Paris to Bamako, and I take the train in the morning, also to Bamako. I am at the Dakar train station, a magnificent colonial building, early enough at 10.30, but learn that the seats were taken around 01.00. Tough luck. I travel 2<sup>e</sup> classe, *place entière*, the luxury of a whole seat by myself, but sleeping is difficult on my narrow wooden seat. The train makes a long stop in Kayes. Several official arrival times in Bamako are provided, between Saturday, 16 September, 15.00, and Monday 06.00. That does not matter much, we cannot influence it anyways. With some Germans and an Englishman we have a few beers in the train’s bar, but the mood is somewhat downcast, nobody can really keep their eyes open for being sooooo tired. At 05.30, we arrive at the Senegal-Mali border. I am quite relaxed, what can they do to me because of my missing entry stamp? It works even better, in the morning twilight the immigration officer sees my hand-scribbled “entry stamp”, reads it out loud, nods, and gives me the

exit stamp. Big relief! Finally Bamako, only three hours behind schedule. Right on time by African standards.

Dorothea and I have arranged to meet “at six o’clock in Africa”. Will she be there? Did she arrive in Bamako at all? Dorothea later tells me that everybody around was excited, waiting for some relatives to arrive. The platform is packed with people, she could not move or see anything and was shoved to and fro. And this for three hours. Then she discovers a bench on which she can stand with a view over the crowds. She falls down several times, but always lands on some people. The excitement grows as the train comes into sight. It feels like elves cheering for Santa Claus. The train stops, people get off, an incredible din and chaos. But Dorothea has a strong voice and was the loudest to cheer and wave like crazy: “Jo . . . Jo . . . Jo”. And then she stands in front of me. We are both happy and relieved that I arrived at “six o’clock in Africa”. Her smile is so radiant that even welders’ goggles would not block it.

We move from her moderately expensive *Grand Hotel* to the cheap *Auberge de jeunesse* (Youth Hostel). A grotty place, dirty, toilets almost unusable, rubber foam mattresses on the floor, plenty of mosquitos. Dorothea is mad, understandably so. Dorothea sleeps terribly badly because of the mozzies.



Figure 10. The elegant bus station at Bamako does not contribute to Dorothea’s well-being.

The next morning, Dorothea is already angry in the dirty shower. I take her—not meaning any harm—to a cheap place in the street for *café complet*, as I had taken happily each morning in the last week. Dorothea works up her anger. I go to the bank to change some traveler’s cheques. As I write in the date, I realize a terrible mistake: “isn’t this your birthday today?”. I completely forgot with all this exciting travel. Wow! I understand Dorothea’s wrath right away, am suitably demure, and use my recently acquired funds

to take her to the terrace of a fancy hotel for a fancy breakfast. The mood cools down. But it was really a terrible blunder that followed me all my life and became a standard family joke. As a further compensation, we have an excellent candle light dinner at the fine *Hotel de l'Amitié*.



Figure 11. Amada Sanyaré and his brother.

Not really relaxing, we take a *taxi brousse* (bush taxi) for 300 kilometers to San. A friendly passenger, Amada Sanyaré, in the car invites us to his home. A pleasant evening in the middle of nowhere. I send him some pictures after our return home, and in

January 1979, he writes to me: “Vous retenez une place de choix dans mes souvenirs . . . Soyez toujours les bienvenus au berceau de l’humanité . . . D’après un proverbe Bambara, L’amitié comme l’amour ne s’impose pas, ne va jamais chez quelqu’un qui ne t’aime pas.”<sup>3</sup>

Next morning, we stroll around the pleasant town of San, down to the Niger river, across the market, where many men are weaving tissue for cloth. Good-bye and a little present to Amada’s brother, who accompanies us all morning. Dorothea and I cram with ten others into a *taxi brousse* for Mopti, a robust Peugeot 504 station wagon that serves as bush taxi all over West Africa. Dorothea has a seat, but for me it is only standing room outside at the back of the car, very tiring and giving me a major muscle ache after this gruelling 10-hour trip. We pass many check points and stop for food and other necessities. At midnight, we arrive in Mopti at a nice *campement* with mosquito nets for an excellent sleep.

We spend several days exploring Mopti, a fishing town on the Niger river. Its Great Mosque (or Komoguel mosque) is a showpiece of West African adobe architecture, but it was actually built under French supervision in the 1930s and has a height of 15 meters. The heavy rains work hard on the façade, crowned by three towers. Hefty tree trunks protrude from the walls for use as ladders during the necessary repairs. Children are everywhere, often naked, loud and friendly, we have to shake hands all the time. Many women walk around with bare breasts, including young pretty girls.



Figure 12. Standing room only from San to Mopti, and the Great Mosque at Mopti.

Dorothea gets invited into a courtyard, where the women show her how to crush millet for *fufu*, the main staple here. When she tries, her clumsy attempts meet with laughter. The pestle, made of heavy wood and about a meter tall, feels like weighing a ton and is difficult to move without experience. But then they show her how—wong, wong—easy this is, accompanied by singing and clapping hands. The millet flour is then mixed with

<sup>3</sup>In my memory, you occupy a top place . . . You are always welcome in the cradle of humanity . . . A proverb of our Bambara tribe says that friendship, like love, does not impose itself, never goes to anyone who does not love you.



(stale) water and saliva and left to ferment until it becomes a slurry and sticky mass, the fufu. We usually like the local food, but already the stench of fufu is enough to turn us off. And the taste matches the smell. We buy woollen blankets, rather scratchy, and a nice Dogon fertility statue.



Figure 13. Thrashing fufu and a street photographer:  
take off the lens cap, count one-two-three.

22 September is Independence Day, for us a big adventure with incredible sights. At 08.00, we are on the big square by the quay and get the last two seats on the tribune for special guests. Will we be able to stay here? With luck, we may. After a long boring speech by some official, a big and fascinating parade starts. A motley crew in uniform and with battered instruments has gathered, and they march proudly along, everyone applauding their cacophony. A wonderfully naive spectacle. They all wear same-size shoes on their feet of rather varying sizes. The *Mopti Cacophony Orchestra*, staffed by the Malian armed forces. They remind us of the amateur bands called *Guggemusig* that parade through Zürich during Fasnacht (carnival), loving their own sound and oblivious of its effect on others.

In the parade, the hunters and the Dogons are particularly impressive, clad in rough brown cloth adorned with hundreds of small shells, and with magical paintings on their faces. Some of them walk on high stilts. The Dogons are a tribe from the Bandiagara area, through which we will hike in a few days from now.

One of the high points is a boat race, with around 30 people per boat, the numbers vary and nobody minds this. They row on the opaque brown waters of the Niger river. Sweat is flowing, and the river water is so much laden with silt and decomposing organic matter that it resembles an elastic substance, like rowing in chewing gum. There is no rhythm or rhyme to their rowing, just everybody pulling as hard as possible with a lot of energy. One of my photographs made it to the cover page of *Schweizer Familie*, a Swiss magazine for which I wrote several pieces on traveling at the time.



Figure 14. A proud young woman.



Figure 15. The *Mopti Cacophony Orchestra*.

Proud women show off their treasure: massive golden ear ornaments (“earrings” is not the right word). They are too heavy for a hole in the ear and are fastened with a band looped around the top of their head. This constitutes their dowry, an insurance against financial hardship in case of divorce. It is easy for a husband to terminate a marriage, and he has no financial obligation to his ex-wife. Unmarried women flout simple jewellery and whatever else they have.

In the afternoon and evening, the whole town is dancing in the streets, children, adults, Dogons in their traditional costumes or even on stilts. The exuberance is mesmerizing, such a happy day. Our ears are filled with the music (or noise) of tam-tams, drums, other instruments, acrobats, Dogon stilt-walkers, and dancers.

One elderly gentleman is particularly funny: he wears a dignified suit on his top, and skimpy shorts for his bottom part, dancing and beating a rhythm with an instrument made from big scissors. We have to shake hands and say “ça va” all the time.

Eventually, we take a *taxi brousse* towards the start of our long walk along the Bandiagara escarpment. It is a steep cliff where a high and a low plain meet, around 150 kilometers long and up to 500 metres high. This ridge of brown and purplish rocks and boulders is one of the most impressive landscapes in Africa.

The peaceful and friendly Dogons live along the base of the escarpment. They have developed a rich culture, including huge masks that fetch high prices at art auctions and woollen headdresses decorated with shells.



Figure 16. Dogon.





Figure 17. Dogons.



Figure 18. Boat race in Mopti.

We have seen a group of Dogons dancing on stilts during the Mopti festivity. They bury their dead in graves high up in the escarpment. The living share large palm-thatched rondavels, and millet is stored in small huts on stilts, in order to keep rodents out. Their vibrant culture still shapes their everyday life.

First we pay the compulsory visit to the *chef du poste de police*, very friendly and with stamps *vu au passage* in our passports; Figure 9, at right. We get some fufu with

peanut sauce in a tiny restaurant, just a mud hut inhabited by hundreds of flies. We can hardly get down the unappetizing food—but what else can we do? People are exceedingly welcoming.



Figure 19. The boat race on a magazine front page.



Figure 20. Married woman with her golden ear ornaments.





Figure 21. An empressive gentleman from Mopti—in shorts.



Figure 22. Festive atmosphere: Africa has soul.





Figure 23. A smiling young beauty in Mopti.



Figure 24. Dogons.



Figure 25. The front of a Dogon lock.



Figure 26. A storage hut door with lock, and the back side of a lock. Note the pins (and their shadows) in the key and the corresponding holes in the bolt.

I buy a marvellous piece of Dogon technology, a wooden lock to a storage hut, a traditional piece of cryptographic hardware. When you push the bolt to its closed position, nails tumble down through irregularly spaced holes from a higher level to keep the bolt

in place. To open it, you insert a long rectangular wooden key with pins pointing upward that push up the locking nails—and in you are. But only with the correct key. Later the same year, I stay at a hotel in the USA which employs a similar system, just with metal pins and a plastic card instead of the wooden key.

Past Sassambourou we walk the whole afternoon in the hot sun, stopping at every rivulet for a rest and splashing us with water. Since we are carrying all our luggage, the hike is quite strenuous. Around 18.00 we find a nice creek and have our luxury dinner there: a whole can of pineapple from Côte d'Ivoire, claimed to contain *10 tranches entières d'ananas*, but there are only small pieces in the can. So what . . . such trifles cannot spoil our wonderful meal. We continue hiking in the dark, no moon yet. It is not always easy to find the trail and to avoid the puddles. Finally we settle down for the night in a flat spot.

Swarms of mosquitos descend on us. Unfortunately, poor Dorothea's pants end somewhat above her socks, and on those 10 centimeters of flesh, she gets bitten by dozens of mosquitos. Scratch scratch. We do not carry a tent and just lie in our sleeping bags on the ground of hard mud, heads covered with a shirt against the ferocious creatures. It is a wonderful 1000-star hotel out there, under the open African sky, no-one within kilometers from us. Not for a minute do we worry about wild animals, snakes, scorpions—worrying would not make a difference in any case.

We wake up at sunrise. Extensive morning wash in a creek, delightful. This frequent washing and refreshing at flowing waters is one of the nice things on our hike. The village of Koron with its—sorry—dirty and smelly inhabitants confirms our impression that we chose a better place to sleep out in the open. The *restaurateur des douanes* Abdulaye Ouédraogo invites us to his guest hut, together with many children and flies. Nice *café au lait*, not so nice fufu and *gâteau au mil* (millet cake)—in fact, we cannot get any of it down—and wonderful tomatoes, of which we buy a few for on the way.

From Koron we hike to the top edge of the escarpment, on a trail that is well visible through the fields, but on large rocks we see only faint traces of sand. And then comes the most exciting part: the descent down the escarpment, about 150 meters high at this point. A tiny cleft in the almost vertical walls provides a narrow and steep path, always with impressive views of the plain below. The only living creatures we see are birds nesting in holes in the walls. At the bottom, a refreshing spring waits for us. In a small village near Nombori we help a few people with our non-existing medical knowledge, barely enough to administer some Spasmo-Cibalgin and clean out some eyes. In Nombori, the village teacher invites us to his home. He does not speak a word of a language that we understand, and our Dogon So is equally poor. We do manage to understand that the large white holes high up the escarpment are their burial places. They can usually only be accessed by experts using ladders. Sleep does not come easily because of the mosquitos, although both of us are dead tired.



Figure 27. Resting on the first day of our Bandiagara hike.



Figure 28. Our friend Abdulaye Ouédraogo and lunch in a hut,  
chasing away the flies.

Breakfast is a can of Nescafé for both of us. It takes some time to cut the wood, light the fire, boil the water, and pour it into a tin can. Our host holds the boiling hot thing in his hands, but we soft Europeans can only touch it with a towel wrapped around it. Lunch in a millet field is again wonderful.





Figure 29. Dorothea and her fancy Dogon hat taking a break in the shade.



Figure 30. Sleeping in the open on the top level of the escarpment.



Figure 31. The climb down to the bottom and millet storage huts in a village,  
with a lock as in Figure 25.

Our food this day is a single can of apple sauce. We eat less than half of it and then,



to extend the pleasure, fill the can with water. We repeat this process of dilution several times, down to homeopathic doses of apple sauce. An enjoyable frugal meal.



Figure 32. The majestic escarpment and a village at its foot.



Figure 33. Millet beer at noon and the trail on which I got lost.

Walking through sand, millet fields, swamps, and small rivers, we chance upon another pleasant creek for a long refreshing break. Everywhere we meet friendly people who rarely

see white foreigners. Later we hear a lot of noise from the distance, and on getting closer, we see that we are arriving at the market in Tirelli.

In Tirelli, everybody is getting drunk on millet beer, the best thing they make of millet. We have pretty much adapted to African standards of hygiene and share with everyone beer from one of the large calabashes. This is quite a potent drink, I have a bit more than Dorothea, with a sorry result. On leaving, I lead the way as usual, but this time in a completely wrong direction, intoxication plus midday heat working hard against my brain. And successfully. My more sober companion Dorothea and some locals correct me several times, and we retrace our steps. At least I can still walk . . . .

We arrive just before darkness at the village of Amani. Without even asking, we are pretty soon invited into a hut, sit on the guest mat, and are served water, inedible (for us) millet stew, nice chicken and tomatoes. Our “mattress” for the night is a layer of reeds on a solid ledge of mud.



Figure 34. Dogon graves high up on the escarpment.

When we wake up, we look at each other with surprise: both of us have long strips of indentations running along the whole body, most markedly in the face. Then we understand: these impressions come from the reeds on which we have slept. For the start of the last day of our hike, our host accompanies us a while, saving us many detours. Finally the steep climb up the escarpment, a painful enterprise with our luggage. At one place, rocks are piled up on each other in a dramatic way, and you have a wonderful view of the valley below. A relief is waiting for us: a local man is willing to carry our luggage up the rest of the way. In the village of Sanga, civilization hits us again: orange juice at outrageous prices, but we do not mind at that moment. We get an expensive lift in a car to Bandiagara. It starts raining really hard, within minutes everything is inundated, and



we are driving through fast creeks. Luckily this has not happened on our trek. We have our first real dinner since a few days, and even find some cold beer. And we have a whole night before us, on a real mattress and without mosquitos. What a luxury!

From Bandiagara, we take a bus back to Mopti. Nowadays, this kind of hiking trip is not possible anymore. Hostels operate in most villages, and a highway along the foot of the escarpment is being constructed.

Ever since our 1973 desert outing in Morocco (page 74), I have dreamed of traveling to Timbuktu, even if not in “52 days” by camel caravan. I have to admit that at first, I thought this was more a mythical place like Shangri-La, but since then I became acquainted with its history as a center of learning in the middle of the Sahara, flourishing for about two centuries after 1400 AD, dominating trade routes, and housing an important university, the Sankoré madrasah. After being placed on a map in 1375, it later fired the imagination of Europeans and a prize was instituted for the first visitor. The Scot Gordon Laing arrived in 1826, but was killed a month later. René Caillié from France was the first non-Muslim to survive a visit, in 1828; the next one was the German explorer Heinrich Barth in 1853 on his *Grand Tour*. And now we are close to this magic place.



Figure 35. A floating milk stall.

In Mopti, we board right away the ferry *Général A. Soumaré* of the Compagnie Malienne de Navigation to Timbuktu. Some annoyances by the ship’s aggressive staff end

with Dorothea slapping a big fat steward right in the face. Eventually we settle down peacefully outside on the Second Class deck with our Fourth Class tickets, spreading our sleeping bags and the recently purchased blankets in a comfy corner. The big river adventure can start. The ship is completely full, people have put long planks across the railing so that they can sit on their end, high above the water. A scary sight, reminding me of teeter-totters in my childhood: if everyone at the low end gets off, the others take a big splash. But they do not do us the favor of playing this silly game. The boat stops at numerous villages along the river. There are no quays to bring the boat close to shore, so she anchors in the river and departing passengers have to take a long swim through the muddy waters. Graceful vendors swim out to the boat, offer food and even milk from calabashes that they balance on their heads, in the water up to their necks. In shoulder-deep water! It takes some agility to balance a bowl with chicken on your head while you swim quite a distance.

The first part of the river voyage is through the semi-arid Sahel zone in which we have spent many days, with millet fields reaching down to the river banks. Getting north, the landscape turns drier and drier, and finally gives way to real desert, with nothing but sand and dunes visible.



Figure 36. From the *Général A. Soumaré*.

Timbuktu was originally connected by a canal to the Niger river, but that silted up a long time ago, and its present port is Kabara. On this trip in 1978, even the canal from the main river bed to Kabara is impassable for our *Général*, and we transfer into a pirogue that can handle the shallow canal. Then a bush taxi for the 18 kilometers into my dream town. What a place! Sand, sand, sand everywhere, including our eyes and mouth. After the compulsory visit to the police and declining several offers of camel rides and trinkets, we eventually arrive at the *campement*. A beautiful old stone construction, walls

completely around it, large round-arch portals, and a pretty courtyard in the center. The old wooden doors are adorned with typical Tuareg metal ornaments. And then, finally—a cold drink and a shower. In the afternoon, a Tuareg tea ceremony and a beautiful sunset over the desert.



Figure 37. Our pleasant hotel in Timbuktu and one of its doors.



Figure 38. Timbuktu main street.

Cold beer is available in the new Yugoslav-run supermarket, which fits here like a UFO landed in the desert. But mainly we enjoy wandering around a true desert city. Daytime temperatures rarely drop below 40°C. Apparently, some madrassas (schools, universities) and mosques hold rich collections of old codices, manuscripts written many centuries ago. We do not have access to such things, people are rather closed towards us foreigners. In

2012, Islamist Tuareg rebels took the city. They eventually fled from the French and Malian military, not without setting an important library with old manuscripts on fire. Today, it is not advised to travel into this area.

Our last leg in Mali takes us through the desert along the Niger river to Gao for 430 kilometers, and then to Niamey in Niger. There is little transport along this route. Eventually, we find a battered old truck going our way.

We are comfortably installed in the back of the truck, the sun beating down on us, sitting on bags of millet, leaning against the rear end of the driver's cabin, together with an old rusty bedstead and other junk, two goats that balance precariously on this shaky voyage and pee all over the place, and a fresh leg of lamb hanging right behind us and getting all sandy. Presumably this heightens the *haut goût*.

On the dirt road, we get shaken and rolled like crazy, it is hard to hold on to anything. At some bumps, it feels like we were flying a meter high. Certainly better than a roller-coaster at a fair, and much cheaper for three days of this pleasure. This is the Malian notion of "comfort" and now also ours.

It is hot, we are tired, and then Dorothea complains that something is hitting her arm all the time. She is too tired to even look, so I tell her to move a bit aside, away from the lamb shank that is molesting her. She does, all is quiet, we are used to this kind of thing. The road is all sand, with endless desert on the left hand side and the idea of the river on the right hand one, but we are too far away to see it.

At noon, we rest under an acacia. I suffer again from some sort of heat stroke, as in Atar (page 22), do not feel well at all, and try to escape the heat by lying under the truck. At least some shade. I am hallucinating and see huge bottles of ice-cold lemonade walking through the desert towards me, so cold that the water condenses on them. Later a Land Rover with a Swiss licence plate drives up and delivers more ice-cold lemonade. But then reality takes over, and we continue on this gruelling trip across the desert.



Figure 39. Lunch stop on the road.



Figure 40. Dorothea relaxing on millet bags,  
lamb shank behind her and goat in front.

The only relief are the frequent stops when the truck gets stuck in the sand. In the



evening, we stop at a Tuareg camp and buy some fresh cow milk, still warm. We hope that this was it for the day, but the truck drives on until 03.00, like a Flying Dutchman. No thought of sleep, because every few minutes we are flying high in the air, then back hard with our bums on the millet bags.



Figure 41. Villages along the road from Timbuktu to Gao.

The next morning, we witness a rarity: a rainstorm in the desert. It pours down. We find an old tarp that is normally used to keep away the dirt. It is hard to hold it up, and we soon have black rivulets of dirty water running down our arms and into our clothes. By now, this hardly bothers us. Finally, a coffee on the market in Bourem.

Shortly after, this trip to hell ends. The driver has gauged a normally dry creek crossing the track incorrectly. Now the front wheels are deeply stuck in the mud. By cleverly spinning the wheels even more, the idiot driver manages to sink the truck even deeper. We are stuck, no question. They continue trying to get out, but in fact get into the mud deeper with every attempt. As night falls, the driver tells us that he will not be able to start his truck again with its empty battery and has to leave it running all night long. We lie on our bags of millet, tossing and turning to the loud noise of the diesel engine. We awake to a dreadful sound: dead silence. Literally dead, the engine has stopped.



Figure 42. Sunset and disaster.



Figure 43. ...and still she wears a smile.

This means that we were in deep trouble, since there is no way to push this heavy truck through the deep sand. Tough luck, so we sleep on, bothered only by concerted mosquito attacks.

The next morning, the idiot driver exhorts us cheerfully: *confiance, confiance en Dieu!*<sup>4</sup>. But we are prepared for an awfully long wait. On the drive, we have seen practically no other vehicles in the two days since Timbuktu. But then another desert miracle happens: a Land Rover. A ride into Gao. The driver deposits us unceremoniously at the outskirts, and we carry all our luggage into town. Both of us are totally exhausted, Dorothea almost crying with desperation. And in the rush to transfer into the Land Rover, she has lost her fine Dogon hat (Figures 29 and 43). I find a local hotel, rather a dump, with straw huts and mattresses on the floor. Dorothea refuses, rightly so, and finds the best place in town. We deserve this luxury.

In the late afternoon, we find a taxi brousse to Niamey in Niger. Mouraou Adama, the unfriendly driver, refuses to pick our luggage up at the hotel, and we have to lug it all the way to the taxi station. Leaving at 19.00, we have to stop frequently for repairs. They do not carry any tools or spare parts. Final breakdown at 21.00, after less than an hour of driving time. The car is only two months old. It is quite a feat of M. Adama to ruin this, normally very reliable, Peugeot 504, in such a short period. Clearly, it would not arrive in Niamey any time soon. Nor would we ...

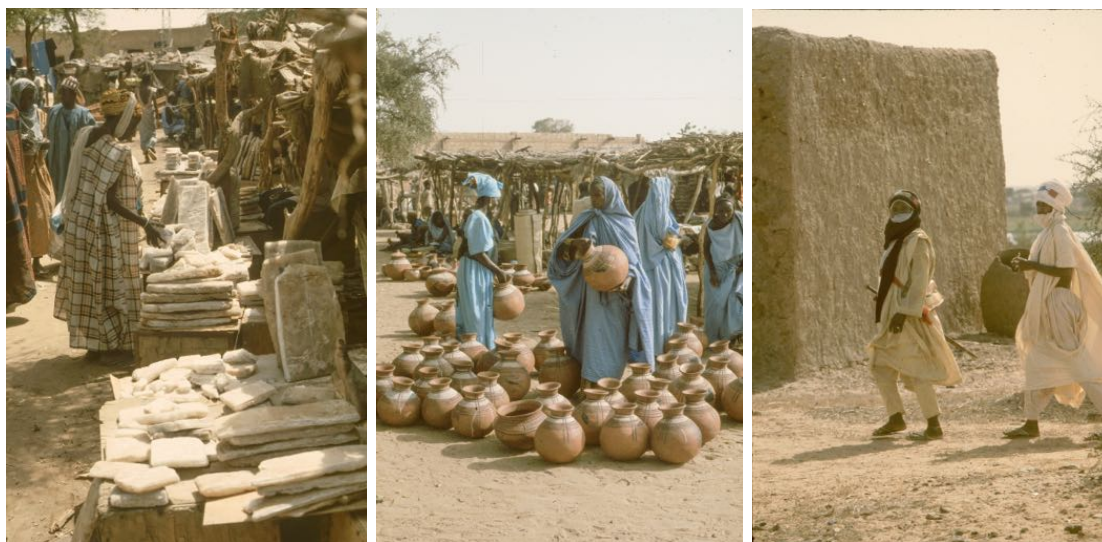


Figure 44. Market in Gao with salt slabs from Bilma.

At 02.00 the next day, a truck picks us up to Ansago. It is also our hotel for the night, sleeping on bags of dates. Very early in the morning we put up camp under a tree in the

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<sup>4</sup>trust, trust in God!



village center. Nothing decent to eat or drink. We wait in the heat until in the afternoon, a car is going to Ayorou in Niger *tout de suite*. Meaning: in a few hours. After twenty minutes of driving, the engine overheats. Our prospects fall, but eventually they resurrect the car, and we cross the border from Mali into Niger.

After our exhausting desert trip from Timbuktu, we finally arrive in Ayorou in Niger and are looking forward to a comfy hotel. That is not to be, the only hotel is closed. We put our sleeping bags smack in the central square of the little town, cover our meager belongings with our blankets, and are rather worried about what could happen at night. After all, this is not the open country where only animals roam, mainly mosquitos, but a town where human animals might roam. Nothing happens, fortunately. For Dorothea, going to the toilet was a nightmare. It is less than comfortable, but the value/price ratio was ok. (Roughly  $0/0$ , but in the mathematicians' language,  $\epsilon/0 = \infty$  for any  $\epsilon > 0$ .)

There is nothing inviting to stop us here, and off we are next morning on a bus to Niamey, the capital of Niger. Each of us has a seat, a luxury we have not enjoyed for many days of tough traveling through the desert. On arrival at 17.30 in Niamey, an even higher level of luxury is waiting for us: a room in the pleasant hotel *Moustache* of *Abdou Sidikou dit Moustache* with a shower and a toilet, even with toilet paper. Wow! How modest our expectations have become! We are truly and totally exhausted after this strenuous trip, incredibly uncomfortable, little to eat or drink, and with the continual uncertainty of whether we would arrive or not. A night in the paradise of a bed, without rattling, shaking, flying through the air, hard metal edges against shoulder or stomach, and then a day of rest are highly deserved.



Figure 45. Good morning! Hotel *air libre* on the main square of Ayorou.

We stroll through Niamey, a sleepy town. The *Grand Marché* and the *Petit Marché* are interesting, but we are too tired to become active purchasers. The museum shows

local villages and a dinosaur skeleton, but its most fascinating exhibit is the skeleton of the famous *arbre du Ténéré*. This acacia was the only tree within 400 kilometers in the huge emptiness of the Ténéré desert, even shown as a landmark on the usual Michelin maps. And then some idiotic truck driver ran into it in 1973, with fatal results for the tree. Imagine: 400 km on either side to pass, and still not to manage!



Figure 46. Drumming it up in Niamey.

One day's rest is enough to get us back into shape, and the next day we want to go from Niamey to Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. The name means *homeland of the incorruptible* and is so totally inappropriate that it comes across as a practical joke; formerly it was called Upper Volta.

We find a car that is leaving *tout de suite* (immediately). After seven hours of waiting, it does indeed start. In a sense, at least, since the starter is broken and we have to push it. This is, of course, frequently repeated. At each of the many police checkpoints throughout the night drive, all passengers have to descend, stand in line like a bunch of soldiers, and have their documents inspected by tough-looking but not very bright policemen. At one point, I give him my passport upside down, he leafs thoughtfully through it, nods, and hands it back to me, still upside down. But he wears a gun, so what am I to say? At these checkpoints, they always ask for money. We never pay anything and get away with it. At one point, Dorothea is so exasperated that she storms into the soldiers' hut and shouts to leave us poor passengers sleep in peace—that helps, but only at that one checkpoint. Each time there is a scramble for the seats in the pick up truck with two long benches facing each other..

Normally these are tiring but uneventful drives. But on this one, the passenger next to us tries to pick a fight. We do not know what irks him. This troublemaker picks a

fight for more space, shoving his elbow into Dorothea's face. She asks him politely to behave properly, but he will not listen. We switch places, but he starts his elbowing game again, this time with me. I see a bend ahead in the road, take his arm, and throw him forcefully across the aisle into the people on the opposite bench, aided by the centrifugal forces. Big applause for me from everybody—except the aggressor—; they all disapprove of his obnoxious behavior. The taxi stops, the others explain the situation, and the troublemaker continues his trip sitting on the floor of the car.

After some hours of sleep somewhere on the way, the driver continues the next day practicing for the Dakar rally, racing at an incredible speed over the red laterite mud road, taking aim at every pothole, the deeper the better. At noon, in Fada N'Gourma, the car has to be repaired. I ask him politely, and with the nodding agreement of the other passengers, to drive a bit more reasonably. This earns just a snort from him.

And then it happens. He hits a donkey, the car is stopped. True to his mentality, the driver does not apologize or offer any compensation to the poor peasant owner of the donkey, but scolds him (and the donkey) for having damaged his bus. As if the donkey had been driving at Fast and Furious speeds. He even wants its owner to pay for the damage to the car, while it was all the driver's fault. A sad incident, and we do not know what became of the donkey, because we take off at breakneck speed right away.

We are so relieved to arrive in Ouagadougou (colloquially: Ouaga) alive. The main reason we are here is that I love this name, so melodic, so soft, such a pleasing sound. Besides its lovely name, the town does not have much to boast. Truckloads of mopeds have arrived recently, and they are being assembled everywhere in the streets. Oh well, we have traded loud mopeds for the wonderful silence at the Bandiagara escarpment. Such is life.

We spend three slow days in Ouaga, running around for passport stamps and papers at the BNST (*Bureau National de Sécurité du Territoire*), but mainly enjoying good food and drink, some friendly people (and ignoring the others), and buying souvenirs.

From Ouaga, we take a *taxi brousse* to Bolgatanga in Ghana. We chat with James Adoguya, a pleasant bus conductor working for the Omnibus Services Authority and carrying a bicycle. We correspond afterwards, I send him photographs and he sends me one of him with his wife. In his letter from November 1978 (Figure 47), he notes that “traveling is you white men work.” This acute observation hits right home: the locals see white people only traveling, and think that that is what we do all our lives. If only it were so! Moreover, this bus-driving philosopher has inadvertently hit on the etymological connection between travel and work, *travail* in French.

At the Bolgatanga bus station, big women, all with a child strung on their backs, sell goods. Dorothea buys a beautiful straw basket. Afterwards, we wait in the bus to Kumasi for it to leave. Out of my customary politeness (haha, would Dorothea say), I have left the seat by the open window to her, and she leans out of the bus into the fresh air. Suddenly, she looks up to the clear blue sky and shouts “Look, it's raining”. Ahem, I say, sorry, but I think we have goats on the roof of the bus. She dries her forehead and

arms and that was it. This is Africa. You have to love it or leave it.

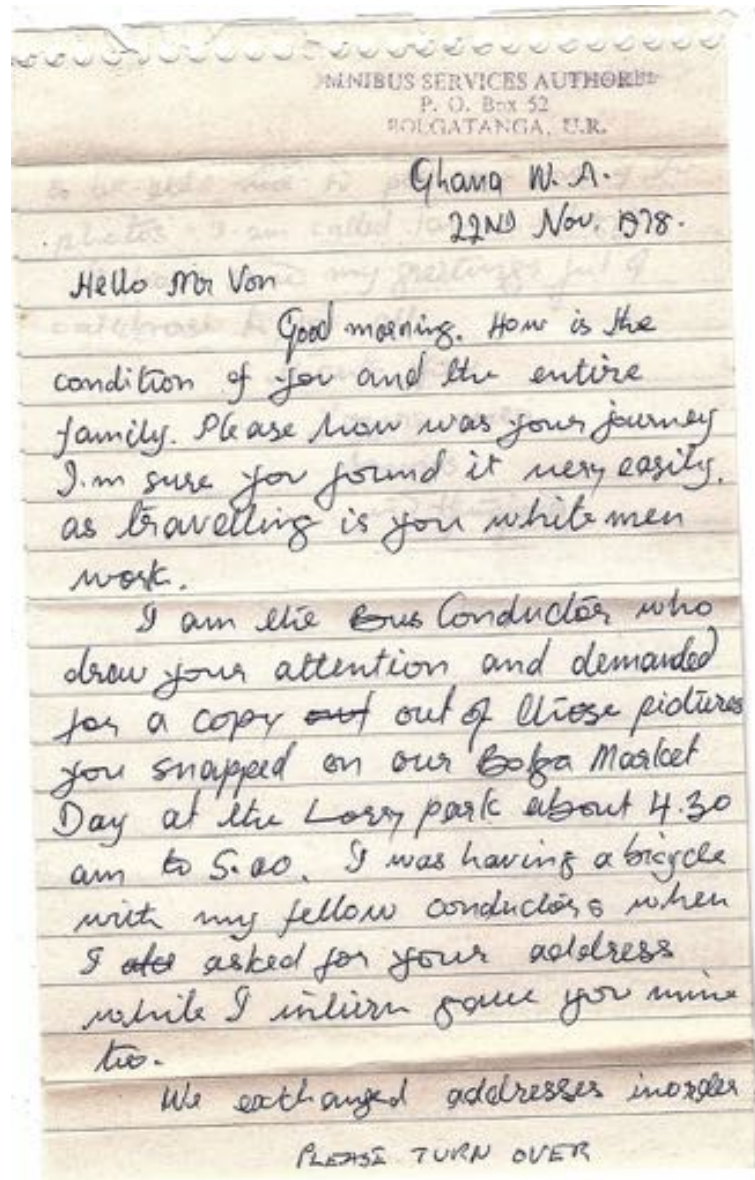


Figure 47. First page of the letter from James Adoguya.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>James Adoguya writes on 22 November 1978: Minibus Services Authority, P.O. Box 52, Bolgatanga, U.R. Ghana, W.A. [West Africa], 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov. 1978. Hello Mr. Von. Good morning. How is the condition of you and the entire family. Please how was your journey. I'm sure you found it very easily, as travelling



Figure 48. Bus with active goats on top.

Via Tamale and Kintampo we go to Kumasi, the second largest town in Ghana, where we arrive in the afternoon of the next day. After checking into a hotel, I rush to the train station. A train buff's dream.

Steam locomotives shunting passenger and cargo cars, loud whistling and white plumes of steam rising to the sky. The train driver Alex Boakye Ampofo from the Loco Running is you white men work. I am the Bus Conductor who drew your attention and demanded for a copy out of those pictures you snapped on our Bolga[tanga] Market Day at the lorry park about 4.30 am to 5.00. I was having a bicycle with my fellow conductors when I asked for your address while I inturn gave you mine too. ...



Shed explains a few things to me, and I can board his loco. It is a fascinating trip back into train history. You cannot see this anymore in Europe, real working steam locomotives. My friend Wally Burke (see Australia, page 1005) would have loved to be here. Train tracks cross a large market, with herds of vendors, buyers, loiterers, women carrying babies, and two tourists walking along the tracks, all moving slowly away when the whistling comes closer. We try some palm wine. It is slightly alcoholic, but reminds Dorothea of sauerkraut juice.



Figure 49. Steam loco at Kumasi.

We take a bush taxi to Cape Coast, through dense tropical rain forest. What a visual relief after weeks in the desert and the sahel!

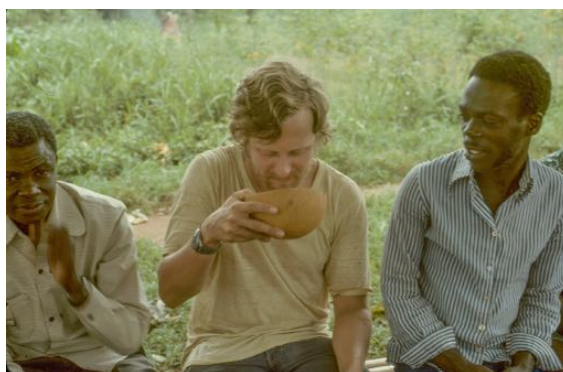


Figure 50. Millet beer fortification on the road.

In our hotel, we meet Comfort, a women who spent five years in Germany with her husband, now divorced. Her comment: “Ghanaian men are all pigs. As soon as they have a bit of money, they only think of buying other women.” We visit Cape Coast Castle and Fort Williams.

The next day, we arrive in the cozy fishing village of Dixcove, near Sekondi-Takoradi towards the border with Ivory Coast. The British colonists built the impressive Fort Metal Cross in 1683. It served a sinister purpose. Slaves were caught in the hinterland and brought here for shipment to the Americas. On these infamous transports, many victims died.

When we are there, the fort, now *Dixcove castle*, has been restored in a nice way and serves a better purpose, as guest house for visitors. Few of them come, since the location is far from everywhere, and we have the pleasure of being the only guests. Our huge room has almost no furniture in it: a petroleum lamp, two wooden bedsteads, and not even nails in the wall to hang our clothes, totally quiet. The castle lies on top of a hill, with impressive views to all sides, but mainly to the port and the sea.



Figure 51. Dixcove Castle.



Figure 52. Just two of the many babies we saw on our trip.

Food every day is rice with eggs or rice with fish. Our peaceful mood shows in a



two-liner we made up: “am Abend ein Joint, und die Nacht ist dein Frint.”. We can walk around as we please and sit on the old cannons.

Then a momentous event in our lives takes place, which makes Dixcove Castle the most important stop of this trip. Namely, I get enslaved into marriage. We have seen throughout this trip everywhere women with babies on their backs, even little girls carrying their smaller siblings. Now Dorothea wants to have babies of her own, and she proposes to me: “Either you marry me or that’s it.”. I try to tell her that we should really get to know each other better before taking such a grave decision, since we have been together for only thirteen years. To no avail, the ultimatum stands. I beg for a deliberation time of one night, which is gracefully granted. And in the morning I kneel in front of Dorothea and accept her proposal. Our procedure is refreshingly different from the one in former times, where the future bridegroom kneels in front of the bride’s father and asks for her hand.

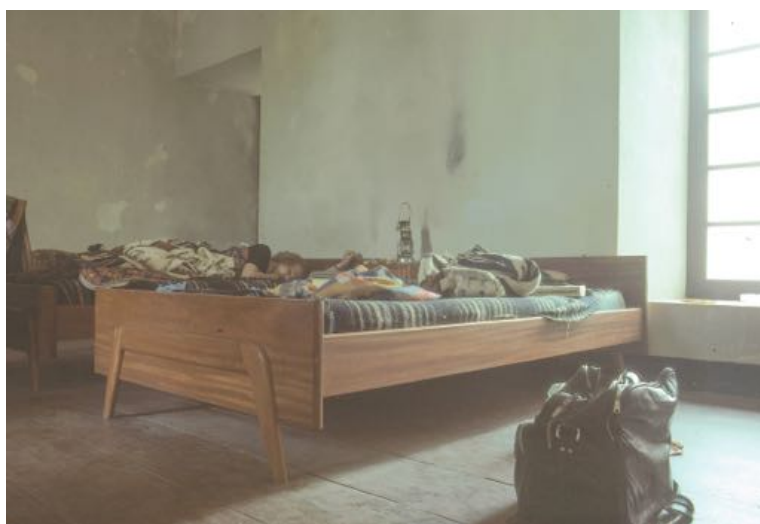


Figure 53. The room where she asked for my hand.

We get married soon after, in January 1979, and our first daughter Rafaela is born nine months later. Thus she was mentally conceived in a slave castle; the required physical exertion took place three months later. I have not regretted our decision (as far as it was ours) for a single minute. We have had and are still having such a good time together! Presumably unrelated to our private decision, the castle becomes a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the next year 1979.

This being said, I still have to confess that I do not really see the reasons for getting married. Three of them are convincing: financial, permits, and names, but the general feeling of elation about such a step still escapes me. Financial: in many countries, especially in Germany, you get a hefty tax break when you are married with two substantially

different incomes. Permits: it would have been difficult for us to go together on visits to foreign countries (partially) paid by the host, and we have done this many times. Names: it is nice for children to have two parents with identical last names. This makes it easy for one parent to travel with a child, and in school they do not have to do much explaining about different last names in the family.

We go to Sekondi-Takoradi and Accra, Ghana's capital, where we stroll to Fort Ussher and Fort James. The president's palace, Castle Christiansborg, is closely guarded and no photos are permitted.

After arriving in Lomé, Togo, we search for a nice place to stay, but end up in the lousy *Hôtel de la Plage* on the major intersection where the international road from Ghana crosses the main city thoroughfare. All night long, we are victims of the infernal noise of trucks stopping at the red light, then accelerating to get away. We stayed at noisy places elsewhere, but this probably takes the top of the decibel rating. Hot water shower on arrival, the only hot water the hotel has during our visit. We take a nice walk on the beach. Some time before this trip, our friend Wolfgang Kory provided one of our motivations for this visit: he showed us an interesting ticket for a fine that had been imposed on him right here, *pour chier à la plage*<sup>6</sup>. I would love to get such a ticket, but my digestion does not play along.

I go on my own to Cotonou in Bénin (formerly Dahomey), and Calavi. Dorothea does not feel like coming along. The country is rather different from its neighbor Togo. Revolutionary slogans are everywhere in the *République Populaire du Bénin*, large posters and pictures with slogans of socialism and international solidarity. I take an interesting boat excursion on the *Lagune de Ganvié*. A long time ago, the inhabitants of the shore fled into this shallow lagoon from warring invaders. It is 10 to 100 centimeters deep, and the dwellings are built on stilts, as in Lake Inle in Burma; see page 988. The boat manoeuvres through gardens of water plants and tree trunks that are meant to attract fish. This lacustrine village has about 20 000 inhabitants who live from fishing. A peaceful (except for the noise of the outboard engine) and fascinating visit to people living on water.

On 26 October 1978, exactly one year before the birth of our daughter Rafaela, mentally conceived on this trip, we depart back home. Dorothea writes her last lines in our diary, imitating the usual lengthy African greetings: "Ça va? Oui, ça va très bien. Adieu Afrique, bonjour Europe, le paradis nous attend. Tout parfait, les voitures parfaites, les restaurants pleins de boissons et avec d'énormes quantités de choses à manger. Qu'est-ce que vous désirez? Il y a de tout ce que vous désirez. Ça va madame? Ça va monsieur? Oui, ça va! Quelle chance pour nous d'avoir la possibilité de vivre dans le paradis!"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>For defecating on the beach.

<sup>7</sup>How are you? Fine, we are well. Good-bye Africa, hello Europe, paradise is waiting for us. All is perfect, perfect cars, restaurants with plenty of drink and food. What do you desire? We have all that you desire. How are you, Madam? How are you, Mister? Yes, I'm fine. How lucky for us to have the chance of living in paradise!

## Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco 1973

*On our first African voyage, Dorothea and I enjoy the hospitality in these North African countries, marvel at the endless dunes with well-defined geometric patterns in the Sahara, delve into the colorful atmosphere of the markets, and are impressed by many well-preserved Roman ruins. We also get a feel of the heavy bureaucracy (when applying for a visa) and the art of pickpockets.*



My “first trip to Africa” in 1970 is a complete failure, but we turn it into a nice voyage. With my brother Christoph and his friend Helmut Bienas, we drive in my old Audi 100 to Palermo in Sicily, to catch the boat to Tunis from there. On arrival, they tell us there is no chance to find a spot on this weekly ferry for the next five weeks. We try our best, without success. We see a veiled woman with six children from a Tunisian family, who also have not obtained a ticket for their car, board the ship. Her husband is in line to drive onto the ferry. He is refused, and then the ship departs, the woman and the children standing at a railing and wailing their sorrow and anger. The devastated lady has probably never learnt how to do things on her own. This sorry spectacle is convincing, and we think about going around the Mediterranean the other way, through Italy, France, and Spain to Morocco, but then decide against that lengthy drive. Instead, we have a wonderful time in Greece and Hungary.

My second attempt also starts out miserably. In 1973, Dorothea and I set out from Zürich in our old VW bus, with which Frank and I had gone on an adventurous road trip to India, see page 929. Dorothea is apparently full of unclear and unspoken anxieties and suffers from diarrhea on her first major trip. But after that, everything goes well.

Taught by experience, I have reserved our ferry from Palermo to Tunis. We meet

Sayed Akrimi, a pleasant young Tunisian, on board and while away the time.

After arriving in Tunis, our first activity is Dorothea's shopping in the suq (market). Nice fabric. In Sidi Bou Saïd, a suburb near the ruins of ancient Carthage, Sayed and his friend Mustafa Saïd introduce us to the wonderful North African *thé à la menthe* and *thé aux pignons* (green tea with fresh mint leaves and tea with pine nuts), a delicacy that we enjoy in several countries of the Maghreb. We share a shisha (water pipe) and long conversations about the world. The village is straight out of 1001 nights: houses painted in brilliant white, offset with azure doors, balconies, windows, all this under a bright Mediterranean sun. A very pretty first impression of the African continent that we will never forget. In the next decades of traveling, we see many other pretty locations on this continent, and also abominable ones.



Figure 54. In Carthage with Sayed.

From Tunis we head south to Hammamet and its beaches, then to Kairouan. This town has the oldest mosque in the country, a center of Islamic learning. In the mosque, we put dutifully a wraparound over our bare shoulders, stretching down to our bare legs.

In Sfax, we sleep in a copse of olive and fig trees, wonderfully quiet under a starry sky. Overnighting outside like this was no problem then, but is too dangerous nowadays.

On the island of Jerba, we camp out on an open beach. Already early in the morning, it gets too hot in the car for sleeping. To combat the heat of the day, I try to put up a bedsheet as a canopy stretching along the sides of our VW bus, but fail miserably. For lack of proper fastening material, our canopy collapses in the wind at every attempt after a few minutes. In the evening, there is a dance on the beach. Four men in long wide skirts and red tops play drums, two others swirl around in front of them. Women and girls sit at a safe distance of 50 meters. The only light comes from the moon and petroleum lamps. A very relaxing atmosphere.



Figure 55. Jerba: ferry to the island, miserable shade and kitchen,  
and a sea monster.

Already centuries ago, the Berbers around the town of Matmata invented a cool way to escape the extreme heat: live underground. They dig large holes, about six meters deep, and several “rooms” branching out from the bottom. Our troglodyte stay in one of them, now the *Hotel Marhala*, is a refreshing relief from the oppressing temperatures on Jerba. Rafaela and I spend a night in another one on our later trip to Libya; see page 105. A simpler alternative are cylindrical huts called *ghorfas*, which we find in Metameur. They are made from thick unfired clay bricks and keep the heat out somewhat, but not as effectively as the caves. Typically, they are built around a square into which sheep and goats would be driven in case of a conflict. In the evening, Dorothea is invited to a



festivity—women only.



Figure 56. Troglodyte hotel in Matmata, with an old Berber woman and a young Swiss one.

Sayed's family has invited us to their small village Bir el Haffey. This is a big event for them: visitors from Europe. Maybe their first such guests to enjoy the overwhelming hospitality in this poor rural area. A lamb is brought in and slaughtered. We get the best pieces: liver and heart, delicious. The family eats tomato soup and couscous from a large bowl. Dorothea is the only woman around. Our bed is prepared on the floor, with soft alfalfa grass and a carpet in a cool room. We sleep very well.



Figure 57. Ghorfas in Metameur.

Karl May (1842–1912) was a German writer of travel fiction. He wrote fascinating stories from around the globe, without ever having been to one of those places. In my youth, every German boy around 10 to 16 years of age read his books, which are practically unknown in the English-speaking world. James Fenimore Cooper's novels have a similar flavor. Over 200 million copies of May's works have been printed. I am one of the few Karl-May-inspired young readers who could convert their adolescent dreams of great travel to exciting and dangerous areas into reality.





Figure 58. Driving on serir towards Bir el Haffey

I still have a large collection of these books; some of them are gifts from my father, who read them when he was of that age. In the very first of about 100 travel books, his heroes Kara ben Nemsi (Karl the German) and Haji Halef Omar ben Haji Abu l'Abbas ibn Haji Dawūd al-Gossarah (yes, I wrote this name by heart, fifty years later without looking up the books<sup>8</sup>) travel through the dangerous salt pan of the Shott el-Djerid in Southern Tunisia. And on this trip, at the tender age of 23 years, I come to that place which I know so well from memory. From Matmata to Tozeur and Nefta, Dorothea and I straddle the rim of the Shott el-Djerid. What a feeling to reach such a far-out place of boyhood dreams!

We cross the border from Nefta into Algeria and to the desert town of El Oued. This is my first time in the desert and I am totally fascinated. Huge dunes of sand stretching to the horizon, always rising gently on the windward side and sharply dropping off on the leeward side. The edges at the top of those dunes are perfectly well defined and describe beautifully winding curves, behind which the mathematician's eye sees inherently the partial differential equations defining them. I am so much taken in that Dorothea complains about my "crawling" style of driving; usually her complaints are about speeding. The heat is atrocious, reaching almost 50°C in the shade—only there is no shade. I hang a towel over our steering wheel, but around noon the temperature blows the limits of our thermometer, maybe 70°C in the sun, so hot that I cannot even touch the towel. At night, the temperature drops to a cool 35°C. Dorothea washes some T-shirts with as much sweat as water and hangs them up outside. Ten minutes later they are dry. Each of us drinks eight liters of water per day, delicious *Ben Haroun* mineral water. After a few steps outside, we spend much of the day in a shady hotel garden with our friend Ben Haroun. Finally no sand between our teeth.

The oasis of El Oued is famous for its date palms. They stand in large holes, 3 to 5 meters deep and protected by a sand wall, each containing 50 to 200 trees. In the center,

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<sup>8</sup>May writes the German Hadschi for Haji.

the palm trees struggle to find water underneath. The owners regularly have to shovel out the sand that is blown in.



Figure 59. El Oued: Dorothea and baskets for cleaning sand out of the palm groves.

From El Oued we head to Touggourt through the Great Oriental Erg, sand desert at its most beautiful.

The Roman ruins at Timgad are impressive: Trajan's street, marble pillars 15 meters high and 1.5 meters thick, library, forum, theater, capitol, and a nice museum. The dry desert air has conserved these monuments through the millenia.

After their victory over Hannibal and their conquest and destruction of Carthage in 146 BC, the Romans conquered North Africa. It was then an agriculturally rich province, very different from the current desert lands. The Romans built up sizeable cities, showcasing their culture with temples, forum, market, theaters, sports arenas, circuses, transcontinental roads, rich villas with mosaics and fountains, luxury baths, and other manifestations of their civilization.

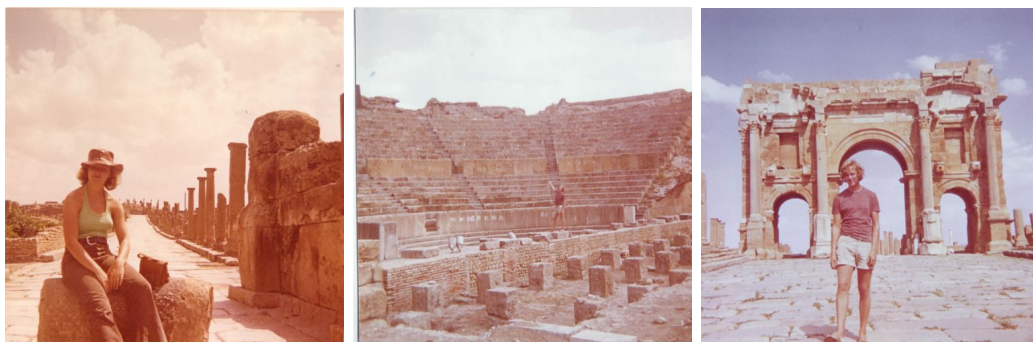


Figure 60. Timgad: the theater and two young Romans.

After the decay of the Roman Empire, they fell into oblivion but impressive ruins still remain. I have visited many such places and satisfied my ruinenlust. Whether and when the Roman level of civilization was attained again in this area is open to debate.

We drive up north towards the coast to Constantine, an ancient Phoenician and Roman city. It is called the *City of bridges* for the many picturesque crossings of the deep ravine of the Rhumel river traversing the city. The Sidi M'Cid bridge spans the ravine at its deepest place. In a curious culinary interlude, we pass a hole-in-the-wall restaurant that serves delicious whole fried chicken at its three tiny tables. Dorothea almost sits in the barbecue. We order a plate each—and do not know how to attack the chicken on our plates. From one side or another: where are drumsticks, breast, wings? This chicken has a lot of brain, tongue and many teeth. After a while, we realize that these are actually goats' heads, fried to perfection but with little edible contents. We have a good laugh at our ignorance of desert cuisine. On leaving, we see the large open plastic container with goats' heads and ears.

We owe a lot to a medical doctor from Constantine. In 1989, an *Anopheles mosquito* infected Dorothea and myself with *plasmodium falciparum*, a nasty little beast that settles and thrives in human livers. Untreated, this type of malaria can be deadly. Charles Louis Alphonse Laveran discovered this protozoon in Constantine in 1880, for which he received the Nobel Prize in medicine in 1907. If recognized early enough, it can easily be treated, and we profited from this; see Solomon slands, page 1010.

On towards the capital of Algiers In Djemila, we see further powerful vestiges of the Roman occupation of North Africa. Theater, temple, arch of triumph, and above all, picturesque mosaics in the museum: abduction of Europa, Venus' morning toilet.



Figure 61. Djemila: the *cardo maximus* and us.

Beautifully located in a bay, the city of Algiers also hosts a fine museum, the Bardo. This is a 200-year old villa in a Turkish style, with many colorful tiles, corridors, courtyards with springs, arcades, and alcoves. Many of its exhibits are artifacts from the Sahara. However, our main purpose was to secure a visa to Morocco, for the next leg of our trip. But that was not so easy.

Spain has held three colonies in North Africa, Ceuta and Melilla until today, and Western Sahara. The wars about the division of the latter country (see page 147) are still going on during our visit, and Algeria hosts the exile government of the *Polisario Front*. The Moroccans are not amused, and the two countries are on the verge of war for some time.

For us, this has the unfortunate consequence that the Moroccan diplomats in Algiers have instructions to be reluctant in issuing visas. We are told it will take a week, then again a week, and the whole business eventually drags on for seventeen days. They have to send a telegram to their capital Rabat inquiring whether we are criminals. Just waiting for a visa!

We want to get out of the city and go to Douaouda, a small fishing village some 80 kilometers west of Algiers, and camp there for the first week. And the second week, and so on. The interminable delay is frustrating, but we take it in good spirits and make the best of our time on the beach.

On this and my previous trips I do not carry a camera—I do not want to feel like being a “Japanese tourist”, a stereotype that exists already then. Today I regret to not have any pictures from those marvellous voyages. On this trip, Dorothea carries a tiny Kodak Instamatic. I hate its blurred photos in faded colors, rarely take a picture, and actually find it silly to take one. One day, Dorothea asks me to snap a photo, to which I reply: “but we already took one this morning.”. But in the following year, 1994, Maria teaches me on our voyage to South East Asia (see Thailand, page 976) that even as an amateur, you can take fabulous photographs. I simply did not know this. But ever since, I lug around heavy camera equipment and enjoy beautiful pictures afterwards. This book exhibits a tiny sample from them.

On 11 September (!) 1973, while we ask at the Moroccan embassy about the progress on our visa applications, we learn that there is a large industrial fair in Algiers, the *Foire Internationale d’Alger* in the Palais des Expositions. We go there innocently and talk to some Germans exhibiting their wares at the fair. At the stand of the German subsidiary of ITT, then a large US corporation in telecommunications, there is a celebration going on, and we accept a glass of champagne from Herr Müller without knowing what is happening. The TV screen shows it: they are celebrating the bloody coup of Augusto Pinochet against Salvador Allende, who nationalized ITT’s business in Chile. A tragedy that is, for us, reason for anger and sadness, not for celebration. Fifteen years later, we are happy to witness the first stage of the dictator’s downfall; see Chile, page 654. In a sense, we were personal witnesses of the rise and fall of Pinochet.

After finally procuring our visa in Algiers, we drive into Morocco right away. Pretty soon, we are in Europe again. More precisely, in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. Formalities are relaxed. The fences and other border installations that were built in 2014 to stall the tide of African refugees trying to reach this African part of the European Union do not yet exist.

We celebrate Dorothea’s birthday in the medina of Fez, an interesting old town, and

push on to Meknès the next day. Following the Atlantic coast towards the south, we come to the impressive Roman ruins of *Volubilis*, founded by Berbers in the third century BC. One can see very well the outline of the prestigious homes and imagine the life of wealthy Romans. Beautiful mosaics, patio with a fountain, dining room with mosaics, strangely oriented away from the entrance, bathrooms, kitchen, etc. Right besides Caracalla's arch of triumph is a particularly impressive house. The upper gate offers a nice view of the whole complex. We walk on sidewalks that Roman generals, legionaries, and citizens have stepped on almost 2000 years ago. But while they shopped and dined at the hundreds of stores and restaurants behind arcaded porticoes, we can only imagine doing so—rather strenuous in the desert heat. We are pretty much alone, but this changed by the time of our second visit in 1995; see page 144. We traverse the city on the paved *decumanus maximus* (main street). This was the main Roman transport artery running along the Mediterranean coast from here to Alexandria in Egypt, with a total length of about 3300 kilometers. Its end in Volubilis is crowned by the *Arch of Caracalla*, a large triumphal arch dedicated to the Emperor Caracalla (188–217), who was of North African extraction. Such engineering feats of the Romans are hugely impressive. Did you know that the diameter of the Apollo moon rocket, launched in 1969, just four years before our trip, was determined by Caesar? He set a standard gauge for Roman carts and long-distance roads; on the *decumanus maximus*, you can still see the deep furrows that donkey-drawn carts made over time.



Figure 62. The Arch of Caracalla in Volubilis.



This gauge was exported to all Roman provinces, and it became the standard gauge also in Roman Britain, later for British railways, and in consequence also in the USA. The Apollo rocket was transported by train from its manufacturing site in California to its launch site, the Kennedy Space center in Florida. And it had to cross tunnels whose width had been determined by Caesar, over 2000 years before!



Figure 63. Volubilis: an arch of the basilica, and mosaics: fishing and bathing (Ariadne and nymph).

Our days in Marrakesh transport us to medieval magic. On the *Jemaa el Fna* (“assembly of malefactors”), the city’s main square, story tellers are reciting tales from Moroccan and Muslim history to a ravished audience of young and old sitting around them with shining eyes. We do not understand a word, but these are moving scenes from old traditions. Cobras in baskets raise their body to the sound of their master’s flute. Acrobats, open-air dentists, ambulant vendors, beggars, Berber women, self-proclaimed pharmacists with wonder pills and ostrich medication, water sellers, boxers in boxing rings, impertinent boys, and pickpockets perform their feats, some more pleasing than others. In the suq (market), we go berserk with all the nice things on display. Hundreds of stores, stalls, and kiosks offer clay amphoras and tajine trays for food, brass lamps and table tops, and the famous Goulimine glass beads, all very decorative. There are special sections for

caftan tailors, carpet weavers, brass smiths, leather tailors, and for the leather tanners stomping with bare feet on sheep and cow hides, in an atmosphere poisoned by the evil stench of the tanning acid. We have plenty of space in our VW bus and make three shopping trips per day to the car: pearl pendants, brass plates, clay jars, pipes, drums, flutes, leather belts, silver chains, leather purses, poufs (leather seating cushions), chilums (pipes), shishas (water pipes), bags, brass mortars and boxes, bracelets, pearl belts, sandals. 1001 beautiful things. In the evening we are totally exhausted from shopping and bargaining, and happy. This is our first time in an oriental bazar, we have never before seen such a colorful place, and fall for its charms hook, line and sinker. Architectural sites like the Koutoubia and the Bab-Agnaon feel somehow stale, they fade besides the high-energy life on Jemaa el Fna.



Figure 64. Tanners' hell in Fez, a lonely drive through the serir desert, and a desert market.

Many people warn us about the nimble pickpockets everywhere. I do not quite believe this and run a little experiment. In Rabat, I buy a cheap leather purse, stuff it with newspaper, and place it in the back pocket of my jeans. We walk through the suq, me being careful and Dorothea keeping an eye on me from behind. Nothing happens, no thief! ... Except that back at the hotel, I find that my purse has gone. Incredible. They are true artists in their profession. (Since 2015, young Moroccan professionals have been practising their art in shopping concourses in Germany.)

Crossing the Atlas mountains over the Tizi-u-Tichka pass, we drive to Ouarzazate, on the edge of the Sahara. Bad rocky roads, with sharp edges that challenge our car's tires (but the tires won), through a hostile arid mountainscape in the heat. At one of the rare intersections, a surprising figure: a hitch-hiker. We asked him where he was going: "to the left". "Well, but we turn right here." "That's fine as well", and we take him the wrong direction until the next village. Now there's a flexible hitch-hiker.

We drive further south through the Wadi Draa. Beside the road, makeshift stalls sell geodes, hard volcanic balls with crystals inside. Red, pink, green. Quartz, achate, amethyst. We buy several of these beautiful pieces, one of our purchases is for a small

amount of money plus a pair of old broken sandals. In the Wadi, the houses are built from black volcanic material, like a fort, almost no windows, but crenellated and with bastions. We get a wonderfully primitive campsite in Zagora, at the edge of the Sahara. Sand everywhere, even in our dishes. But then there is this enigmatic signpost *Timbuktu—52 days*, showing a camel caravan. In my profound ignorance, I am not even sure whether Timbuktu is a fantasy place from 1001 Nights or a real city. But here is irrefutable evidence of its reality. And a challenge at the same time. Indeed, only five years later, we arrive in Timbuktu (page 47), although by boat and not in 52 days by camel caravan, which would have been the real challenge.

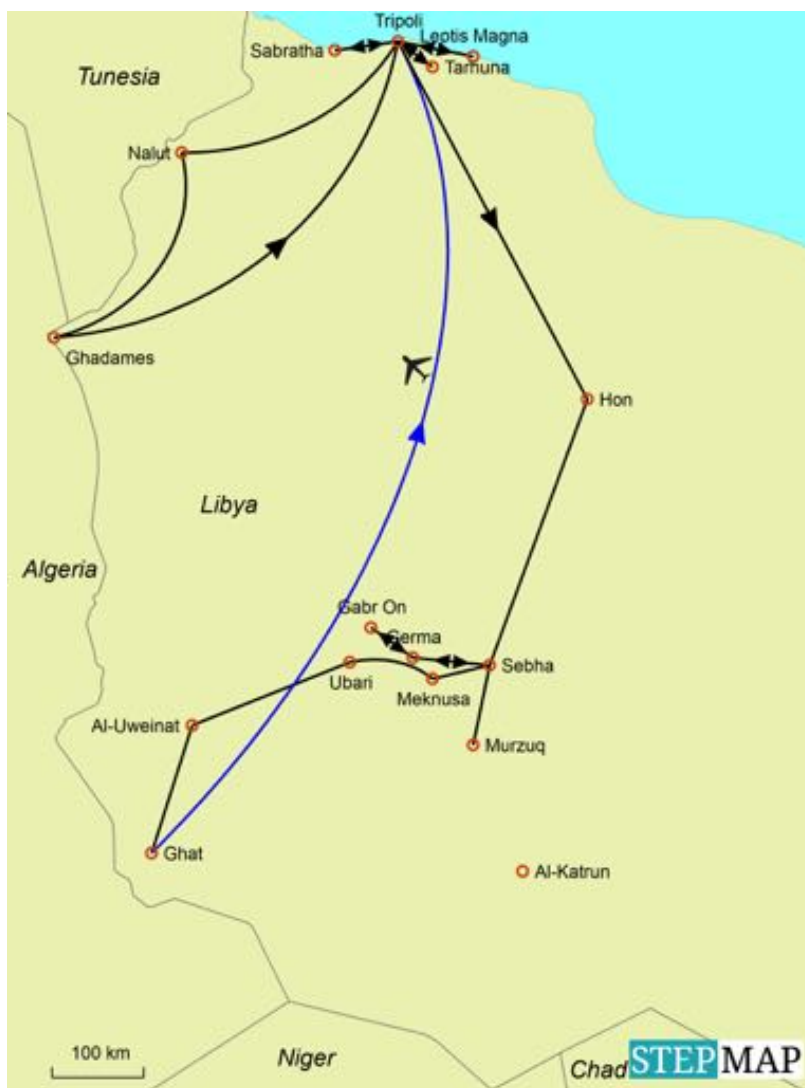
We continue on a really bad road to Tazenakhte. It gets dark and we have to sleep in a lonely stone desert.

The town of Goulimine is famous for its colorful glass beads, a centuries-old craft. We buy some of these simple but nice trinkets, bargaining hard with the store owners, sometimes tongue-in-cheek. On the camel market, we see our first Tuareg, men in blue.

In Agadir, we meet two friends from Switzerland, Edi Odermatt and Hanni in their ritzy hotel. We have a good time together, but I'd rather sleep in a stone desert.

## Libya 1979

*My “first honeymoon” is an adventurous trip to Libya on my own. The beauty of the desert with its dunes, oases, ancient rock engravings, and old towns is overwhelming, as is the hospitality, mainly of immigrants. But I also get into contact with Qadhāfi’s brutal regime, being thrown into a prison cell. Severe misjudgements on my part almost lead to disaster as I run out of water on a desert hike.*



On our 1978 trip to West Africa, Dorothea enslaved me into a marriage that that has worked well for both of us; see page 61. So much so, that we got married in January 1979. We could not go on a honeymoon right away, because I was just finishing my PhD thesis.



We intended to go in the summer, but our plans were voided by a stroke of luck: our eldest daughter Rafaela was on her way to be born in October 1979. We compensated with a wonderful lune-de-miel-à-trois the following year; see Sri Lanka, page 951. Rafaela and her sister Désirée, born in Toronto two and a half years later, are the greatest pleasures of our lives.

So, as a minor inconvenient, I have to go on our honeymoon trip all by myself, and decide to visit Libya Getting my Libyan visa is an interesting experience. In their embassy in Bonn, six business people in suits and myself apply for a visa. I expect that they will obtain a visa and I will not, being just a student in a rather relaxed outfit. I am the only one to fill the forms in Arabic, and able to make smalltalk with the consular staff, having learned some of that language for my trip to the Arabian peninsula in 1977; see Jordan, pages 935 ff. Only one of us is granted a visa—guess who! The reason cannot have been my jeans and T-shirt, but rather the impression I created of being interested in the country and having learnt the language. My linguistic skills have proven so useful during my travels!

After a few days in Malta, I arrive in Tripoli, the capital of Libya, then under the dictator Mu'ammār Qadhāfī (Gaddafi). He was involved in the massacre of Israeli athletes at the München Olympic Games in 1972, and responsible for the blowing up of PanAm Flight 103 in 1988 over Lockerbie in Scotland. During the Libyan rebellion in 2011, he was brutally killed. No tears were shed for this guy, but since then the country has fallen into anarchy, one of whose sorry consequences is the massive flight of African refugees via Libya across the Mediterranean to Europe, driven by unscrupulous dealers in human misery. Thousands of people have drowned on these perilous crossings, and human traffickers have made millions from their misery. This loss of life is greater than anything that Qadhāfī could have achieved with his worst schemes.



Figure 65. Triumphal arches in Tripoli of Marc Aurel and Qadhāfī. The first one has lasted 1800 years, the second one is already gone.

On arrival in Tripoli, I fill my immigration form in Arabic, but the official does not like that. He stares at it for five minutes, then tells me to wait. This is a bit surprising, because the effect was the opposite at the embassy in Bonn. It does not sound good, so



I quickly fill a form in English, steal my passport back under his eyes, and go to another line. I get my stamp right away and am through.

On my first stroll through town, I have no map and no idea where I am, until I get to the sea and the castle. The next day, I explore the bustling town of Tripoli, its port, qasr (fort), museum, and the Green Square. In the suq (market), some houses have Roman pillars as part of their walls. In the old town, the Marc Aurel arch of triumph sits almost two meters below the current street level—the garbage of centuries. But the sights—the entrance gate to the old town, the suq—pale compared to the other archeological attractions in this country. Much work is underway to beautify the city for “10 years of revolution” on 1 September 1979.

I briefly visit the German embassy, where the friendly Herr Stenz cannot tell me anything of interest, except for being surprised at someone willing to travel on his own to the Fezzan, the central Saharan part of Libya. In the evening I meet Jochen Klinkmüller, whose name I have from a friend in Germany and who runs the local office of a German company. He proves to be of enormous help to me. He is interested in archeology, like myself, has done some excavations himself (of Punic graves), unlike myself, and proudly shows me his collection, among it two huge amphoras. Exactly the right guy for me. He also enjoys talking to someone who is interested in such things.

The following day, the Klinkmüllers invite me to a simple German-style dinner of bread and sausage in their home. We agree on an outing in two days to some rock engravings and Roman ruins.

The next day, I go by bus to Khoms and with a pickup truck to Leptis Magna, with several nice people and one bore, about 17 years old. He tries to impress me as being a policeman, orders me “You stand here, and I get policemen”, which I simply ignore.



Figure 66. Decumanus maximus and luxury toilets in Leptis Magna.

The ruins at this important Roman city in Libya, *Leptis Magna*, are fantastic. Beautiful friezes on four pillars in a temple, a large theater, the triumphal arch of Septimus Severus, and wonderful Roman marble toilets; it must have been a pleasure to sit there. In the *circus*, the low gates are visible through which lions and other playmates were

released during those cruel, often mortal, games; *The Gladiator* with Russell Crowe gives an impression. In the nearby stadium, the tunnels are well usable. Some of them are so wide that combat chariots could drive through them. All this has been very well preserved in the desert climate, also on my next visit 22 years later, see page 111.



Figure 67. Relief in Leptis Magna.

In the evening, I am again at the Klinkmüllers' home. He has spent the whole day at the Tunisian-Libyan border trying to get someone from his company into the country, but all borders are closed from yesterday to 10 September because of the festivities. Just imagine I had come two days later! I would not have been able to enter the country.

Both Klinkmüllers and I leave in the afternoon. He shows me rock engravings half-way to Tarhuna, impossible to find without a guide. This is my first encounter with this art since visiting the Altamira caves in Spain. The archeological sites that Klinkmüller shows me are almost a secret. Knowledge of them circulates among the (few) interested locals and expats, but the historical wealth of Libya does not fit into guidebooks. And it is unclear how much of them and their knowledge has survived after the upheavals of 2011 and later. On we go to Tarhuna. In another place, again difficult to find, surfaces of large flat rocks are engraved with cows or goats, horns aggressively to the front. After a meager dinner, we sleep out in the open near a Roman dam. A cold wind blows, and I am freezing all night long.

We drive around Khoms, visit several Roman dams, then one Roman ruin after the other along the *limes tripolitanus*, the border line of Roman North Africa. Usually, not much is left, an arch or the bottom of an oil press. It is quite hot, and both Klinkmüllers suffer from symptoms of a heat stroke, but I am fine. The mood in the car is low. A dramatic accident happens just 500 meters in front of us: a Peugeot 504 station wagon hits the sand on the side of the road, overturns three times (!) and comes to rest on its

roof. Klinkmüller tells me that there is an atrocious rate of bad accidents in the country, mainly due to speeding and distraction. Unfortunately, he has adapted to the local driving style.

My visit to the Roman ruins at Şabrātha, just west of Tripoli, is both relaxing and fascinating. No traffic chaos as around the Coliseum in Rome, no overflowing parking lots like at Delphi, no guards telling you not to do this or that—just myself walking around in total peace, not even other visitors. 22 years later I came back here again, with Rafaela, see page 111.



Figure 68. The theater and a bas relief—two actors in action—on the front of the scena at Şabrātha.



Figure 69. By the sea in Şabrātha.

The well-preserved theater here is one of the highlights of Roman architecture anywhere. The family of Emperor Septimus Severus (145-211 AD) hailed from Leptis Magna, and he gave the theater as gift to his home town when rising into office. Three storeys of the theater's stage (*scena*) are still standing, with imposing pillars, and the head-high orchestra front is adorned with magnificent reliefs, slightly gnawed at by the rare rain: muses, goddesses of arts and sciences, sacrificial ablutions, and the three graces. The Isis temple is right on the beach, with the shimmering blue Mediterranean in the background.

The main road, *decumanus maximus*, connected Šabrātha to Oea (now Tripoli) and Leptis Magna, then called the *tri-polis* (three cities). This was part of the main Roman transport artery running all along the African coast of the Mediterranean, see page 71. Much of the Roman pavement is preserved, and I walk, quite literally, in the footsteps of the Roman emperor Septimus Severus. A great thought, this guy stepped almost 2000 years ago on the same stones as I do! And thousands of other Romans did that. Hot baths and inviting toilets, beautiful mosaics in the open air, a large theater. (The ruins of Šabrātha were occupied in 2014 by the IS and possibly first looted and then bulldozed.)

I meet Günter Spillner, manager for the German MaK company (Maschinenbau Kiel, makers of diesel engines and other heavy machinery), at his house. This giant from Hamburg is somewhat reserved at first, but then we have a wonderful evening until 02.00 talking about the exciting things to see in Libya. In the end, he even takes a bottle of Ballantine's out of his cupboard; alcohol is strictly forbidden in Libya.

I stay at the Klinkmüllers' home and take a taxi to the bus station. After fighting my way through the unruly crowd to the ticket counter, I learn that the first bus to Hun leaves only at noon. I walk to the port and take a picture of a long row of brand-new white Toyota Land Cruisers in the port, presumably a government purchase. Immediately, a policeman comes running and orders me to take out the film and give it to him. I refuse, and he takes me to the near-by police barracks. After an hour of waiting, a Land Rover with the police boss arrives, and they take me to the central police station near the Marc Aurel arch in downtown Tripoli. One of the guys speaks English, I explain my (true) story for the umptieth time, and eventually they release me. This shock in the morning was sufficient for today, but worse was to come later; see page 90.

My bus leaves on time and looks like new. I am quite surprised to see 140 000 kilometers on its odometer; such care must be rare in the country. At a three-hour lunch stop, I am not allowed to pay for my food myself, rather three young Pakistanis insist on inviting me. Thanks, guys. Lively and friendly discussions on the continuing trip to Hun, where Naji Sassy and Ammar Mejbri, two young Tunisians, invite me to their home. I take a well-deserved rest on a comfy bed under the stars.



Figure 70. Naji and Ammar in Hun.



After strolling around the Hun oasis, I go to Sokna, an old desert town with a wall around it and a modern part next to that. The houses have beautiful palmwood doors, but are rather decrepit. I imagine the place looked similar when the first Europeans visited, like the explorer Friedrich Gerhard Rohlfs (1831-1896) in the 1870s. Rohlfs died in the suburb Rüngsdorf of Bonn, where I now live and a street is named after him. In Waddan, I try to take the same picture as one in Rohlfs's book, but the town is all built up. Back to my friends in Hun who care for me like for a baby. Another tea? One more biscuit? Really kind people. The two are quite different, Naji is a trained electrician and speaks good French. Ammar is illiterate and slower than Naji in many respects.

After this pleasant stay, I ride an uncomfortable bus from 23.00 to 04.30 to Brak, no sleep. On arrival, nothing is open, and I sleep in the sand. I barely survive the next bus ride to Sebha in my zombie-like trance. Travel discomfort continues: the hotel in Sebha is full, but around noon they have a (shared) room for me. A dirt hole, toilets clogged and full of ants and flies. Who cares—I first take a few hours of beauty sleep.



Figure 71. Jochen Klinkmüller and yet another triumphal arch, at Sebha.

During the next days, I explore Sebha and its surroundings. The hill in the north offers a nice view of the city, but of Elena Fort in a military area, no photos are allowed. I meet Charlie Runge at the MaK office. He manages a large electric power project for



his company. Back at the hotel around midnight, my Moroccan room mate wants to kiss me goodnight, but I make it clear to him that this is a no-no.

In a large parking lot, I see completely overloaded trucks. What is that? Elementary, my dear Watson. Long-distance trucks. I make friends with some drivers, considering a ten-day ride via al-Katrun (Gatrun) and Bilma through the Ténéré desert to Agadèz. They leave “tomorrow”, for many days on end. They are waiting for some border post to open, at the moment all are closed. Starting in 2016, Sebha became a focal point for the refugees’ treks across the Sahara. Risking lives and money in the hope to reach the green pastures of Europe, thousands perished on this dangerous route.

Charlie Runge is obviously pleased to have found a soulmate in me, someone who shares his interest and excitement about the cultural relics in this region. Other expats and locals are usually not interested.

In his Peugeot 504, we fail to get close to the Wadi Zigza—four-wheel drive only. We end up going to the Wadi Debdeb, where we climb in the steep rocks, looking at engravings of cattle, ostriches, giraffes, and other animals. A lot of fun.



Figure 72. My trucking friends in Sebha, and Abdurrahman Mohammed Wadan, my host in Meknusa.



Figure 73. Wadi Debdeb and rock engravings.

The next day, Charlie Runge and I drive to Ubari. Along the Wadi Ajal, we have on the left the continuous steep walls of the Mellak Settafet, on the right the incredibly beautiful dunes of the Edeyen Ubari. Between these barren lands, there is greenery in one oasis after another. Deep wells provide fossil water for agriculture in a forbidding environment.

On my own, I find an old man to drive me in his old Land Rover to Jebel Bouzna. I read archeological articles about marvellous rock engravings there. From the road, it is three kilometers on foot through the desert, my footprints in the sand are the only ones far and away. An hour's climb takes me to the top of the mountain and the most fascinating views and rock engravings I have ever seen. Once I am up there, on a ledge just below the summit, I can hardly believe my eyes. Huge elephants, giraffes, cattle, a hunter. Very well preserved in this climate, about 10 000 years old—nobody knows for sure. Below me, an arid landscape devoid of any life. These beautiful images are almost surreal, straining the imagination to see such wildlife in the barren desert dunes of today. It is an exhilarating situation, up there high above the desert in the virtual presence of all those animals, far away from any other human, and in a place that few people have visited. There I am, in total solitude, looking at a time-frozen movie of how this part of the world has changed dramatically in just a few thousand years—like a second on the geological scale—from rich hunting grounds that fed many people to an empty desert that

forestalls any attempt at life.



Figure 74. Jebel Bouzna and rock engravings near its top.

I sit there for an hour, absorbing this unwritten tale of human endeavor and defeat. Will the apparently unavoidable *global warming* lead to similar disasters elsewhere? Eventually, I have to give up this impressive view of some thousands of years of history, and I hike back to the road.

By chance, Charlie Runge drives by, and we go together to the Garamantes graves and the Roman mausoleum (qasr Watwat). The Garamantes kingdom flourished approximately from 400 BC to 600 AD. It was based on agriculture, mainly grapes, figs, barley, and wheat, and its people were of Berber origin. At the time, the area was productive land, as also witnessed by the earlier rock engravings. This was enhanced by a large network of underground tunnels and shafts called *foggara* in Berber to mine the fossil water from below the limestone layer under the desert sand.

These schemes came to an end due to worsening climatic conditions and possibly overuse of the fossil water. Militarily, they were strong enough to raid Roman coastal settlements and to resist the expansion of the Roman empire for a long time. But in 203 AD, the annoyed Romans under emperor Septimus Severus captured their capital Garama (today Germa).

I have had a full day of wonderful sights.





Figure 75. Charlie Runge and the Garamantes graves.

On the first of September, big festivities take place: 10 years of the Qadhāfī revolution. Triumph arches of steel everywhere, roads blocked because the arches are unfinished, green flags all around, buildings painted green, garlands with light bulbs, fireworks celebrating the Great Leader of the Green Revolution. Instead of participating in this joyous celebration of a murderous regime, I make an excursion south to Murzuq. The city flourished under Ottoman rule, about 1500 to 1900, mainly from the slave trade. Two qasrs (forts) offer nice views of this old desert town, which had 2800 inhabitants on Heinrich Barth's (see page 101) visit in 1850, and 13 000 today. The hot dry air is full of sand

particles. In the evening, it is difficult to get back to Sebha because nothing is moving. I stand, then sit, in the middle of the road, but no car passes by. After about two hours, I am saved and get back to my hotel.



Figure 76. Qasr Murzuq, delapidated in 1979 and well restored in 2001.



Figure 77. Waiting for a ride from Murzuq to Sebha,  
and a couple of dragonflies playing games.

I have obtained permits to visit Mandara and Gabr On. The police in Ubari is quite helpful, but they do not have a car. Come back tomorrow. But shortly after, Abdussalam picks me up in his light blue Toyota Land Cruiser for an unforgettable trip to the salt lakes of Mandara, a spectacular series of salt lakes hidden in the high dunes of the Edeyen Ubari, quite difficult to access. I sit between barrels of fuel and water on the truck bed. Just past Germa, he cuts into the huge dunes.

Abdussalam is an expert and knows the area inside out. He drives on the sand at speeds of up to 100 km/h, then up a dune at high speed but so carefully calculated that he comes to a stop at the top of the dune and rolls down the steep leeward side in a controlled manner. All this reminds me of skiing, the blinding sands, driving with a tight hold onto the ground, skidding around bends in controlled turns.





Figure 78. Dunes in the Edeyen Ubari around the Mandara Lakes.



Figure 79. Two of the Mandara Lakes.

We come past a Land Rover whose driver was obviously not such an expert, the car was turned over and burned to a skeleton. Such a dune ride turns your stomach over, but

is a lot of fun.

Finally, the first lake! Hot sun, yellow sand dunes about 100 meters high, green palms, and the heavy blue water. A symphony in basic colors. The dune's reflection produces an image of perfect mathematical symmetry. The water is extremely saline and the impression of life in the desert is rather misleading. On to Gabr On, 65 kilometers from the start, an incredible image. A huge dune with palms at the bottom is reflected in the still waters of a salt lake. Quiet, majestic, yet a rare exception in this sea of sand. Further on, Mandara Lake is almost dried out, just a bit of salt water remains at its edges, the color is almost red from the high salinity. A large salt crust in the center is mined for selling salt in blocks. After a very long day, with just too much to see and 200 kilometers across the dunes, we are back in Ubari at 19.30. No way to get back to Sebha, but I find a friendly rest house with Romanian geologists.

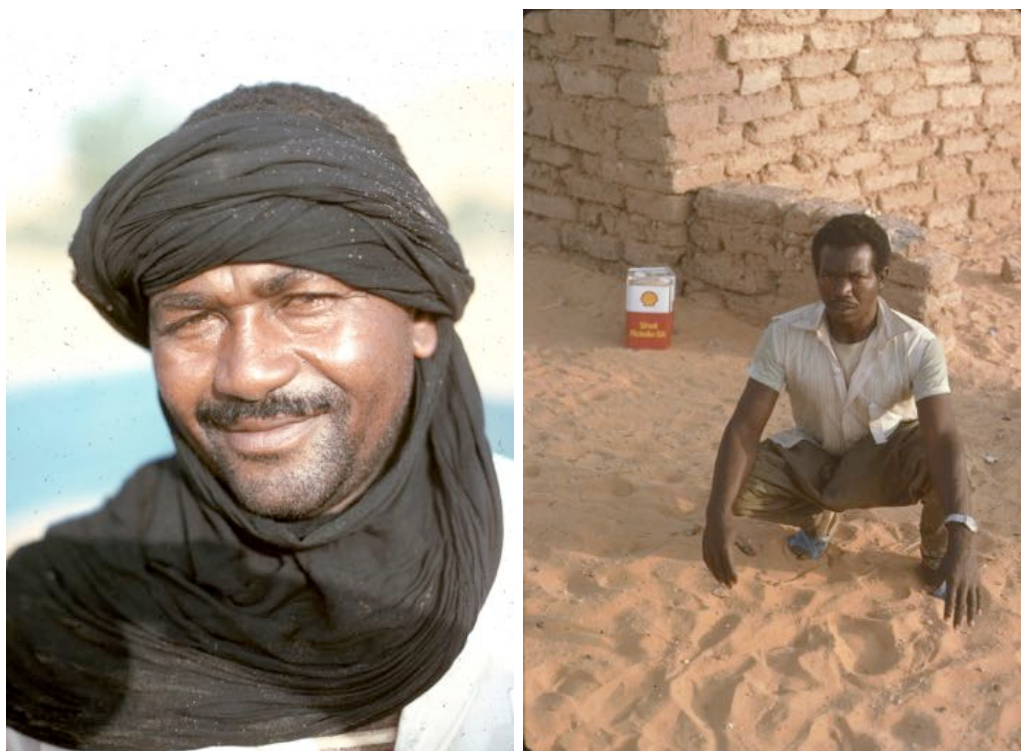


Figure 80. Abdussalam and a friend in New Gabr On.

After plenty of breakfast with my Romanian friends, I catch a bus to Germa, 30 kilometers east of Ubari and about 170 kilometers west of Sebha. Garama (today Germa) was the capital of the Garamantes kingdom and destroyed in 202 AD by the Romans; see page 84. I walk around the ancient town, complete with a wall, fort or castle with towers and a large patio, many houses made from adobe and adobe bricks. Palm wood covers

the top of doors and windows. As always, it is great fun to walk around this old place, all by myself, and I snap a lot of pictures. Nearby is the *grave of Princess Lucilla*, the southernmost piece of Roman architecture, with Corinthian pillars and the only one to have inscriptions both in Latin and in a precursor of Tifinagh, the Tuareg script.



Figure 81. Princess Lucilla's tomb: 1850 by Barth, and 1979.

On the ride back to Sebha, my Algerian truck driver tells me about his troubles with the police because of his Moroccan wife and the Polisario war. My hotel in Sebha is sequestered by the police and I can stay only this night. The next day, I take my luggage to the MaK office, where Charlie Runge has offered me to stay.



Figure 82. A swinging finish of a long day of sightseeing.

After a lazy day yesterday, this one was to bring some more excitement. I deposit my luggage at the bus station and buy a ticket for my ride to Meknusa (or Maknussa) at noon, an interesting agricultural experiment with fossil water. On an easy stroll around town, I bid good-bye to my truck driving friends, who will go to Ghat and Tamanrasset, not to Agadèz as planned. Too bad. I take some farewell pictures.

I thought this was my last moment of notice in Sebha and happily walked, at 10.30, to the bus station. But fate did not play along. Or rather, the Libyan Secret Service, which

likes to assume the role of fate at times Two young men accost me, flashing a badge and asking me to come with them to their post. My choices are rather limited and I go along. After half an hour, they drive me to another police station.

I am put behind bars in a bare cell with a chair. The clonk of heavy steel bars closing is not a happy sound. They let me stew for three hours. In such a situation, all kinds of dark thoughts go through your mind. First: why? I really do not have a clue. My currency declaration? Would they search my luggage? I carry a fair number of photocopies of large-scale maps for my hikes and explorations, but for them this might be enough to prove that I am a spy. In fact, there is practically no way to disprove the accusation of being a spy, because to simple minds any argument against it will only show how good and well-prepared a spy one is. Then: what can they do to me? Frankly, in the worst case I could simply vanish and never be heard of again. A search by my family, friends, or the German embassy would be impossible in this dictatorship that even sends its own secret agents to explode an airliner over Lockerbie. I might disappear and Rafaela would grow up without ever having seen her father. Somehow, not a glorious prospect. Would I get out of here? How?

The police treat me reasonably well, offering water, biscuits, cigarettes, and not threatening me. I would rather pay for all that in a place of my choosing, without those steel bars. They bring my luggage from the bus station, implying that they have followed me all the time and know about my backpack left there. In fact, secret service people have probably been tracking me all the time in Sebha. After three hours in this uncomfortable situation, they finally level a terrible accusation at me: I was trying to slander the Libyan state by taking photographs of a garbage truck. What a crime! How happy people in Naples or Beirut would be for efficient waste removal as in Sebha. But these suspicious secret agents do not understand that a truck collecting rubbish is a sign of hygiene and good government, not of dirt and garbage everywhere. I try to explain this, but cannot convince them. Wow! All my adrenaline spent on just a stupid garbage truck in the distance which I did not even notice! Or maybe they were just bored or felt like showing their power to a foreign tourist.

Luckily, they ignore my backpack; all those large-scale maps that I assembled painstakingly for my hikes would have confirmed that I am a spy. But they take my camera bag apart. I carry two Canon EF cameras, one with b & w Ilford film and the other one with Kodachrome slide film. I had secretly removed the current cartridge and inserted a new one in the police car. They take both cartridges out of the cameras with proper precautions and are clever enough to realize that they cannot do anything with the Kodachromes which need a special process. And also much later at home, I do not see a garbage truck on any of my photos. They confiscate the Kodachrome film in the camera, which actually is unexposed. However, they give the b & w film to a local photo lab.

The people who arrested me are footsoldiers of the regime. But now news of their important catch spreads to the upper echelons of the Sebha secret police. Higher-level officers arrive, finally at 14.00 the local chief of police. By that time, my films have come



back from the lab and I have the pleasure of seeing the first of my films developed, at least the negatives. Nice pictures of the old city of Germa, old wooden doors and ladders, mud walls and bread ovens, but certainly no garbage truck. None at all. Not even the Libyan Secret Service can read a garbage truck into those garbage-free photos.

I explain truthfully the situation over and over, and give a spiel to the chief that I remember from one of my prison experiences in Saudi Arabia (see page 941). About the eternal Libyan-German friendship, how well we treat the many Libyan tourists that come to Germany, even if they break unknowingly some rule that does not exist here. How I admire Libya and its greatest son, Mu'ammar Qadhāfī, leader of their Green Revolution. And do my pictures from Germa not prove this? Such lies come easily when your life is at stake. All this in my poor version of Arabic; they do not speak English or any other language I understand. It takes some time to sink in. The big guys discuss this negative (for them) turn of events. What can they hold me for, when the only charge they level at me has been disproved by a Libyan photographic laboratory? Nowadays, more imaginative secret service people might construe something out of nothing, or hold me just for spite. But this is just 1979, and fortunately, they have not yet evolved to the point where they base decisions on alternative facts. Rather, they act in a pleasantly old-fashioned manner: realizing they have nothing against me and giving up. In the end, the chief actually apologizes for the "problem", and I am set free, with all my belongings minus four b&w films and one unexposed color film. I have been in rather somber thoughts for hours and am incredibly relieved when I am told this. So I am going to see my daughter!

But once I am on the upswing, I do not stop. I stand in the middle of the police station, all the big shots staring at me. They know about my bus ticket to Meknusa. I now complain loudly about the stupidity of those youngsters who arrested me and how I have lost my bus because of them. There is no more bus today. General embarrassment.

The chief of police steps forward and orders two of his men to get a car ready to take me to Meknusa. Wow! I thank him politely and within a few minutes we are zooming along the highway in a brand-new Datsun 140. Approaching Meknusa, the eternally blue Sahara sky darkens, a strong wind comes up, and then it starts pouring. In the middle of the Sahara! It is well known that more people die in this desert from drowning than from thirst, because camps are always made in a wadi (valley) for protection from the wind, and very distant thunderstorms can create flash floods that carry such camps away. Well, here I see the spectacle of sand and rain fighting against each other, the sand being carried high into the air and coloring the sky in pink.

My two drivers are getting worried because they do not know the way to Meknusa. I calm them down, and pretty soon the first signs of habitation show up. I can stay overnight in the camper van of Abdurrahman Mohammed Wadan, a friend of one the policemen.

The agricultural project is designed by the Food Development Corp. in Pasco WA and highly impressive. It comprises 48 circular alfalfa fields of 100 acres each, irrigated from long arms that rotate each on eight pairs of electrically driven wheels. It may be based

on Israeli designs, but nobody will talk about this. Such a massive display of green, in big fat circles, is a delight after weeks of brown and gray sand and rocks. The water is fossil from a huge underground reservoir, which is not refreshed and will eventually be depleted. In the late afternoon, I take a long walk around the grounds.



Figure 83. The agricultural project at Meknusa.



Figure 84. Lunch in Ubari.

In the background, black rain clouds come from one direction, a marvellous sunset in the other direction. Just after sunset, all of the sudden a big thunderstorm begins, fat strokes of lightning hit the ground just one or two kilometers in front of me. It is not clear whether I was more frightened in prison during the day or at this moment. All on my own on a wide open plain, no protection, no trees or buildings to attract the lightning. I run as fast as I can and am relieved to arrive in the shadow of huge John Deere harvesters. And exhausted, because I have not eaten anything since breakfast. Well, I also survive this intermezzo, have a pleasant dinner with the crew, and go to my well-deserved sleep around 22.00. Another long day with plenty of excitement. I have not had any other rain during my visit to Libya. Does the water here attract the clouds?

The next day, after some strolling around and waiting for a lift, the Italian Signore Bruni gives me a ride all the way to Ubari. He is from Ferrara, works here, and is quite unhappy because it is so difficult to make progress on the four construction sites that he is responsible for. This morning he was in Murzuq, to no avail—no one works because today and tomorrow are (again) holidays.



Figure 85. My German trucking friends to Ghat,  
and a selfie in the rear view mirror.



Figure 86. Building a truck fort at night.

During a pleasant day in Ubari, a group of Libyans invites me for lunch, then I meet Bruni again. No cars going to Ghat. But the following day, I luck out. Four large trailer trucks with German licence plates carry building materials for the airport in Ghat. Wittig Freiherr von der Goltz, a noble truck driver, Werner, Willibald, and Hubert are glad to have a small change of conversation. We stop soon after sunset and they build a circle of wagons with their trucks. Pleasant dinner with German specialties like black bread, butter, sausages, pea soup with fried bacon. Home away from home, out of the can. The rocky desert is covered with pieces of petrified wood. The truckies tell me how they once took home a whole trunk, weighing more than a ton, which now adorns the entrance to their company head office. I am more modest and my personal head office now has just a few small pieces. We sleep outside.

We drive along the dark ridges of the Mellak Settafett for many hours, but then this mountain range turns south. Past Serdelès (Uweināt), the track becomes worse, with many sand holes and an average speed of 20 km/h. Luckily, no truck gets stuck; digging one out in the desert heat is not really fun. In the distance east, the Acacus mountains show fantastically eroded peaks, many have a shape like huge roof tops. Eventually, we see the *Qasr Idinen* (devil's castle) in the west, split and eroded. The African traveler Heinrich Barth got lost here, almost dying of thirst and exhaustion, see page 101. After our late arrival at the air base near Ghat and a small dinner, I fall asleep almost immediately.

The next day, I move to Ghat, 20 kilometers away. I can sleep in the large dining hall of an old hotel. The many goats in Ghat have a peculiar diet: they are given old paper bags and cardboard, which they tear up with a lot of noise and eat it. The city is a conglomerate of old mud houses, without any plan or order (to me, at least). Narrow twisted paths between the houses, sometimes covered by terraces, old palm wood doors, pleasantly rounded forms of the adobe structures, even at edges, stairs, and walls. The



old qasr (fort) offers a beautiful view of the whole place, with many roof gardens and balconies.



Figure 87. The Mellak Settafett towering over a village.



Figure 88. Long drive through the desert, petrified wood, Idinen.



I try to get the permit required to take photographs from the police chief, but he refuses. I walk off into the desert, without plan, all the time being followed by a police vehicle until I reach some dunes which are impassable to them. On my return an hour later, they are still looking for my tracks.

Next day, I set out on a desert hike to Feuet, 12 kilometers away, with plenty of water. I walk completely alone through the sand, hot but marvellous. Total freedom, an infinite landscape. Friendly reception in the village, but I continue to the so-called *shelters* with rock paintings, the goal of my excursion. These caves in rocky outcrops are filled with sand, sometimes I have to creep on all four. Ancient red painting on the ceilings, groups of dancers, hunters, newer paintings in a different red color with camels. It is an interesting and totally isolated site. The can of pears for my lunch is of moderate quality, the juice has already begun to ferment in the heat.



Figure 89. A Tuareg lock in brass.

I am forbidden to take photographs in Ghat, but obedience to stupid rules does not come easy to me. I put on my special Tuareg dress early the next morning: a beautiful indigo blue *gandura* (or *tagelmust*), a long dress down to the feet, and a white *litham* (turban), and slink out of the hotel at 06.00. Like Harun al-Rashid, I walk in disguise through town and up to the qasr, avoiding people. I am not sure I have put my new clothes on properly, since the few people I meet seem to stare at me curiously. Am I not in the perfect disguise? Later, I laugh out loud in front of the mirror in my hotel room: my disguise is perfect and covers everything except my eyes, but my blonde eye brows are a dead give-away. So much for me as an authentic Libyan Targi (singular of Tuareg).

Years later, when I wear this garb at the German carnival, people are less discerning. At the top of the qasr hill, my camera clicks away at the stunning views over the city, still asleep. Fortunately, no-one else is around. Dirty deeds done, I turn back into a European, carrying a big red plastic bag with my Tuareg dress.



Figure 90. Dawn over Ghat—a forbidden picture from the qasr.

Ghat is the end of the road in this part of the world, except that an adventurous sand track goes south and then west to Djanet in Algeria, see page 134. So I have to fly back. After breakfast, a bus takes me to the airport terminal. It is not quite finished, but already looks rather decrepit. After a long wait, the Fokker F-27 plane of Libyan Arab Airlines lands, and while she is still taxiing, our little car drives up to it. A beautiful flight to Tripoli over the Sahara, Acacus, Edeyen Ubari along Wadi Ajal, the Mandara lakes are well visible, little specks of blue in the great light brown desert. Stop in Sebha, where the day before an ammunitions depot has exploded, possibly during welding work on a loaded (!) ammunitions truck. Nobody can get in or out of town. My good luck that I was not there; there are rumors of a bombing attack, and then “foreign spies” like myself can have a hard time. I’ve had enough of that.

From Tripoli, I make a brief visit to the Roman villa in Tajurah, with a German architect and his Volkswagen. A bush taxi Peugeot 504 takes me to Gharian, via the Jefara plain, in steep turns up the Nefoussa mountains. I inspect the troglodyte caves, big holes in the ground, six to ten meters in diameter, five meters deep. Some boys show me around, then get nasty, pulling my leg on a steep incline, and finally throwing a sandal and rocks at me. It is high time to leave this hospitable place.

The next day, it is long trip via Yefren and Bir 'Ayat to Nalut. In a restaurant, a middle-aged Libyan tells me how he recently got a US\$ 40 000 loan from the government to build a house and buy a car, repaying about \$ 100 per month. When he dies, the outstanding loan is forgiven. On top of that, six weeks of annual leave and free health care. He explains that such welfare makes the “small” Libyans like himself—he is an employee—quite happy with the government.

I hike up to the qasr, a Berber fort surrounded by walls that are fifteen meters high, with tiny windows, and a single gate that creaks when I open it. Inside is a beehive of

houses, all completely empty. Not even goats or piles of excrement, as usual elsewhere. Palm wood doors, stairs, alleys are in disrepair. The doors are so low that I have to creep through some of them. I have a lot of fun wandering around all by myself. At noon, I take a bus for the last 320 kilometers to Ghadames. It is an endless drive through a depressing landscape, *serirs* of a brown surface strewn with black rocks, completely flat, no hills, no valleys, no flowers, nothing. True desert, with a burning sun. These *serirs* are more typical of the Sahara than the beautiful dunes that you see in all fancy desert photographs. This is 18 September, Dorothea's birthday, and as a little present for her, I change my plans and fly home one week earlier.

From Ghadames, the border with Algeria is quite close, with Bordj Messaoud on the other side, and formed by a huge dune. Something tickles me to go and have a look at that dune. This would be highly illegal, I do not even have a visa for Algeria. I make a short preparatory hike in the intended direction and find Ain al-Fras (mare's spring), whose fresh waters delight me and that people recommended to me.

The next day, I set out for a long desert walk which almost results in disaster. The water in town is not as good, and I start out early morning with a half-empty water bottle. What a frustration when I arrive at Ain al-Fras and find that it does not work. No water. The spring is dead for the day. I have no idea why, it might have to do with the time of day or something else. Now I have to make up my mind: continue with little water or cancel this hike, since I have to leave town the next day. I take one of the worst decisions of my life, which almost cost me the same.

I have never shied away from challenges, but this is one of the most stupid ones I took on. I walk over a rather boring *serir*, but big yellow dunes promise hiker's fun in the far distance. A meat-eating sun scorches my face, the level in my water bottle drops precariously. Foolishly, I cannot refuse the lure of the sand and chug along. Surprise: an asphalted road crosses my direct way to the dunes. Is this already the Algerian border? Would I get into trouble with the Algerians? Again, I ignore my inner warnings. Minutes later, I hear a jeep stopping and people—presumably an Algerian border patrol—discussing when they see my tracks, but they do not see me and eventually drive on.



Figure 91. Forbidden fruit: Algerian dunes just across from the Libyan border.

The dunes finally reward me with beautiful views, hard sand on the windward side, soft on the lee side. The smooth curves of the top of the dunes, the magic bands of ripples in the sand display, to a mathematician's eye, wonderful but complicated partial differential equations. Pure delight, seeing math at work. I am low on water on my return trip. After a while, in spite of careful rationing, no water is left and my strength is rapidly weakening. I find the largest *sand rose* that I have ever seen just lying around. At about 20 kilograms of weight, I am not up to carrying it. Such sand roses consist of baryte crystals containing sand grains that take the shape of rose petals. But my thirst reminds me of reality, and the sight of the remains of a camel gives me the shivers. I stumble on to a group of palms, where I had already rested on my way here. Coolness. No water. I almost have to grin at myself when I open my empty water bottles to check if there is a drop left. No, sir. No miracles for now. My knees are weak, I continue stumbling through the desert towards Ghadames, sometimes crawling on all four, but I force myself to get up again. My thirst is a physical pain, like a cut or a thorn in the flesh. Quite interesting, in hindsight. Slowly I move towards a hut. Some kind Pakistani construction workers come out and help me get into their camp. They see my distress, I lie down on a stretcher, and then they give me water, finally water, lukewarm water. What a blessing! I almost fall asleep with exhaustion. Then four cups of extra-strong tea, and I am nearly myself again. Many many thanks to this friendly group of Pakistanis, and I am off to Ghadames. Walking. Walking tall. In town, ice-cold Pepsi and a shower. What a relief! I go to bed really early but cannot sleep, the near-disaster haunts me all night. I could easily have died that day, out of my own stupidity. Just imagine my soon-to-be-born daughter to grow up without a dad.

Heinrich Barth (1821-1865) from Hamburg was one of the foremost European explorers of Africa. On his *Grand Tour* 1849-1855 he traveled through the Sahara and West Africa, often under difficult circumstances. Although his expedition was financed by the British (!) government, he was often left without funds and had to survive on his own wits.



Figure 92. The harsh desert and its beauty: a sandrose.



Figure 93. Salvation in sight: a green line behind the merciless serir desert.

An exception among the travelers of his times, he did not look at the Africans with Western arrogance, but treated them as equals and tried to understand their culture. He talks about the clash between the Christian and Muslim worlds, and that religious reformers of Islam are badly needed—a surprisingly modern view. On 15 July 1850, he decided to explore the *Qasr Idinen* (devil's castle), see page 95, on his own, because his companions were too scared by the devilish myths surrounding this mountain chain. He almost died on this foolish excursion, and his experiences are quite close to mine as reported above. Barth<sup>9</sup> writes: “[Wir] hielten uns in dem breiten, nackten Thale gerade auf das verzauberte Schloss Idinen zu, das durch die wunderbaren Berichte unserer Begleiter unsere Einbildungskraft auf's Höchste erregte. Trotz oder vielleicht noch mehr in Folge der Warnungen unserer Imōsharh, unser Leben nicht bei so gefährlichem, gotteslästerlichem Unternehmen, wie ein Besuch in dieser Wohnung böser Geister sei, zu wagen, schien es eine unwiderstehliche Anziehungskraft zu besitzen. . . . [Ich] machte mich mit meinem kleinen Wasserschlauch auf dem Rücken auf den Weg. Ich hegte die Zuversicht, dass ich im Stande sein würde, den Brunnen, den mir gemachten Angaben nach, später wohl zu finden. . . . Im Anfang ging Alles gut. . . . Mein geringer Wasservorrath musste mich sorgsam machen, so dass ich mich nur durch einen ungenügenden Trunk aus meinem Schlauche erquickte . . . Mit der steigenden Hitze ward mein Zustand immer unerträglicher. Ich kroch umher, jeden Augenblick meine Lage verändernd, um ein wenig Schatten, welchen die laublosen Äste bildeten, zu geniessen. Um Mittag wich auch der geringste Schatten; nicht einmal genug blieb, um mein fieberkrankes Haupt zu schützen. Ich litt unsäglich von Durst, obgleich ich an meinem Blute sog. Endlich ward ich besinnungslos und verfiel in eine Art von wahnsinniger Träumerei. Ich kam erst wieder zum Bewusstsein, als die Sonne sich hinter die Berge senkte. . . . Es ist in der That auffallend, dass der Europäer wenigstens in diesen Gegenden ganz ausschliesslich nur von dem lebt, was er augenblicklich zu sich nimmt, und dass er, sowie er einen Tag durch Kränklichkeit oder sonst verhindert ist, das gewöhnliche Quantum von Nahrung zu sich zu nehmen, augenblicklich um alle seine Kräfte kommt.”<sup>10</sup> Barth is eventually saved by a Targi—there were no Pakistani road

<sup>9</sup>Heinrich Barth, *Reisen und Entdeckungen in Nord- und Central-Afrika*, Erster Band, Justus Perthes, Gotha, 1857. IX. Kapitel, pages 228-237.

<sup>10</sup>In the broad vegetationless valley, we made straight for the bewitched Idinen castle, which after the wonderful stories of our company stirred our imagination to the utmost. In spite or maybe rather because of the warnings of our Imōsharh (Tuareg guides) not to risk our lives in a dangerous sacrilegious enterprise



workers in his times.

My next day is a well-deserved day of rest. I stroll around the old Berber town of Ghadames, the underground city. Large parts of the town are slightly below street level in a dense maze of alleys, lanes, and courtyards, all covered with thick thatch, mud roofs, and balconies, in order to protect against the permanent heat. It is wonderful to wander through these cool streets, or sip a tea in one of the chaikhanas. There is hardly a sound, all gets muted by the soft adobe constructions. Even the chatter of invisible women behind tall walls. When a woman comes the other way along a lane, she either runs away or hides in an entrance until I am past. Even small girls behave like this. Very strange to someone like me, this absolute separation of sexes.



Figure 94. A relaxed pottery worker.

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such as a visit to the dwelling of evil spirits, it seemed to possess an irresistible attraction ... I got on my way with my small skin water container on my back. I was confident that I would be able to find the well later easily, following the directions received. ... In the beginning, everything was fine ... My small water supply made me careful, so that I refreshed myself only with an insufficient sip from my container ... As the heat increased, my state became worse and worse. I crawled around, changing my position again and again, in order to enjoy the little shade that the leafless branches provided. Around noon, even the least shade disappeared; there did not remain enough even to protect my feverish head. I suffered unbearably from thirst, although I sucked on my blood. Finally, I lost conscience and fell into a type of insane dream. I regained consciousness only when the sun descended behind the mountains ... It is in fact notable that the European lives, at least in these areas, exclusively on what he gets instantaneously, and that, as soon as impeded by illness or the like for a day to consume the usual quantity of nourishment, he immediately loses all his strength.



Figure 95. A Targi and a semi-Targi in the Ghadames oasis.



Figure 96. Young lady and old door in Ghadames.

After a long bus ride to Tripoli, there is no water or shower in the hotel—I smell like hell. The next day, I fly back home to Zürich. As in the whole country, the airport road is full of triumphal arches, billboards, and garlands proclaiming *revolution forever, peoples' committees in every village, partners not wage workers*. Blablabla. My backpack is full of heavy books (on Libyan archeology), petrified wood, and rocks. But it is also so dirty

and unimpressive that I sail through the many checkpoints without any problem. In the departure lounge, almost everybody is either from the business faction or expat returning home.



Figure 97. The underground city of Ghadames.

Announcements are only in Arabic, which most of them do not understand. Even when the plane arriving from Zürich is announced, they only understand *Zurich* and rush to the departure gate. Herr Hüririmann—whoever that is—is asked to come to the airline counter, but how do they expect him to understand this request in Arabic?

On arrival, I am so happy to embrace my seven-months pregnant wife and our little baby growing inside her. It is a great feeling to be safe back home again, after so many adventures.

## Tunisia, Libya, Algeria 2001

*A fantastic trip begins on 31 August 2001, in the wonderful company of my 21-year old daughter Rafaela. Besides our many desert experiences, a notable event is dinner at Bin Laden's table on 9/11.*



We planned to travel with Manfred Agethen, then Rafaela's boy friend. But this got messed up. He was doing his compulsory military service, which was supposed to finish on 30 August at noon. But then they did not let him go, he has to come back on 12 September. The reason is not clear. It may be a general rule, but Manfred bragged about going to the Sahara right away and this may have been a frog in the throat of some of his superiors. We are all very annoyed, but in the end Rafaela and I decide to go on our own and that Manfred will join us by plane later in Sebha. As it happens, not even this works out.

We leave at 10.00 from Paderborn via Kassel and Würzburg to Zürich, in our aging Toyota Corolla station wagon, normally used for our daily shopping trips. But now it is to see more interesting parts of the world. I paid almost 2000 DM for our Libyan visas two days ago, by far the most expensive visa ever. Some people, possibly including embassy



members, make a lot of money from new regulations requiring an invitation from a travel agency. Very annoying, but what can you do? It was so much cheaper in 1979 (see page 76), but then it was also much harder to get any visa at all. As we drive, Rafaela's mobile phone rings. Our travel agent Ramadan wants to fax<sup>11</sup> us some papers for entry into Libya. Difficult conversations on the autobahn, in the end they send it to our friend Wolfgang Kory in Zürich. Our Algerian visa arrived at the last minute, the day before we left.

We arrive in Zürich at 17.30 and pick up our fax at the Korys' apartment. A major renovation is going on, and they currently live in modest quarters around the corner.

We continue at 21.30. From the start until the Gotthard pass it is raining, sometimes heavily. Now it stops. The last rain for six months? Unfortunately not. Via Chiasso and Milano we arrive in Ronco, about 30 kilometers from Genova. On a quiet forest road we sleep in the car, at 01.30.

The alarm clock rings at 07.00, we are not really rested. At 09.00, we are in Genova, where two weeks ago the first martyr of the anti-globalization campaign has been shot dead. With a courageous U-turn of Rafaela's on the city highway, we arrive at the port. We line up in the long queue for the ferry to Tunis, in heavy rain. On the boat, we find two comfy chairs with a table by a window, perform the lengthy customs and immigration formalities, and have a simple dinner, with the island of Corsica drifting by on portside.

At 13.00, we arrive in the port of La Goulette in Tunis. We try to send a fax to our Libyan travel agent and succeed on the third attempt. As suspected, all this was quite unnecessary. During our drive on the highway to Hammamet, Sousse, Kairouan, and Gabès, Rafaela's phone keeps ringing. In the end, it turns out that the agent does not really want the fax, but rather an extra 150 US\$ for customs clearing of our car. A very kind offer of help, which I kindly reject.



Figure 98. Troglodyte caves in Matmata,  
from the outside and the inside.

<sup>11</sup>For the younger reader: fax is an old-fashioned method to communicate documents over a telephone line.





Figure 99. Change of licence plate, change of dictator.



Figure 100. Theater at Šabrātha.

From Gabès, we take a shortcut via Chenini to Matmata. As happens so often with shortcuts, we get lost and take more time than on the easy way. Then we spend a marvellous night in the Berber village of Matmata, which is famous for its cave dwellings, see page 65.

They dig large pits into the soft clay ground, and then caves emanating from the bottom perimeter of this pit. The five to eight meter layer of clay keeps these troglodyte caves pleasantly cool during the stifling heat of the day. We get a room in one of these caves, an interesting experience.

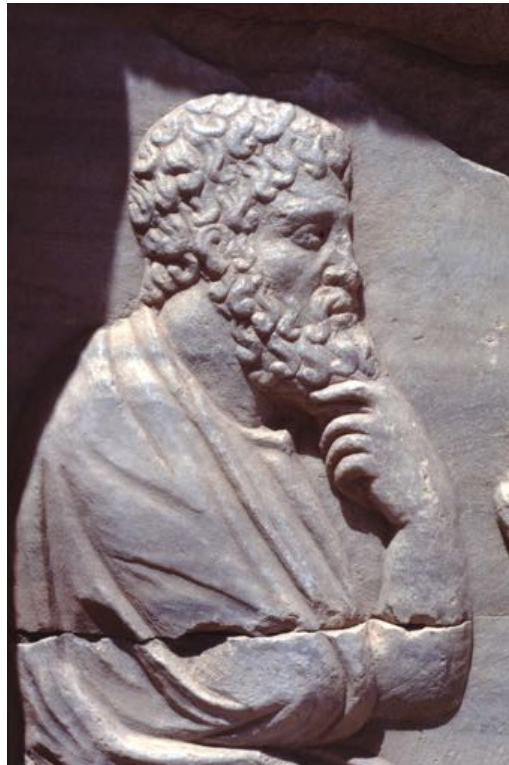


Figure 101. One philosopher, two actors, and three graces.

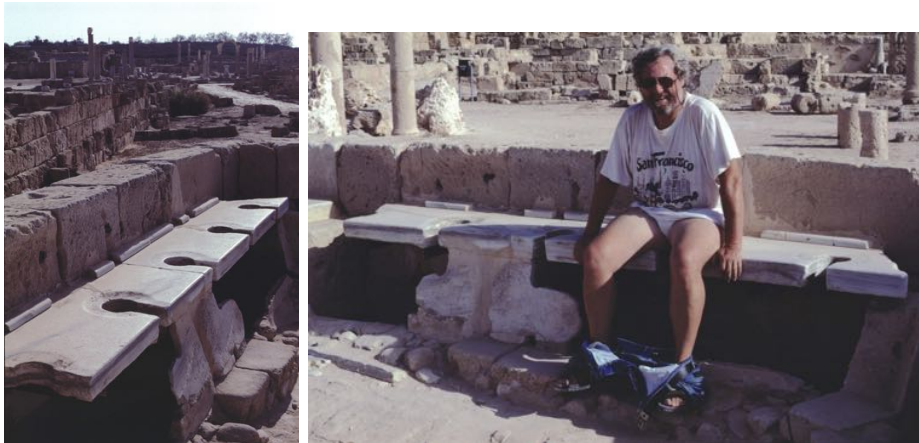


Figure 102. Hygiene and comfort at a level unknown here for the next 1800 years.



Figure 103. Relaxed at the coast in Ṣabrātha.





Figure 104. Şabrātha.

The next day, we drive towards Medenine, buy a funnel for gas, and Rafaela's mobile phone keeps ringing. Sari and his helper Kamal from the travel agency want to know

about our progress.

The Tunisian formalities go quickly, there is a huge lineup at the Libyan checkpoint, but I simply drive past it. They do not see many foreigners here and accept this.

But the Libyans take their time and our money. We have to buy insurance, Libyan licence plates (rather pretty, I still keep them in my basement), a carnet de passage, and then we are through. On our way towards Tripoli. Excellent highway, gas about 1/10 of the price back home. In Ṣabrātha we find a nice hostel near the famous ruins. My first night in Libya this century, and given the situation in 2019, probably the last one ever.

The Roman ruins at Ṣabrātha are among the most interesting I have ever seen, and I remember them well from my visit over 20 years ago, see page 79 for a description. A typical Roman luxury were the baths, with basins for different temperatures from scalding hot to cool, and fancy polished marble toilets. They are so inviting that I cannot resist a photo of myself sitting there.

It takes only 90 minutes to Tripoli. At the police station, we get a stamp that is required for traveling. Then we send the ticket we bought for Manfred to him. In the end, he cannot use it. In the evening, we drive back to Ṣabrātha.

With a wide detour around Tripoli, we drive to Khoms the next day. Directions are rarely marked and we have to ask several times. Nobody speaks anything but Arabic. Our hotel in Khoms is pleasant. We sit in a garden café in the evening. A strange lady who calls herself Nana asks Rafaela first for her address and then for a visa to Germany. Dream on! This African desire to get to the honeypots of Europe will take a tragic turn from 2015 on.



Figure 105. Brass handcraft in Tripoli.

The Roman city of *Leptis Magna* is impressive, see page 77. The arch of Septimus Severus is now hidden by scaffolding, but the Hadrian baths are as inviting as those at Ṣabrātha. The *Via colonnata* takes us to the port and its lighthouse. A sandbank now blocks the former port entrance. The bright green water is enticing and we dive into it,



fully dressed. Three guys swim around us and ogle all the time, but not so much at me. The *Cardo* road leads away from the water and via the forum and the theater to the market, whose stalls are well recognizable. Our visit finishes at 18.00, and we are rather exhausted after seven hours of walking in the suffocating sun.

In Sirte, we go to a wonderful beach, crystal-clear water and many kilometers of pure white sand just for ourselves. Overall, the beaches in Libya are the nicest ones I have seen on the Mediterranean: not overrun, wonderful sand and water. But somehow Libya has not made her way to a top holiday destination . . .

We drive in one go from Sirte via Ajdabiya to Benghazi. Around noon, we take a side trip towards the beach, three kilometers on a small dirt trail. We come to a deserted village with two huts and some stables. The only living souls around are Ahmed and Ali, two boys of about 12 years. They accompany us to the beach, which we would not have found easily. All along the coast, there are two parallel sand ramparts, with a distance of 100 meters. Maybe for defence purposes? And then the beach, with white sand stretching to the horizon and nobody but us on it. The sea is a bit rough. Unfortunately, there is no little hut to sell us some food or drink. It is tantalizing to think that Spanish or Italian beaches may have been like that a hundred years ago.



Figure 106. Leptis Magna: the *decumanus maximus* with the arch of Septimus Severus and a pedestrian crossing in front.



Figure 107. Leptis Magna: the theater.



Figure 108. Leptis Magna: the circus.





Figure 109. Leptis Magna: Roman baths. Hot air circulated between the brick columns under the raised floor.



Figure 110. Leptis Magna: our friends, neatly separated into girls and boys.



Figure 111. Leptis Magna: ornaments in the theater.



Figure 112. Leptis Magna: lions were once led through these passages under the circus seats. The market, originally surrounded by arcades with numerous shops.

Our drive is pure fun, smooth asphalt and almost no traffic. Easier than an autobahn in Germany. At 18.00, we are in Benghazi in the Cyrenaica. After visiting the suq (market) without any purchases, we enjoy cool drinks on our hotel terrace, quite busy. Someone tells us that many customers are ladies of the horizontal profession, but certainly the softdrink prices are vertical.

We drive further east, to the *Turkish fort* of Tukra. We see a Byzantine basilica and amphoras for water storage. There is so much broken Byzantine and Roman ceramic on the ground that it is hard not to step on some shards. We walk again on the *decumanus maximus* as in Şabrātha over one thousand kilometers back. And it still stretches all the way to Alexandria.



Figure 113. On the road.





Figure 114. Village by the beach.



Figure 115. With young friends on the beach.

In the Roman ruins at *Ptolomaïs*, we see a huge private home, the *palace of pillars*. Four boys, around thirteen years of age, come running and sell us a Roman copper coin and a small marble head. Rather expensive and with a bad conscience for supporting this looting of artifacts.



Figure 116. Tukra: defensive view over the sea, amphoras for water..

In fading daylight, we drive past Cyrene to Apollonia and find the nicest commercial place at which we stayed in Libya. The *Masif* is a vacation resort, totally unexpected here. We have a nice bungalow, our car parked below in the shade. We are the only guests and have a ballroom-sized dining hall all to ourselves. Later we go to a bar with the unreal name *Apollonia Hard Rock Café*. They fill our ears with rock music so loud that it comes out of our eyes again. Real fun, this whole place.



Figure 117. Tukra: shards and a hunter returning home.

The Byzantine ruins of Apollonia contain several basilicas, basins for baptizing, mosaics, and a large theater with the fantastic background of the blue Mediterranean. As so often, we can enjoy the elated feeling of being the only people to visit. No crowds, a lazy guardian in his hut, and we may wander around as we please. Some mosaics are covered with sand and I take a branch of a tree to swipe it away. Up in the cool pine forests above Cyrene, we hike along a row of cave tombs about two kilometers long. We have a nice view of the Apollo temple down in Apollonia, but the largest one belongs to Zeus, as is appropriate. A real monster with  $8 \times 17$  doric pillars from the fifth century BC. We walk into its underground *cella*. Then on to the stadium with a Bacchus temple in its center, which sounds inappropriate today.



Figure 118. Apollonia.



Along streets lined with statues we get to the private home of Jason Magnus, with wonderful stone and marble floors. In the Agora, funny dolphins are dancing on the marble *ship monument*.



Figure 119. Apollonia; the Zeus temple at the bottom.



Figure 120. The *Masif* and an exhaustive gas station advertisement.

Quite frankly, at that point I have a bit of a museum overload—and maybe the reader as well. There is only so much that I can take in and digest. Libya has an incredibly

rich cultural inheritance, from ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine to even older cave paintings and rock engravings—or rather used to have before the destructions of the civil war. After a while, it is hard to avoid confusion. In conclusion, our tour group of two foregoes a close inspection of the Apollo temple.

Today is 11 September a.k.a. 9/11—a day that changed the world. In the evening of this historical game-changing day, we dine at Bin Laden's table. In a small street restaurant, we have nice fried chicken. As in most Libyan restaurants, the tables and chairs are the white plastic models that you see in backyards all around the world, and they are the standard in Libyan restaurants. Embossed on the side of ours is *Sharikat Bin Laden* (Bin Laden corporation), the large Saudi company that produces such cheap plastic furniture for North Africa and the Middle East. The infamous Osama was a son of that family.

When we return to the *Masif*, an agitated employee of the complex runs towards us to tell us about a hijacking of four airplanes in the USA and that one of them has crashed into a big house. He is all excited. I remain calm, thinking so what—four planes hijacked is probably an exaggeration, and a plane falling onto a house is no big news. Actually, we had that in our family when in 1988 an American A-10 Thunderbolt II military jet crashed into buildings in Remscheid in Germany, and Dorothea's aunt and uncle lived right next door (and were traumatized for the rest of their lives).

The hotel staff take us to a small office with a TV set, where the whole hotel crew is glued to the screen. First no sound, then screen and sound for an hour. CNN is showing live pictures from New York, with the two airplanes being flown into the two towers of the World Trade Center, and their collapse. Walls of fire, a big antenna tumbles vertically down. Huge clouds of dust, people with gypsum-white faces. Terrible. I actually saw the Twin Towers in the distance from Long Island just a month earlier. The quality of the TV reminds me of my early days of television, in the mid-1950s. Vertical stripes of black and white traverse the screen, then a random mixture of pixels that looks like snow falling (here in the desert). Then a blank screen, then a few seconds of a regular but faint image. Everybody in the room is shocked, none of the Libyans expresses any joy at this attack. They understand that this is an event, a criminal action at the highest level, that might change the course of the world. Which it did.

Our family in Germany is highly concerned about our safety. But pretty soon it becomes clear that not the leader here, but rather al-Qaida of Osama bin Laden is the culprit. Taken literally, it is true that we dined at Bin Laden's table on 9/11. Of course, it sounds funnier that the cheap plastic reality. A comforting, although equally unrealistic, thought is that we are safer here in Libya than in Germany (or New York City). We are told that President Qadhāfī is in Tripoli, and we hope that US war planes do not see a reason to bomb our little tourist complex.



I now understand my previous misunderstanding, because Arabic uses the same word بيت الكبير (bait al-kabīr) for “large house” and “skyscraper”, and I had not figured out the latter meaning.

Flights to and from Libya are cancelled during a few days. My diary says that we can expect flying to become more cumbersome: earlier check-in, less hand luggage, more security checks. All this has come true in the meantime.

Along the coastal highway, we reach Benghazi. Comforting emails go to our family: we are ok. They are not even sure whether we know about the terrorist attack. Bad news from Rafaela’s friend Manfred: the German military is making his participation in our trip impossible. Annoying.

After dinner in Braigha, we take an asphalted road into the desert, towards Maradah. As it gets dark, we drive off the road and sleep in the car. It is uncomfortable, but too cold and windy for our tent.



Figure 121. After a pleasant drive through the forested Cyrenaica comes the last asphalt and a street sign for the 980 km to the oasis of Al-Kufrah.



Figure 122. No overtaking ... because this might happen.

Our map shows a road from the coast via Zilla and across the Sirte desert to the Hun oasis, on our way to Sebha in the middle of the Sahara.



Figure 123. The road is asphalt all the way, carefully presented bit by bit. The effect on our car is predictable. But we are rewarded by magnificent views—certainly worth the pain.

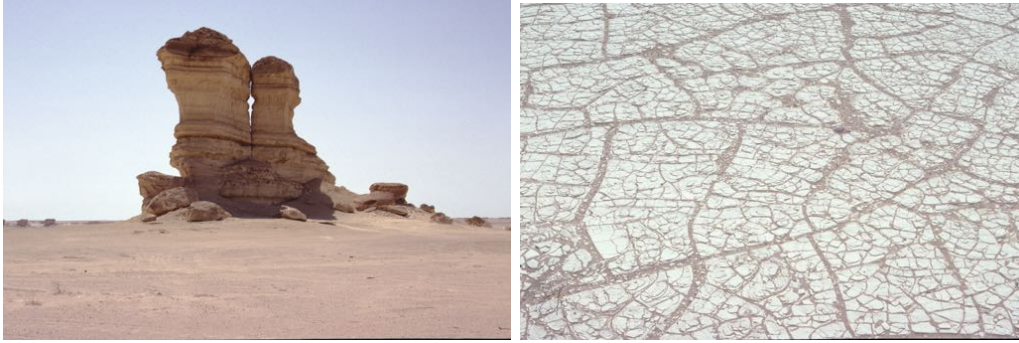


Figure 124. Erosion mushrooms and scorched earth.

We take it and suffer badly on the just 72 kilometers to Maradah. The “road” is “asphalted”, but the surface is broken up along most of its length, with only small square slabs of asphalt remaining intact, sharp edges at each slab cutting into our tires, and a lot of sand on the road. Eventually, I have to drive besides the road in the sand. Also not easy, because this path is corrugated and frequent ridges prevent the speeds at which corrugated roads are best taken. Our car bangs from hole to hole, from ridge to ridge, complaining with many sorts of noises from the front and the rear, and eventually the exhaust pipe falls off. No surprise. I tie it up with a piece of wire.

Still, it is surprising how well our sturdy Toyota braves this endurance test. We do not see any other car the whole day. Given my frightful experience two decades ago (page 99), we carry lots of water. The landscape is marvellous, absolutely desolate rock and sand desert, with rocky outcrops of fantastic shapes.



Figure 125. This car needs no more gas from the oil drilling, in the far distance.

Relief in Maradah: back on a proper asphalt road. Rolling along smoothly. There is almost no traffic. Passing Zilla we get to Waddan and Hun, where I was 22 years ago. But everything is new. We enjoy a delicious chicken dinner and peace.





Figure 126. Restaurant-café *Al-Zahūr* “halal” with the local chef, and the national boss.

The 360 kilometers to Sebha are an easy drive. We send some letters and emails, but otherwise relax. Well deserved after yesterday’s bone-breaking ride.

We want to go to the famous extinct volcanic crater of Wau an-Namus, which I had wanted to visit in 1979, but did not manage. This is also impossible now in our little car. After asking around a bit, we offer the job to Abdul Jadid, called Lel, from Alawy Tours. More precisely, he accepts us as clients. He makes a decent impression and runs a wonderful trip for us.

We leave very early and on time. On good asphalt, Lel drives his Toyota Land Cruiser to Tmissah, where we buy gas and bread. Lel is also a good car mechanic. He changes a gasket in the rear differential, later a tire, and finally a strut holding the front right suspension spring, repaired with a belt and pieces of rubber.



Figure 127. Funerary towers, and Lel and myself fixing something.

At 18.00, we put up our tent at a pretty dune. Nel cooks noodles for all three of us. We sit outside for a long time, gazing at the star-studded blackness above, with many



shooting stars. On land, this is about the farthest you can get away from light pollution and frequent clouds.

We drive on to the funerary towers of es-Sabah, probably erected about one thousand years ago. At 15.00, we arrive at Wau el-Kebir, a godforsaken settlement, really only one building. Some people live here, they are all either dozing or watching TV or both. After this last remnant of civilization,



Figure 128. In the desert.

Lel takes off over endless stretches of fine white sand. At breakneck speed, always somewhere between 80 and 120 km/h, he plows across the sand plain. Not a soul, no

animal, no tree, not even a hill, just flat desert, dead, glistening, dry. Visibility is perfect, the sand smooth.

The desert is nothingness only to laymen like ourselves. Lel explains different kinds of desert and how to read them. The main type here is flat *serir* with hard ground underneath or covered with scree, pebbles, and stones.

We drive all of the next morning through the unlimited extent of the extreme desert. Everything is flat, rarely a small hill, no reason to touch the brake. We see car tracks, sometimes a dense tangle of many, but mostly Lel drives into the sandy void.

Around 11.00 the ground begins to turn black, and soon we stand at the edge of the crater Wau an-Namus, a perfectly flat black circular rim with a circumference of about 10 kilometers. Deep down lies the volcano of a secondary eruption. It is not the usual mountain rising from a plain, but rather a hill inside this deep depression. From afar, one cannot even see it, hidden in its bowl. And even more amazing are the palm-fringed lakes surrounding it, three larger and several smaller ones, totally unexpected here in the middle of the dry desert. They are colored blue, green, and red by mineral deposits and by algae. A surreal picture, after spending almost two days of riding fast through arid country, we have this beautiful view in front of us. And only to us, nobody else is around.



Figure 129. The secondary crater in the center of the big one, surrounded by salt lakes with palm stands.

The colors are dazzling. Volcanic black dominates, but the green colors of vegetation and the multi-hued waters provide a pleasant contrast. The bright yellow sand in the distance is invisible, but a forceful sun shines from a deep blue sky. This volcano is a really far-out place and we are so happy to be here. A chance of once in a lifetime—especially since now, in 2019, travel in Libya is impossible due to the breakdown of governmental structures. We see quite a few car tracks into the crater, created by tourists with the same intelligence and respect of nature as the truck driver ruining the *arbre du Ténéré* (see page 55). Those tire tracks remain for eternity.

We climb into the depression, about 160 meters down. The steep top part of its sides consists of black volcanic pumice, a very light material. Going down is no problem, we are sliding more than walking through the soft layer. Almost like skiing. At the bottom is hard ground, sometimes small areas of soft sand. After walking all around the lagoons, we rest in the shade of palm trees. The lakes are surrounded by thick stands of reed, and it is hard to walk to the water's edge. It is very picturesque but not pleasant to camp here because of the clouds of flies and mosquitoes.



Figure 130. Views from the top . . . .

The secondary volcano's cone rises from the bottom of the depression. Of course, we have to climb up there. The steep climb is quite tough, because in most places, small loose pebbles lie on a hard underground and our boots simply slip. It feels like walking on a bed of marbles. We find a way to go just in soft sand, strenuous but not that dangerous.

Rafaela and I enjoy a picnic of an apple each on the summit. It is hot and windy, and the view into the crater is fabulous.



Figure 131. ...and from further below.



Figure 132. Rafaela running down from the top of the rim,  
and resting by a lake.



Then comes the hardest part of the day: the climb back up to the crater rim. It is pure drudgery, since we are pretty tired from a long day of hiking in the diabolical sun, and then have to pull ourselves up through the soft underground. Two feet ahead, one and a half foot sliding back down. On the last 50 metres, I am totally exhausted and almost despair whether I will ever make it. Rafaela is substantially fitter than me. Good for her.

The drive back towards Sebha is somewhat less exciting, also because we are tired. In Wau al-Kabir we have a shower, highly welcome, and then drive on to make camp. Lel cooks a simple dinner again for all of us. Rafaela and I sleep in the tent. The wind makes a lot of noise all during the night.



Figure 133. A salt lake, tracks from the final ascent to the rim, and total exhaustion afterwards.



Figure 134. Rafaela's birthday cake for her mother, Lel racing the dunes, and Rafaela racing after Lel.

It is Dorothea's birthday today, and Rafaela bakes her a delicious sand cake. We drive over *serir* to Tmissah, then Traghan and Meknusa towards Terkiba, where we arrive around noon. Lel then puts on a show for the rest of the afternoon, driving up high dunes at full speed, almost stopping at the top, and then tumbling down. A wonderful art, it feels like a roller coaster. The dunes are of soft dry sand, at angles of around  $60^\circ$  on the lee side, less inclined in the windward direction. When you are almost stalled at the top of the dune, the steep face looks vertical, like a roller coaster. We see the dry lakes Tasrufa and Maflu, and then we arrive in Gabr On, the most beautiful of the Mandara lakes, see page 86. It is also the one that shapes my memory from 1979.



Figure 135. Dunes and lakes—mathematical esthetics of the desert.



Figure 136. Surprise surprise: tourist boutique and café at the Mandara Lakes.



Figure 137. Lel: expert driver, sympathetic guy, and entertaining and knowledgeable guide.

The people living along the lake shores were resettled in 1980 by the government into “modern” housing along the main highway, and off-season there is not a soul in the whole



wide area. The empty dwellings are falling into disrepair. Later, we will learn from another driver, Sa'ad from Gabr On, that he and others are happy with the relocation. Indeed, the infrastructure here is very primitive; the beauty of the lakes does not compensate this in the long run.

Even a tourist café has opened in Gabr On, the *Winzrik*. They offer 4WDs for dune drives and—believe it or not—skis for the dunes. Lugging a pair of skis up that dune in the heat of the day must be really tough. But—we decline, there are no other tourists around, and the dunes are left intact today.



Figure 138. Dunes galore.



Figure 139. The Saleh family in New Gabr On.



Until 2011, during the tourist season around Christmas there were so many Europeans driving their 4WDs around that one had to watch for oncoming traffic when going up a dune.

We continue to Umm el-Ma (mother of waters), and Mandara. The lake is practically dry, just a few pools remain at the fringes. The ground of the former lake is hard and salt encrusted. It reminds me a bit of the Devil's Golf Course in Death Valley.

Lel takes us to his friend Sa'ad Saleh in New Gabr On, the resettled Gabr On. He invites us for dinner, makarona from a large communal pot, but everybody has his own spoon. Certainly not for concerns of hygiene. We arrange a tour to Wadi Mathendous in two days, staying overnight in the Edeyen Murzuq.

Lel drives us back to Sebha. His tour was a great experience for us, we are very happy, and bid him goodbye with a generous tip. He is also happy, we got along perfectly well on the whole three-day excursion.

A day of rest in Sebha. There is not much to see, and I do not recognize anything from my previous visit. All seems to be new. We exchange emails with Manfred. Bad news: he will definitely not come. Unfortunately, this also impacts our trip: Rafaela is not happy, sometimes morose, and not as energetic as otherwise.



Figure 140. Wadi Mathendous: fertile millenia ago, barren today.

We drive in our own car towards Germa, looking for the fantastic Jebel Bouzna that so impressed me twenty-two years ago; see page 83. In spite (maybe because) of the careful

description in my diary, we do not find it. The Roman *tomb of Princess Lucilla* is simpler to find, there is even a road sign, see page 90. At Bab Mekkusa, we go hunting for petrified wood, and our patient Toyota donkey has a few more kilograms to lug. Stopping for a drink in a tourist camp, Rafaela suggests I drive up the dune there. Of course, I follow her request as always, and make it up two thirds of the way. Then the car is definitely stuck in the deep sand. It is simply not made for this kind of adventure. No problem: I shovel away the sand that clings to the undercarriage, free the wheels, put rubber mats under them, and down I go in reverse.

All this in about 20 minutes of hard labor in the scorching sun. A guy in the bar has watched all these goings-on and slaps my shoulders: “you are a strong man”. And then I realize that I put the mats under the rear wheels, while our car has front traction. Maybe strong and stupid?



Figure 141. Rafaela resting in Wadi Mathendous,  
and me with Sa'ad, armed Tuareg style.

Rafaela, Sa'ad, and me leave very early in his Toyota Land Cruiser, the most common and most useful car here in the desert. Three hours to the Wadi Mathendous and In Habeter. The last bit of road is quite taxing and we know by now that our own car does

not have the ground clearance for it. Rafaela and I hike through the wadi eastwards, Sa'ad will meet us somewhere further on ... but it is not clear that we are talking about the same point. We'll see.

Starting from In Habeter, we see rock engravings on the Mathendous valley's west side, then east, then again west. Elephants, giraffes, rhinoceroses, many cows, ostrich and other birds, frog, one hunter. Fascinating to see in a valley where today only a few acacias grow between the rocks, and outside nothing, just barren rock and sand. Eventually we meet Sa'ad. He cooks some tea for us under a nice shady acacia. In the winter, apparently three or four  $4 \times 4$ 's can be found seeking refuge under each of them. Now, we are all alone. The 4WD tourists do not venture out in summer. Too hot for them.



Figure 142. Rhinocerus.

In the evening, we are again invited at Sa'ad's house for dinner, and we also sleep there on a large mattress outside. Two weddings are taking place in the neighborhood. Everybody including his family is extremely friendly and generous to us. True beduin hospitality.

Then we go on a long drive to Ghat. First stop in Germa: no gas. Then to Uweinat: yeah, it's a gas. Very cheap, about 10 cents per liter. After passing the Qasr Idinen, where Heinrich Barth almost died in 1850 (see page 101), we arrive in the evening in Ghat, our last Libyan stop on this trip. It is the end of the road in Libya and I flew back to Tripoli from here on my "first honeymoon"; see page 95. But we had rather not make a U-turn here, although there is only a difficult sand track further on.





Figure 143. Wadi Mathendous.



So Rafaela and I are considering to drive from Ghat in Libya to Djanet in Algeria. We ask everybody we meet about this idea and get contradictory information. Some say that it is possible and that they know of cars that have done it. Others say that one needs a 4WD, and in fact, even the ordinary taxis here are Land Cruisers.



Figure 144. Our friends in Ghat.

The bank does not change money, but one of its employees does, no receipt given. The immigration office is right across the street, and the friendly Mohammed Abu Bakr is already waiting for us, aware of our plans. It is a small town, we arrived yesterday, and already today everyone seems to know us. I think other tourists come by, but only in the winter, and father with daughter and an old 2WD station wagon may be a rarity.

Mohammed speaks excellent French and good English. We chat amiably about travel and the world. One of the bystanders says that he can take us to Djanet. This is Tura, 31 years old, and after some discussion we agree on an arrangement. Yeah! This will make for an interesting trip. Tura turns out to be indispensable, hard-working, and efficient, without him our trip would not have been possible.

In the morning, we checked out of the hotel because we thought we would drive back to Sebha and Tripoli. Now our plan is much more interesting. Earlier, we had a misunderstanding about the hotel room rate and I finally agreed to pay 35 Libyan dinar (LD, US\$ 17). While we sit at our breakfast table, the owner comes and brings us 5 LD—he says that this would also be ok. When do you ever get money back after you have paid? Overall, my experience in countries like Libya or Sudan is that people are totally honest and very generous. We never got cheated on this trip. In other countries, like Morocco, we have fared very differently.

In the afternoon, we drive to the rock engravings at Feuet, to where I had walked in 1979; see page 97. Asphalt to the village, then a difficult sand track which our car cannot make. Rafaela stays in the car, I hike the remaining part of the 12 kilometers. I chance into a military camp, explain my goal, but they do not know about the engravings. However, they allow me to walk there. Only it is getting dark, I do not find the caves that quickly, and in the end have to return unsuccessfully. Too bad.

After an early breakfast, we go to the immigration office for our exit visa. Tura is there, but the immigration officer is not. When he comes eventually, everything goes smoothly. At the customs office, they ask us to return our Libyan licence plates. I explain that we would like to keep them as souvenirs, and then that is also ok. They are still in my basement.



Figure 145. Ghat to Djanet: stuck in the sand many times.

Finally, we set out. 20 kilometers of asphalt to the Libyan border control at Tin al-Koum. Four miserable containers, truly a post at the end of their world. They are friendly and the required formalities are quickly done. And then the adventure starts. The driving is mostly on a dirt road, often branching out widely, but frequently on sand. Ahead of us

is the yellow glistening track, to our right in the west the dark serrated rims of the Tassili N'Ajjer, and to the left the Acacus mountains. An awe-inspiring landscape. We might have found our way without a guide, but Tura is indispensable because he knows where the sand is easiest to navigate. On hard sand, we advance quickly, but lateral ridges and the soft sand called *feshfesh* slow us down. I drive with power into the soft spots, going on, on, on, please! please! no! no! and we are stuck. Then Tura takes over, jacks up our car, we collect medium sized stones, dig out some of the sand, and build a meter or so of road with the rocks and our rubber mats. First attempt: failure. Second attempt: failure. On the third attempt, we are out and relieved.

We have met so many friendly, generous, and helpful Libyans on this trip. A sad retrospective thought is that we have no idea how they fared through the violent recent years in their country.



Figure 146. Tura and a friend of his from a village.

Tura drives at times, he knows the sand better than I do. The next time, he gets stuck in a long sand hole in a wadi. Fortunately, there is a Tuareg village near-by, with friends and relatives of Tura. We sit in the shade for a while, then walk into the village. Extremely poor, huts made from straw and corrugated iron. Of course, we get invited for



tea. Four strong boys then carry our car out of the sand hole. What would Rafaela and myself have done on our own?

In total, we get stuck six times. Each action takes between ten minutes and an hour, and is very strenuous in the scorching sun. One time, I feel a heat stroke coming, but can avert it by sitting in the shade and drinking a lot. Overall, I am elated by this adventure. Yes, it is tiring and we are sweating all over, but here we are in a totally unsuitable vehicle making our way through a difficult passage. Just wonderful!



Figure 147. Meditation after a tiring day, and sand for Rafaela's collection.

Around 19.00, we stop at some distance from a village. The track to the huts is too sandy for us. Tura walks into the village, Rafaela and I are too exhausted for this additional exertion. Our dinner consists of dry bread, a can of tuna, and water. Rafaela sleeps in the car, I outside in my sleeping bag. Not to miss the starry sky. Driving a full day, we have covered a whopping 176 kilometers, an average of 18 km/h.

We get up with the sun and start after a frugal breakfast. We advance well, but I drive around a large sandhole the wrong way, the other way I would have had firmer ground. The usual digging and road construction begins, and we get out of the hole on the third attempt. But this was the last time we got stuck. At some point, we drive across a runway of an abandoned airport, and then it is asphalt to Djanet. We arrive around 11.00.

Tura's friend Mohammed invites us to his home. I change some money. The currency is a bit complicated. Inflation drove the old Algerian dinar to very little value, and people said "20" for "20 000". But then it was devalued by a factor of 100, and now it is 200 Dinar. Both terms are in usage, causing some confusion.

Mohammed gives us a whole house for our sojourn, for free. Very kind. We visit palm plantations. The work there has not changed in centuries, only there is more plastic garbage around. Dinner at Mohammed's house is delicious. We sit in an open courtyard, his wife with us. Two small children are there, and one shy teenager.



Rafaela calls her Manfred, who tells her that he will not come to Africa. She now wants to go home rapidly, taking the ferry from Tunis in three days from now. This is annoying for everyone. For me, because I am in the famous Saharan town of Djanet and do not even get the time to visit the important rock paintings in the vicinity.

Our rallye Djanet–Paderborn starts at 06.00. Rafaela makes a disturbing discovery: her writing set and four shirts are missing. Everybody else is asleep and we cannot discuss this with our hosts. Will we make it in four days? Crazy. From Djanet it is a long desert drive to El Oued in the north and then Tunisia. Our asphalt road goes past many beautiful dunes with black basalt boulders embedded. At noon, we are in Illizi. Officials tell us that it is important to get a *laisser passer*, and we go through that procedure. Nobody asks for it later. There are not many roads in this part of the Sahara (or anywhere in the Sahara, for that matter), and we pass a place where in early 2003, just a year and a half after our passage, a band of Salafist terrorists took fourteen Austrian, German, and Swiss tourists as hostages. One of them died because she did not get the medication she required. The others were eventually released, for an alleged ransom of 5 million Euros and after an ordeal of over five months in various hiding places in the midst of the Sahara. We also drive past the Tiganourine gas facility near In Aménas, which al-Qaeda terrorists attacked in January 2013. Over fifty people were killed, most of them in the rescue attempt by Algerian security forces.

We do not realize how lucky we are to escape such dangers, and drive on via Ohanet to Tin Fouyé, arriving shortly after sunset. A tiny hamlet, we almost do not notice it beside the road. But then we luck out. A former oil worker opened a restaurant last year. An oasis of hospitality. Delicious dinner, he even opens a bottle of red wine, of which he drinks most. This is our first alcohol in a month, but the abstinence did not bother us. He proudly shows off how well he and his colleagues are paid: 1800 Euros per month, and a pension of 1200 Euros, which is paid regularly and on time. Quite a lot for these countries. I sleep on the ground beside our car, Rafaela inside.

Even though we leave at 06.00, the restaurant owner starts our day with a welcome café au lait. Day 2 of our rallye begins. Past Hassi Messaoud and Touggourt we go to El Oued. I recognize nothing from my visit with Dorothea in 1973, see page 67. The border crossing from Algeria into Tunisia takes over two hours. A very relaxed working attitude reigns. Via Tozeur we arrive shortly after dark in Gafsa. We get a decent dinner after a day of fasting.

The next day is one of trembling uncertainty. We leave early, via Kairouan to Tunis and its port La Goulette. At 11.00 we are at the shipping office to change our booking to today. This should not be a problem, since the tourist season has ended. But it is, and in fact the ferry is full. The next available space is a week from now, but they put us on the waiting list for today, as number 28. Depression!

Rather shocked, we drive to Sidi Bou Said, a pleasant suburb of Tunis where Dorothea and I had a good time in 1973; see page 64. Over a *thé à la menthe* and shisha in a café with a beautiful view of the Mediterranean, Rafaela tells me that she will take the ferry

on her own and leave me here to see how I drive home. Not the most pleasant way to end a thoroughly enjoyable journey.

The ferry departure is set for 15.00, we are in the port by 13.15, and at 15.30 the first ten numbers on the waiting list are allowed on the ship. Then the next ten. And then the next, our number 28 among them! Hurray! I do not have enough Tunisian currency to pay the fee of 6 Euros for our change of reservation. A friendly soul offers me the money, but I have just enough Italian Lira to pay him. We met so many nice people on this trip. Which German would offer at a counter 6 Euros to a Tunisian he does not know?

We board the ferry, the car deck is almost full. On our deck, we talk to Evy and Erich, who have led a tourist group with two Nissan 4WDs through West Africa. That was not a great success, three of their guests came down with Malaria in Ouagadougou. To compensate for our food situation, full of privations over the last weeks, we afford a luxury menu in the First Class restaurant, with five courses and a bottle of wine. From Genova, we drive back home to Paderborn in one go. Djanet to Paderborn in four days! Actually, not my favorite style of traveling.

## Morocco, Western Sahara 1995

*With three girls (Dorothea, Rafaela, and a friend of hers) we drive to Morocco and the Western Sahara, to the end of the road for vehicles like ours. We experience the sounds and smells of North Africa, beautiful mountains and the endless desert, Berber hospitality—and a slave household.*



In 1994, we relocate from Toronto to Paderborn in Germany. 1995 is our first summer there. Désirée's friend Sarah Chiddy has been visiting and we take her to the Düsseldorf airport. Leaving at 07.12—only twelve minutes later than planned, a huge improvement over the six-day delay seven years ago. Dorothea, Rafaela, and Désirée accompany Sarah to the check-in, while I fall asleep in our sturdy Toyota Corolla station wagon. I have had too much stress and too little sleep over the last few days. The good-bye is not too

tough, because Désirée will fly to Canada in just three days.

When we arrive a few days later on our ferry in Ceuta, there are long queues for crossing the border into Bab El-Sebta in Morocco. Touts greet us: *Welcome! I have worked in Germany.* We pass a *Club Med* in the middle of nowhere. In Fez, we find a hotel with the friendly help of a moped driver. Dinner finishes with our first *thé à la menthe*, delicious.

We spend the day in the suq quarter of Fez-el-Bali. The smells of the orient welcome us at its entrance gate Bab Rcif. The leather suq with its huge tanning pools is impressive, the odors are less so. The scene is almost unchanged since 22 years ago; see Figure 64. A friendly Italian tourist gives Dorothea and Rafaela a branch of mint leaves, to dampen the vile smells. It works.

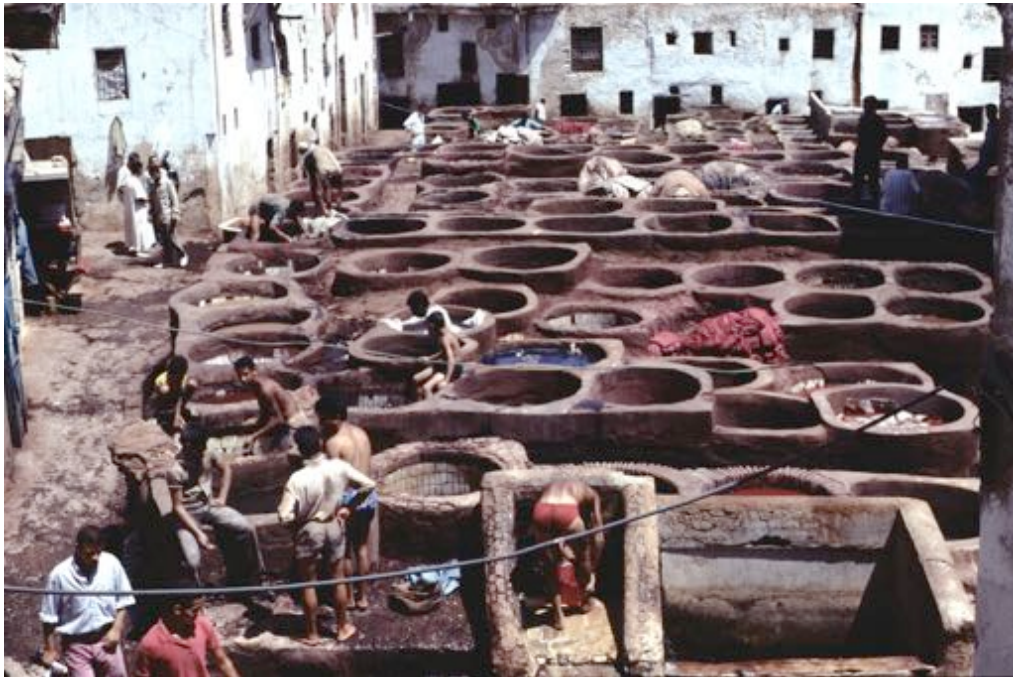


Figure 148. The leather tanners in Fez.

Wonderful items are offered in the little shops, we admire them, but refrain from purchasing any; many of them are overpriced. From our last trip to Morocco (see page 72), we still have a basement full of Moroccan handicraft.





Figure 149. Working hard in Fez: on hides and on ladies' hair.

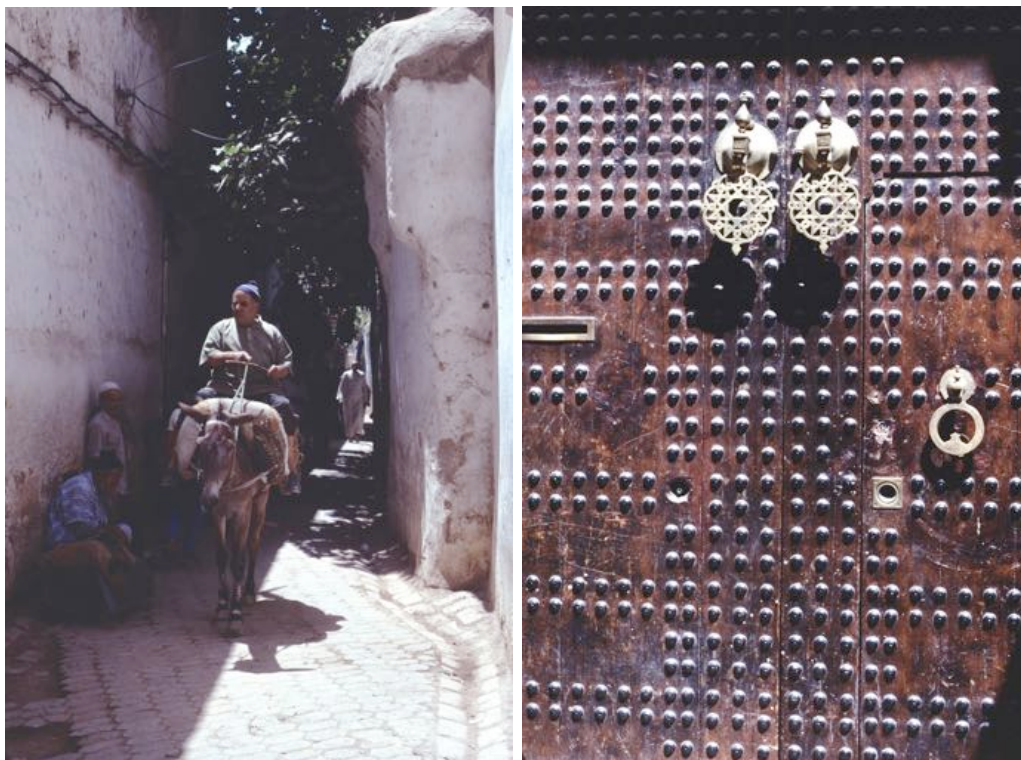


Figure 150. Around the market in Fez.

We find an oasis of peace, the *Zahra* restaurant in the middle of the suq, where we drink tea, eat, and rest in the cool for a while.

Driving west, we spend the hot hours around noon in the Roman ruins of *Volubilis*, which had already impressed Dorothea and me on our first visit; see page 71. Besides foreign tourists, there are also numerous Moroccan families visiting.

At the *Hotel Volubilis*, we have drinks and a snack. Perfect service, cool calm collected. Then it is on to Casablanca. This is a modern town of highrises and poor districts, the charms of Humphrey Bogart and Audrey Hepburn are nowhere to be seen and probably never have been, nor can we ask Sam to play it again.

Rafaela had suggested to take Tanya Mitra, her good friend from Toronto, on this trip. Of course, we oblige, and pick her up at the Casablanca airport, as arranged. She is happy to join us and we introduce her to our mode of travel right away: after a snack, we drive from Casablanca to Marrakesh, Agadir, Ait Melloul, Tiznit (last lead-free gas), Goulimine (today Guelmime), and Tan Tan to Tan Tan Plage. There is no hotel in town, but we can go to the camping. That, however, is a big disappointment. Hundreds of vans with large families camp there, not many spots are left. Are these nomads or Moroccan tourists?

This place does not charm us and we drive south along the coast until we find a quiet spot on the beach, adorned with a ship wreck on the coral rocks. Some huts nearby seem uninhabited. We are completely on our own, except that later a fisherman offers us an octopus. The only restaurant in Tan Tan Plage provides a nice dinner, later we enjoy walking on the moonlit beach.

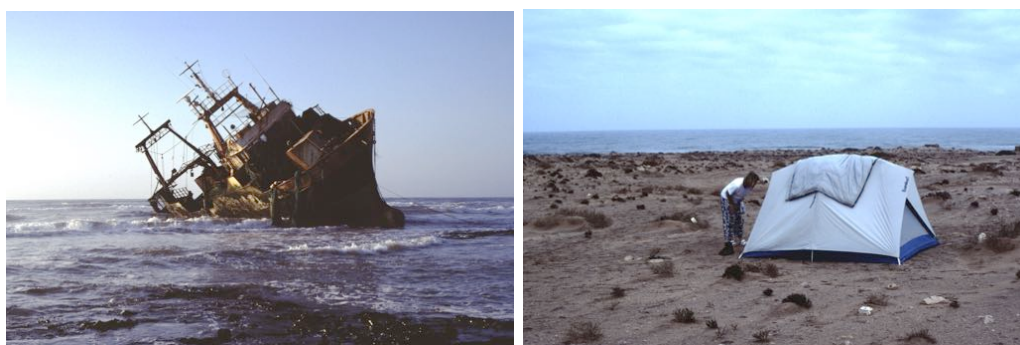


Figure 151. Stranded ship and stranded travelers—  
a calm night by the sea.

The next day, on our long drive along the coast, we see our first dunes and many police check points. Sometimes they just look at our passports, sometimes they enter us in large ledgers that nobody will ever read. But they require the names, Maria and Joseph, of Tanya Mitra's parents which are not stated in her documents, and which in fact are Kumkum and Utpal.



Figure 152. Rafaela on Tan Tan plage, Tanya in the background.





Figure 153. Leisurely breakfast in Tan Tan Plage,  
before driving through the desert.

We reach El ‘Ayun, the “capital” of Western Sahara. The country became a Spanish colony after the Berlin Conference in 1884. In the African decolonization phase of the 1960s, the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco rejected demands for independence, but after his death internal and external pressure increased. Two governments claimed the country as part of their own: Morocco and Mauretania. The colony was given independence in 1975, being divided into a two parts, the north governed by Morocco and the south by Mauretania. Demanding independence for the whole territory, the *Polisario Front* started a guerrilla war, whose effects soon forced Mauretania out of the fray; Morocco then occupied the whole former colony except the Nouadhibou peninsula which is now Mauretanian; see page 19 for my visit. I saw some war damage back then near Nouadhibou, but not on this trip.

On our 1973 trip to North Africa, Dorothea and I were minor victims of the ensuing dispute between the Moroccan and Algerian governments. It took seventeen days to obtain a Moroccan visa in Algiers, see page 70. Since 1991 the country is split between Morocco and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, which occupies a small strip of desert in the east and is not recognized internationally. Since then, there have been several plans for a referendum to choose between independence and becoming part of Morocco. During our visit, a referendum was announced for January 1996, asking two questions: association to Morocco, yes or no? Independence, yes or no? It is not quite clear what these questions mean and the Moroccan-controlled electoral roll was heavily debated because large numbers of Moroccans had entered the territory in the *Green March* of 1975. This attempt at holding a referendum and all subsequent ones failed, and now Moroccan policy is not to hold a referendum. During the guerrilla war, a large berm (sand wall) was built along the eastern border, where Polisario guerrillas were accommodated in their own strip of land and on Algerian terrain.





Figure 154. Other travelers on the road.

Our hotel in El ‘Ayun is the worst one on this trip, with a thoroughly disgusting toilet and bath. We gotta get out of this place, if it’s the last thing we ever do!<sup>12</sup> That was our only thought after waking up in this nightmarish place. Boujdour is a tiny village south. It draws some profit from the then approaching referendum (which never took place) in that the Moroccans are spending some money on upgrading roads and squares. The only southbound road from Morocco is in excellent shape, comfortable to travel by car or tank. Driving further south, our vantage point high up on the escarpment offers fine views of enormous salt plains, shimmering white in the bright sunlight with the Atlantic Ocean in the background. We are completely by ourselves, no other car passes, camels are the only living beings that we see.



Figure 155. Coastal salt plains.

About 25 kilometers south of Boujdour, an unmarked tracks heads off towards the nearby coast. We drive a short stretch, then climb down the steep sandy ridge, not passable for our car. We are on a marvellous beach! 15 kilometers of fine white sand.

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<sup>12</sup>From the 1965 hit *We Gotta Get out of This Place* of *The Animals*, written by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil.

And we are almost on our own. We walk along the beach and inspect several wrecks of large freighters, having lain there for decades and now silently rusting.. It is all so peaceful, although it was not on the day a storm drove those ships up the reef. This *Cabo Bojador* (in Spanish and Portuguese) had a fearsome reputation in the early days of sailing. The sail ships tended to hug the coast for lack of precise maps. But in this area the winds can change quickly to strong westerly gusts, driving the sail ships onto the rocks which are hidden by fog rising from the cold Atlantic waters.



Figure 156. The Abdel'aali family on Boujdour beach.

The famous Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa wrote: *Quem quer passar além do Bojador / Tem que passar além da dor*<sup>13</sup>.

To top it all, the friendly family of Boudahab Abdel'aali invites us into their tent, the only shade on the whole beach. Half of them lives in Tata, to the north and where Boudahab works as a paramedic, and one brother is army corporal in Boujdour. Our conversation is rather halting, since our Hassaniya (the local dialect of Arabic) is weak and so is their French, but we get along just fine with lots of smiles. They invite us to tea and fresh bread, and their tent is a small relief from the Saharan heat.

<sup>13</sup>Who wants to pass beyond Bojador / must pass beyond pain. From Pessoa's 1934 *Mensagem*.



Figure 157. Walking down to Boujdour beach, with two shipwrecks in the background. Two Abdel'aali boys.



Figure 158. Boujdour and El Argoub beaches.

Around noon, we arrive in Dahkla and have a cold drink at a stall. Mohamed Ali El Alem, a Sahrawi (inhabitant of Western Sahara), joins us and invites us to his home for a cuppa. Of course we accept this kind invitation. On arrival, he disappears and leaves us with his young wife, their son, and her sister; the latter masters a few words of French. The kid is utterly spoiled. We get the full treatment of a Sahrawi tea ceremony, a refined (and sand-free) version of the one at the Boujdour beach, including sweet biscuits. The entertainment is local TV, not quite our game. Everyone is exceedingly friendly, we are the first Westerners in their home (and possibly in the neighborhood).





Figure 159. Rafaela at El Argoub.



Figure 160. Daughter with Mom and Dad.

The young wife is originally from Mauretania and has lighter skin than the Moroccans. Her hair is braided in an interesting way with pearls in them. A shocking discovery is that we are visiting a slave household. A young woman with deep black skin, probably from Senegal, is a slave here. After she has served us tea, the lady of the house calls the slave with a loud yell *Minnah!* She appears and has to blow on the lady's tea cup so that the tea cools off. This itself only looks ridiculous, but poor Minnah's situation is



lamentable. The lady explains to us cheerfully and without a bad conscience that here and in Mauretania, the ugly tradition of slavery is still quite common. They are always black people from further south, subsaharan Africa. Rather disgusting. After long and polite good-byes, we are invited for morning tea tomorrow.



Figure 161. Tanya, myself, the son, Mrs. El Alem, Dorothea.

We drive to El Argoub and collect shells at a lonely beach. The beaches further south are inaccessible because of mines. This is the southernmost point where we can go in Western Sahara without joining a military convoy. This system was installed after repeated attacks by insurgents on vehicles crossing the area. Twice a week, the convoy drives along the coast to the border with Mauretania near Bir Genzout, much of the time through sand. Today's convoy is just getting ready, and from the looks of their sturdy vehicles, I have grave doubts whether our Toyota Corolla would survive that passage. And we would only be at the border, with no guarantee of return, or else with the 500-kilometer beach trail from Choum (see page 21) to Nouakshott ahead of us. Impossible. So this is also the turning point of our trip.

The next day, we arrive as agreed around 08.15 at the home of Mohamed Ali. Wife, son, and Minnah welcome us with a sumptuous breakfast, but the master of the house has more important things to do than being here. And then we hurry back north.



Figure 162. 300 km to Boujdour, 1131 km to Agadir.



Figure 163. Hot sand.

Many checkpoints, tea in Boujdour, we pass El 'Ayun without shedding a tear, and arrive at 19.30 for the sunset at Tan Tan Plage. After dining on some tagines (Moroccan

couscous served in special pots), we camp on the beach in the same place as a few days ago. But today, the atmosphere is eerie: dense fog, almost no visibility, everything is quiet, dampened. The white-out reminds me of a snowstorm in the Alps and gives an impression of the difficulties of marine navigation in these waters.

In Goulimine, the three ladies look at jewellery stores, with the famous Goulimine pearls (made of glass). They do not buy anything. An elderly gentleman offers me *two small and two large camels* for 16-year old Tanya. I have to graciously refuse this kind offer, since we do not have room for the four animals. Also, it is not clear that she or her parents would have liked the idea. In Tiznit, I can feed our reliable Toyota for the first time again with high octane gas, as required for its catalyzer. We'll see how it held up. (Well, it did!) In the evening, we reach Agadir.

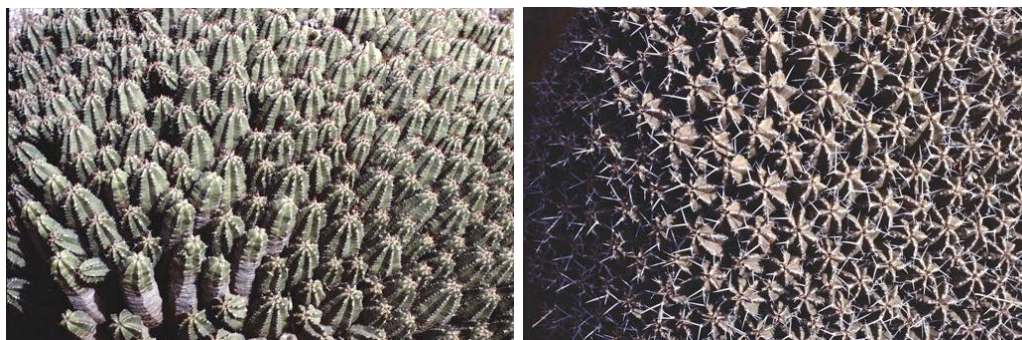


Figure 164. Cactus geometry.

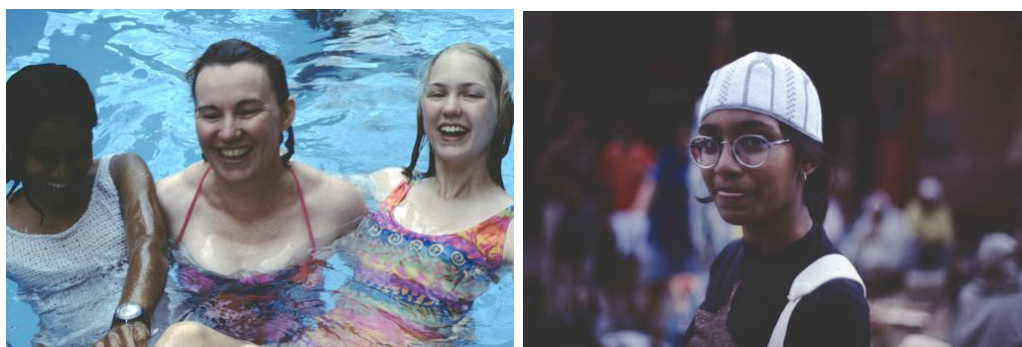


Figure 165. MarraSplashing.

Leisurely drive to Marrakesh. After dinner, Tanya does not feel well, we take her to our hotel and then go the Jemaa el Fna, one of the most fascinating squares in the world, see page 72. We just drift around, taking in the sounds, smells, noises, sights of the orient. A tea on a terrace finishes our evening.





Figure 166. Story teller.



On our third day in Marrakesh, my three ladies run a serious attack on the shops in the suq. Anything goes: mirrors of all sizes, plates, tagines, key chains, leather camels, a wooden table. So much to carry. And their shopping spree continues after dinner, while I enjoy my tea.

A fantastic drive takes us through the High Atlas Mountains via Ouarzazate and the Wadi Draa to Zagora. Many kasbahs, ksur, and dunes. Papa Kodak and Mama Do are happy.



Figure 167. The suq in Marrakesh.

In Zagora we find the nicest camp site of our trip, the *Sindibad*, where we were already in 1973 (page 74). Car and tent sit quietly in the shade of palm trees. Make-shift electrical

wires and outlets snake their way down the trunks of palm trees, so that Dorothea can operate her hair dryer with *palm current* right in front of our tent. All this is very relaxed, especially after some of the dingy holes in which we stayed in the last weeks. The sign indicating *Timbuktu—52 days* is still there, see page 74. My camping bill is for *Alman avec deux garçons*.

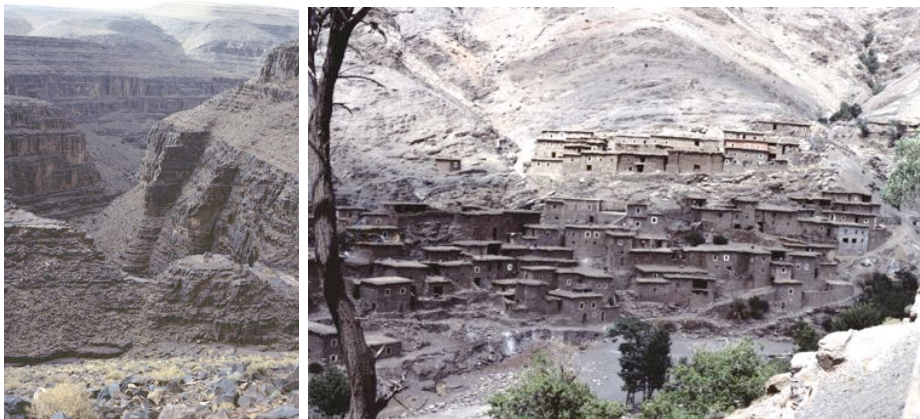


Figure 168. Dadès Canyon.





Figure 169. Palm current in Zagora and three camels riding to Timbuktu.

Another spectacular tour takes us past palm groves, dry red mountains, and volcanic black kasbahs, back through the Wadi Draa and towards the Dadès Gorge with its deep canyon and hairpin bends.

This was an exciting day, but the main event comes in the evening. On arrival, Mohammed from our hotel tells us about a Berber wedding ceremony in the village. The social highlight of our trip.

Some friends dress up our two 16-year old girls, Rafaela and Tanya, as Berber bridesmaids. They look fancy, Tanya with her dark Indian skin like a true Berber, our blonde white daughter is less convincing.



Figure 170. Dadès Canyon.



Figure 171. The mighty Dadès Canyon.





Figure 172. Rafaela and Tanya all dressed up for a Berber wedding.

We get to the house at 21.00. About 200 wedding ravers are already partying. Mountains of food and tea. Gender separation is strict, I join the guys and my girls the other women. On a sign, everybody moves into the courtyard and four men start to sing love songs, accompanying the dance: chains of ten unmarried girls move against chains of ten young men. It reminds us of a polonaise, but is a more serious affair. One person I ask says I can take pictures, another one denies this. I take some in a hidden fashion, but they turn out to be blurred.



Figure 173. Rafaela and Tanya, and boys practising for their toy driver's licence.

The Todgha Canyon is impressive and different from Dadès. A nice clear mountain stream flows through the valley, we cross it many times. By car and on foot—the wading is the hardest thing.



Figure 174. Village, and mountains towering over the “road”.

At the top, a funfair of restaurants, berber tents, and hotels caters to the large crowd of local tourists. Quite nice, but not our thing. We take a hike through the gorge. As expected, after ten minutes we are in total solitude. It is a bit tiring, and the three girls walk back to the enticing cold drinks.



Figure 175. Todgha Canyon.

We drive to Errachidia and have trouble finding accommodation. We land in an ugly place with tunnel-like corridors and the charm of a decrepit Soviet hotel. But then Dorothea hits the jackpot: just as shops are closing, she buys substantial quantities of spices, herbs, peppers. Even months later, tears start flowing whenever we open the back hatch of our car—the pepper scent still lingers strongly in the air.

We cross yet another gorge, the Ziz and the Central Atlas. In the cool cedar forests, the roadside is populated by wooden stalls selling local handicraft and petrified animals and plants in highly polished slabs of rock. Just before Azrou we strike the deal of the century:



we swap a large table top with fossilized trilobites (beliminites and goniatites) plus a dozen smaller petrifications and carved wooden pieces against an old yellow transistor radio that we carry. Good buy and good riddance! The attractive table top still adorns our living room. We continue through Meknès and Suq al-Arba'a to Larache. After a stroll on the *Malecón* by the sea, the ladies go to the suq for even more shopping. By now, our car is so overloaded that we must consider ourselves lucky to not have have a broken axle.



Figure 176. Fossil table top.

We drive through Tanger to Ceuta/Bab el-sebta for our boat to Algeciras, and then home to Paderborn.



## Senegal, Cabo Verde, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Gabon, São Tomé e Príncipe 1990

*A long trip through the western part of Africa starts in Senegal. Based on a friend's recommendation, I enjoy hospitality at several Catholic missions and an interesting insight into the manufacture of handicraft items like brass figurines. Civil war in Liberia blocks my intended route further on, and I have to take large detours suffering through some of the worst bus and bush taxi rides of my life.*



I arrive via the Canary islands at 02.00 in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Friends of a fellow traveler take me to the expensive *Hotel Sunugal*. They say that nothing cheaper is available. I kill six mosquitoes, but some still get at me. The final score is 6:3 in my favor.

I fly from Dakar to Cabo Verde, an island archipelago in the Atlantic. Early morning, I eschew the taxi to the airport and take a cheap bus. Everybody is very helpful. And the same happens in the long queue at the TACV counter for the flight to Praia, the capital of Cabo Verde. Surprise, surprise: I am on the passenger list and can buy my ticket. After my recent airline experiences, this was not to be expected. Mountains of bags, packages, suitcases. I carry two packages for a “friend”, one of which must contain rocks by its weight. In Praia, she gives me the money for the taxi. With only one hour's

delay, we get going.

Life in Praia is a giant sedative. The clocks tick slower than elsewhere. There is nothing to see or do, but of that, there is a lot! Some relaxing is good for me, I have had too much rushing and hurrying over the last few days. The islands have a warm tropical climate cooled by a regular breeze. The food is good and inexpensive, the wine too. I have an afternoon beer in a garden restaurant on the Esplanade: time warp, like 50 years back. All signs in town are in Portuguese, I suppose that few people speak English (but I do not know, since I speak Portuguese with them) outside of the now prospering tourist enclaves.

The next day, I dedicate myself to the strenuous activity of doing nothing. This comes easy with all those good examples around. I walk around town, 10 minutes from one end to the other. In the evening, some friends convince me to watch a rather boring soccer game: Germany-Argentina 1:0 with a penalty by Andreas “Andi” Brehme, the final of the 1990 World Championship.

I meet again Chago (Santiago) and Carmelo from Las Palmas. I helped them a bit there, after they had spent 10 hours waiting at the airport. Chago is a policeman who accompanies illegal immigrants expelled from Spain. They come from Senegal, São Tomé e Príncipe, Sierra Leone. Trying to find a rental car, we arrive at 12.00 at an agency. *Sorry, we are just closing, come back at 14.30.* A good illustration of the locals’ enthusiasm for real hard work. The usual work week is MonTueThuFri, four days a week. Compare that to the Beatles’ Eight days a week!



Figure 177. Well guarded: Cidade Velha on Cabo Verde.

With Chago and Carmelo, we manage to book a tour to the Cidade Velha (Old City). Through a dry rocky volcanic landscape, we get to the Fortaleza San Felipe, from the end of the 17th century. It was built after Francis Drake (1540-1596, later Sir) and other pirates had looted the city. Well, who buys a burglar alarm before the first burglary? It is in good shape and has secure defence positions. Dozens of old cannons lie around and the view of the small town of Cidade Velha is beautiful. We pass ruins of its cathedral and come to a small chapel, from 1550. Some tombstones are dated from the 16th century,

perfectly legible. This is very impressive, even 200 years after that Toronto was still just forests and creeks. We have a nice dinner back in Praia, with view of the ocean. The two *canarienses* try to convince me how beautiful the Canary Islands are. I believe them, but they have too many tourists . . . I'll go there when I am 64. But still have not done so at age 68.



Figure 178. Driving through a volcanic landscape, and relaxing on the beach.

After my return to Dakar, two friendly French *coopérands*, one of them a medical doctor, offer me a lift to Kaolack in their Peugeot 104 with a Red Cross standard. It is pleasant drive via M'Bour on my way south along the Atlantic coast to the Casamance, then further east. The famous Kaolack market is not worth a detour. I quickly find a taxi-brousse to the Gambian border. No problem, they issue me a 7-day visa. Another car to Barra for the ferry to the capital Banjul, which is just leaving. A courageous jump (of 20 centimeters) gets me on board the ship.

My short stop in Banjul, the capital of The Gambia, is rather depressing. Plenty of touts offer me *true friendship*, but all they want is my money. After checking out unsuccessfully three guesthouses in the heat of the day, I get tired and decide to take off. A bus takes me to Bakau, still in The Gambia. The next day, I make a short trip to Banjul, looking for books and a post office. Closed.

The next day brings an unwelcome reminder of the African transportation system. The four-hour trip to Cap Skirring takes me 13 hours. Getting up at 06.30, bus to Banjul. I find the cars to Brikama, one is ready, I am the first passenger. At 11.00, I am still the only passenger. People are quite unfriendly, but finally someone tells me I should try to get to Serrekunda instead. Indeed, a Peugeot 504 is ready to leave for there. I am the third passenger, but it takes two hours to fill the car with its minimum of seven passengers. At 14.00, we arrive at the Gambia-Senegal border, 50 km from my hotel. In the next car, a *malien malin* has no papers, allegedly stolen in Banjul, who smuggles himself through most checkpoints. But before the first bridge in Senegal, all of a sudden two gun-toting policemen confront him: *mains en haut!*



Figure 179. Children of Kabrousse.



I think the chauffeur ratted on him. He is searched thoroughly, in the end nothing happens and he can continue his trip, visibly shaken at first but quickly regaining his arrogance once back in the car. At the muddy bus station in Ziguinchor, my new friend Gaston and I get a car to Oussaye and Cap Skirring. I stay in Kabrousse. The hotel is not really pleasant, no-one is responsible for anything.

The next day, I take a pleasant walk on the large deserted beach. The village of Kabrousse is quite interesting, many children at play. At 16.00, a big *initiation festival* is announced, with drums and traditional dances. A huge stereo set fills the square with noise. But then the festival is cancelled because of the civil war raging in the Casamance. The local tribe of Diola wants more autonomy, and there have been several deaths. Abroad, I never heard of these *événements*. On other occasions, much firing in the air occurred, and these festivals have to be permitted by the prefect. But the local organizers of the *Jeunesse de Kabrousse* had forgotten to obtain this permit, and it cannot be issued today, because the prefecture is closed. Too bad. The friendly hotel owner Jean-Philippe takes me around, among other things to a huge *fromager* tree with impressive air roots.



Figure 180. More happy kids in Kabrousse.

But the next morning, Jean-Philippe shows another side of his character. He charges much more than previously agreed, with insults and threats. We finally agree on something. He has to go to Ziguinchor and gives me a ride, first asking for money, but eventually giving up. At the same muddy bus station as two days ago, I get a car for Tanaff, where we arrive at 13.00.

I am in deepest Africa, everything is asleep. I sit for some time in Tanaff under a mango tree, until I ask the boss if we cannot get moving. And indeed we can, in lightning

speed we leave at 15.15. At 17.30, we have made about 10 kilometers. Many checkpoints, (friendly) passport controls, buying gas, and greeting those numerous friends that he meets all the time.

After finally getting out of Tanaff in Senegal to the border with Guinea-Bissau and further checkpoints after the border, I continue fairly quickly, for a change, to Farim and the ferry across a river. Quite unexpectedly, I even catch a car to Bissau, the capital of this former Portuguese colony.



Figure 181. Getting ready to leave Tanaff, and two hands greeting from above.



Figure 182. Eternal Africa, here on Portuguese azulejos, and a perfectly theft-proof car.

At 21.00, it is pitch-dark, not a good time to be up and around in Africa. The third hotel my taxi tries has a spot for me. Their restaurant is about to close, but they still serve me a lovely dinner with cold beer. In my dirty rags, sweating like a pig. I bet a local with a similar outfit would never have been permitted inside. I smile inwardly all the time at the contrast between my ultra-simple fish and rice in a muddy hut at noon and this luxury of an airconditioned dinner in a pleasant setting. That's Africa! That's traveling! And the shower afterwards tops it all.

The next day, I try to get three visas, for São Tomé and for Angola, in vain, but they promise me the one for Guinea-Conakry (or Guinea for short, the -Conakry is used to avoid confusion with Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, and Papua Niugini) for tomorrow. Much running around for nothing.



Figure 183. Africa may not be functioning well, but she has soul!

On the following day, I wait for two hours at the embassy of Guinea, only to be told that they will not issue a visa to me. I already have one from Washington DC, but the brutal civil war in Liberia now blocks my planned route from Freetown via Monrovia to Abidjan, and I have to make an enormous detour, again through Guinea. Both in Sierra Leone and in Liberia, civil wars are starting to ravage these countries over the following 16 years. Warlords are fighting to gain or keep territory under their control. Here it is not oil, but diamonds and rare metals like Coltan, necessary for mobile phone production, and also iron ore and timber, that fuel the hostilities. One of the worst things in these wars is the pressing of children into military service under such warlords, resulting in a brutalization and exploitation of a whole generation of traumatized young people whose education consists in learning how to kill. To break their resistance, often an initial step is to force them to kill mother, father, or other relatives, molding them into complete submission under the command of their warlord. The movie *Blood diamond* with Leonardo DiCaprio gives an impression of the brutal attacks of these militias on

peaceful villages. I visit Liberia in 2011, after peace is restored; see page 196 for the fate of Charles Taylor, a brutal warlord.



Figure 184. A more-or-less functioning taxi, and one that functions perfectly well—as a playground.

Both Bissau and Conakry in Guinea are on the Atlantic coast, but there is no direct road connecting them; the road goes in a tortuous loop far inland. However, I luck out with my bus to Gabú, a modern vehicle that moves well. Four hours on a good road, through the jungle, some villages and arable land. In Gabú I stay in the only hotel, sharing my room with plenty of non-paying small critters.

In the morning, I spend three hours in the Toyota Land Cruiser with which I want to travel, waiting for it to start. They will not let me sleep there, because “it makes a bad impression on potential passengers”. I could do that while they are driving . . . Oh well, if I wanted a comfortable life, I would have stayed at home.

We drive along an interesting bush trail, branches beating us from above, left, and right. In North America, this would be a broad hiking trail along which park rangers might drive from time to time, but here it is advertised as a *transcontinental connection*. During the whole day’s drive, we meet two other cars. The border check into Guinea is ridiculous. The official reads my passport from front to back, my visa three times. He is obviously waiting for some remuneration for his substantial efforts. That, however, is not forthcoming, and after some more turning and investigating my document, he returns it for free.

In Koundara, I get a nice hotel. I have gotten used to minor deficiencies like no electricity and a stinking toilet. I have dinner with four Belgians who work for an agricultural university. They give me some anti-malaria Paludrine, which I had tried to purchase without success.

The next day is another real Africa day. The cars leave at 06.30 from Koundara, and I am there on time. A guy from the *syndicat des transporteurs* gives me a seat in a bus, which leaves *tout de suite* (right away). Eight hours later, it is still standing still. So I sit around the deserted *gare routière* of Koundara most of the day. Several wooden shacks



look like they might sell food and drinks, but none of them has anything to offer. A miserable place, all dust and sweltering heat. Poverty attacks me like a mangy dog. They only living creatures moving around are stray dogs, ugly animals that, like me, look like they need something to eat or drink. Dozens of vultures sit on the trees and come down every once in a while to feed on the plentiful garbage. Not really appetizing. Adding insult to injury, one of them drops a big piece of shit smack on my head. It feels like a rock hitting me, and it is not easy to get the sticky goo out of my hair. This excremental incident somehow symbolizes for me this epitome of a poor city within a poor country. Great, this is Africa. Where else in the world can you have a vulture shitting on you?

Guinea is a rich country with poor people. Its mountains contain, among other treasures, iron ore worth about 140 billion USD. But corruption prevents all development, the incoming money vanishes in the pockets of an élite that exploits the country. The curse of Africa (and other regions).



Figure 185. The Koundara taxi station. The vultures have left after doing their business.

I give up on my bus and find a seat in a Land Rover. We leave at 16.30, after ten hours in this sorry location. The driver is pleasantly cautious, one of the few of this ilk I had in Africa. It is a trip through the heart of Africa. Over narrow dirt trails through the bush, then corrugated roads through villages. The car breaks down regularly, because the carburetor is clogged. They take it apart every time for cleaning. The petrol flows liberally, and the driver works under the hood, wielding a screwdriver in one hand and his cigarette in the other. Every time, I quickly flee to a safe distance—but luckily the car never catches fire in spite of this casual attitude towards an obvious danger.



Figure 186. Driving along the transcontinental connection,  
with some friends.



Figure 187. Our driver cleaning out the carburetor. He needs  
both hands, full of gas, and has briefly put his cigarette away.

We cross four rivers, the first one at midnight. The bridge has been shot to pieces and two rows of planks have been laid over the remains of the steel girders. The driver risks

driving across them, but, quite reasonably, asks all passengers to descend. We have to wade through the waist-high river with a moderate current. My main concern is *bilharzia* (schistosomiasis), transmitted by the parasitic flatworm *schistosome* with an interesting life cycle. Its larvae breed in certain freshwater snails, eventually swim into the water, enter the human body through small wounds or cracks in the skin, and then infest the liver of the victim. After having multiplied, they enter back with feces into the river and look for snails to lay their eggs in. The human victim may live for a few years with these beasts in his organs, but not for very long. Bilharzia is endemic in all African sweet waters, all rivers and lakes, with the exception of volcanic lakes with high acidity as Lake Kivu between Rwanda and Zaïre; see page 332. I was lucky, none of these worms got through my boots and jeans—or maybe they were all asleep . . .



Figure 188. The truck is in dire straits, but we drive happily across mud and rivers . . .

We drive through more rivers, water streaming through the car doors. That does not matter, we are soaked anyways. At 02.00, we arrive at a hut labelled *bar*. I have a lukewarm beer and driver and helper get their fill: a water glass of vodka, *et après on a encore augmenté* (and then we got some more). Clinically drunk, my guess is at 3 per mill of alcohol, the driver insists on going on. Fortunately, after a short time some screw



falls off the rear axle. While a helper fixes this, the driver falls into a deep snoring coma, and they do not succeed in bringing him back to the world of the living. So we all sleep from 03.00 to 06.00 extremely cramped, squatting by the edge of the trail in the middle of nothing. My bones and muscles ache incredibly, and I am totally happy. This is what I travel for, a real experience of the wild side of Africa. Traveling for me does not mean being at least as comfortable as at home, but rather sharing the difficult lives of people here.



Figure 189. ...and across the bridge-building feats  
of African civil engineering.

Around 09.00 we arrive in Labé, after taking 16 strenuous hours to cover 260 kilometers. I find a hotel and wolf down a substantial breakfast of bread with coffee. A local man boasts how well the country has developed since the death of the former dictator Sékou Touré in April 1984. Before, there were no hotels or restaurants at all. So I enjoy the dubious comfort of a run-down hotel instead of complaining.



Figure 190. The latest styles in hair dressing,  
and a gas station operating from plastic bottles.



What bothers me is the small-scale corruption I see everywhere. Every few kilometers, our driver has to bribe the officials at some checkpoint. The other passengers express their annoyance by loudly clacking their tongues, and I also learn to do this.

I meet three Swiss travelers, from near St. Maurice, who plan to go to Koundara. I explain the drive there, and they decide to stay in Labé. Very wise, not everybody is crazy enough for this.

I spend a pleasant day in the Fouta-Djalón mountains of central Guinea. After a comfortable—for a change—drive to Pita, I have a sumptuous breakfast of bread with mayonnaise and coffee. When I ask to leave some things there for a while, the owner does not like the idea, but finally agrees. I leave the village towards the north. My goal are the Kinkon Falls, where one allegedly needs a permit which I do not have, of course. All day long, I try to avoid anything that looks like a checkpoint.



Figure 191. Hiking to the Kinkon falls.

It is a wonderful hike along the flat plateau. People everywhere. A boy accompanies me for a while, and I miss a turnoff. No worries. Me and my new hiking boots enjoy the day. The trail is not easy to find, but eventually I stand in front of the majestic falls. Lots of water, rainbows, bathing pools everywhere. A totally relaxing picnic in front of this sight, which I have all to myself.

On my way back, the weather alternates between heavy rain and torrential tropical downpour. My boots stay dry inside, and I am happy to arrive at 16.00 and have another slice of bread. Then a taxi to Mamou, where I arrive at 21.00. My hotel *Luna*, the only one in town, is the low point of the Guinean hotel industry. Sinister guys and girls linger in the courtyard, the floor in my room has served as spittoon and ash tray, the bathroom is afloat with disgusting liquid and solid legacies of previous guests, and the shower has been unusable for a long time. The only positive thing are the strong steel door and bars in front of it. But I am so tired that I fall asleep easily, without any nightmares about the piles of dirt around me.

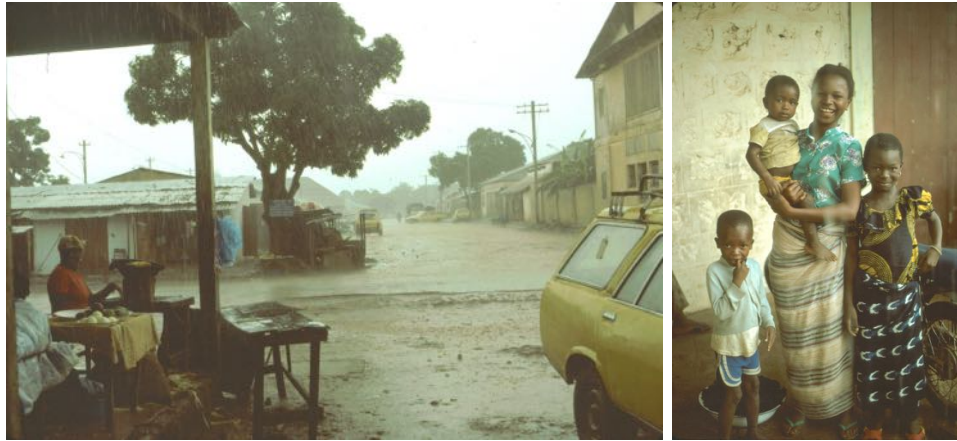


Figure 192. A bit of rain, and a welcome dry reception in a friendly home.

A shower in the morning would be wonderful, but is unimaginable in this god-forsaken rathole. I leave my totally rotten and torn jeans in the room and get out of here as quickly as possible. Stale breakfast in a wooden hut with an unfriendly owner. A girl from the Peace Corps had told me that Mamou is less touristy than Labé. Labé is not touristy at all, but I now understand what she meant—and she was right. The *gare routière* is equally depressing. Many people want to go to Conakry, the capital of Guinea, there are many cars, but no gas.

After a short wait, a bus stops outside the station. I race there, with many others. Although everybody knows where I want to go, nobody had told me. I luck out and can squeeze myself into the last seat in the last row. The drive turns into yet another horror trip. To my left sits a woman with a half-year old sick daughter. They leave plenty of space between themselves and the window side of the bus, while the others are squished together. Everybody is annoyed and tries to tell the lady to move over, but she does not budge. The baby coughs at me all the time and rubs her ulcerous head against my arm. Fortunately, I am wearing a long-sleeved shirt for once, left arm down and right arm rolled up. The exhortations of my fellow passengers and myself are fruitless, and finally my right neighbor switches seats with me and puts his jacket demonstratively between himself and the child.

At 15.00 we are in Conakry. I get a fairly clean hotel room with a usable shower, where I wash off several layers of dust and dirt. Nice, although with cold water. I stroll through town. The traditional village on Avenue de la République is interesting, but there is not much to see otherwise.

A deserved resting day in Conakry. I visit the German embassy and talk to Frau Kobrosly and Herrn Kremp. As expected, they do not know much about the situation, but one thing is clear: Liberia is out. A bloody civil war is raging. Bad for my travel

plans, but much worse for the Liberians.



Figure 193. Richard and Marlene Levis in Conakry and Alexis in Macenta.

I visit Marlinde Levis, sister of Reinhard Lehmann, with whom we shared a house for several years in Zürich. Her husband Richard Gabriel Levis is the *procureur de l'archevêché de Conakry* (procurator of the archbishopry of Conakry). His mother is a Canadian Indian from Manitoba, he is an engineer and has lived in Montréal for a long time. He is one of the few Westerners who lives in Africa, likes the place, and knows a lot about it. Our conversations are interesting. Marlinde is a medical doctor, but does not work here and just sits around morosely in her house. She is a shy person, full of anxieties, not really apt for Africa. Our main topic is the dominance of her mother over her, and less so over her sister Almuth and even less over her brother Reinhard. The latter has donated 16 000 DM for the building of a dispensary here. Extremely generous. We enjoy a wonderful dinner together and a beer afterwards in my hotel.

A Catholic driver picks me up, Marlinde has invited me to my first hot shower since Bissau, breakfast, and Richard writes two letters, a recommendation to the Catholic missions in Guinea and an *ordre de mission*. I embrace my friends for a warm goodbye and thanks for the wonderful time we had together. The chauffeur drives me to the bus

station for Pamelap, the border between Guinea and Sierra Leone. Just two hours driving. The Guinea border checks are easy.

But there are big problems at the Sierra Leone border. They try to scare me with currency declaration and the like. Unsuccessfully, although my pockets are full of Leones. Some market women get into a big fight with customs, and we are held up until 17.00. Corruption everywhere, at each checkpoint the bus driver to Freetown has to pay something. The road is bad, some meters of macadam followed by rough dirt and potholes the size of bathtubs all the time. At 21.00 the driver says: it's not far now. Indeed, it only took another six hours of torture.

We rattle through the night, holding on to the seat in front of us. Just before 03.00 we arrive in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. It is pitch dark. With difficulty, I find a car that takes me to a hotel. There is no street lighting, it is completely dark, and the car has no light. The driver feels his way forward, rather scary.

Next challenge: the hotel has no room available. I talk and talk, and eventually the concierge finds something for me. When I get to my room, my (self-imposed) tribulations have not ended: a 1.5 liter bottle of mineral water in my backpack is broken. In this humid climate, there is no way to really dry things. A week later, my paperbacks are as wet as before. Anyways, I drop to sleep like a dead man, but only for a few hours.

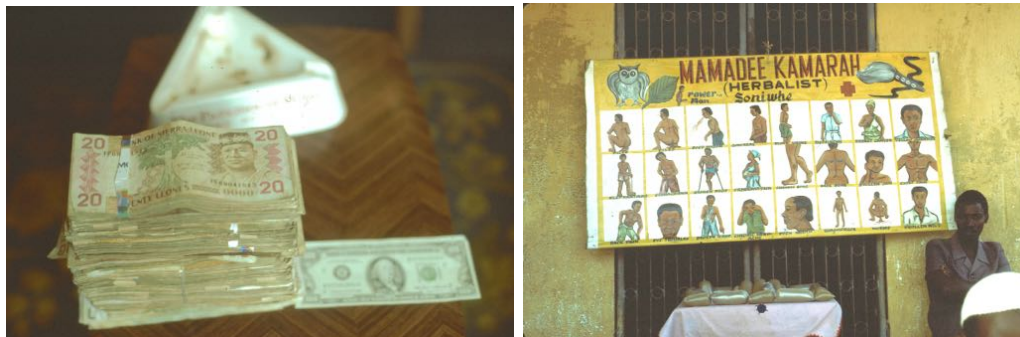


Figure 194. A hefty brick of Leones worth US\$ 100. Impossible to count those sticky bank notes. Mamadee Kamarah provides Power for Man and cures all ailments.

I spend an irritating day in Freetown. The tall tree on the main street intersection is impressive, the old Law Courts next to it, many wooden houses, often dilapidated. Travel agencies are helpless, and Herr Tietze at the German embassy only tells me horror stories about Liberia. Definitely I cannot travel there, as planned.

The next day, the 09.00 bus to Kenema rattles along the potholed road. 9 hours for 300 kilometers. The bus was originally air-conditioned, but that broke down a long time ago. Now the windows cannot be opened and suffocation is close when the vehicle stands. Kenema has nothing to recommend it.



The worst day of travel on this trip, besides Koundara-Labé, begins. At 07.00, chaos reigns at the Kenema bus station. “My car will go first.” “No, my car goes first.” I sit in one and chat with the people for hours, only to take another Peugeot 504. Off we go, after hours of waiting. Well—you might think so. First a tire has to be changed. Of course, that could not have been done before. Buy gas. And at 11.00, we really leave.

The road is a nightmare. We drive through the bush, in parts through real jungle. A rutted dirt track, sometimes the car climbs up rocks, over boulders, through creeks. First gear, second gear, first gear, . . . . Extremely tiring, especially for the driver. I sit in my preferred spot, front right besides the driver, so I can watch all mishaps closely. In Kailahun, I get some bread and roasted corn. A Liberian wants to go to a village by the border. They tell him where to get off the bus—then it is only 25 kilometers of walking.



Figure 195. The bone-shaking road from Kenema to Koindu,  
and the ferry from Sierra Leone to Guinea.

More than half of the cars on the road carry a Liberian licence plate. The rich travel in a Mercedes whose tinted windows shield them from the human misery outside, and the poor on top of a truck, exposed to glaring sun and tropical rains. I see truckloads of wounded women, children, and few men that have escaped to Sierra Leone. Many have bandaged limbs, and bandaged stumps where the limbs have been cut off by the ferocious

youth squads in Liberia. A terrible sight, and I decide not to take any pictures of these mutilated humans. At 18.00 we arrive in Koindu, a wretched village. The one hotel in town is illuminated by the only electric light, everywhere else there are oil lamps only.



Figure 196. Another fantastic bridge, and a hand-pulled ferry across a river.

Finally, a more relaxed travel day. A short ride to the waterfront, where a river forms the frontier between Sierra Leone and Guinea. For once, the border formalities are simple. Then comes another catastrophic road to Guéckédou, and finally 80 kilometers on smooth asphalt to Macenta. What a relief after all those bone-shaking spine-squishing dirt tracks! This road was well built by the French, and the British maintain it.

In Macenta, I go with Richard's recommendation letter to the Abbé Alexis, who greets me in a white priest's robe. He is extremely friendly, gives me a wonderful room with mosquito nets and a bathroom, and we chat amiably. He is the only person on this trip who is amazed at my job, professor of computer science, and writes to me later: *mon dieu, un homme de la science—ici, dans les pays pauvres, sur un voyage difficile ...*<sup>14</sup>. I spend a really nice evening with him, interesting conversation, simple but delicious food in his house, and afterwards a cold beer in a government hall with thickly upholstered chairs.

Breakfast with Alexis, they even washed my dirty pants and shirt. He gives me a kind letter to Dorothea: *Madame Joachim, J'ai eu le grand plaisir d'accueillir votre mari à son passage dans notre ville de Macenta. J'étais surpris de voir un homme si grand goûter à mes peines sur des routes difficiles. Je profite de l'occasion pour vous adresser mes saluts. ... Merci ...*<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup>Oh migod, a man of science, here in our poor countries, on a difficult voyage ...

<sup>15</sup>Madame Joachim, I had the great pleasure to welcome your husband on his passage through our town Macenta. I was surprised to see such an important man taste my pains on difficult roads. I take this occasion to send you my regards ... Thank you ...

One of the interesting experiences while traveling is the stark contrast of the personalities that you meet. Here is Abbé Alexis, welcoming me with open heart and mind. And I have met a large number of people like him, going out of their way to help me, even to feed and accommodate me, and to have long conversations, exchanging experiences from different worlds. But then there are the others, arrogant and aggressive. The percentage in a country of the one or the other type of people seems to correlate, as I have seen it, with the lengths of wars and civil wars in the country. They leave many people traumatized, and this shows in their behavior.

After two hours of waiting in a drizzle, the 2.5 hour drive to N'Zérékoré starts at 10.00, we arrive at 18.00. I get a moderately friendly welcome at the *mission catholique*, and a room.



Figure 197. The jungle has not quite swallowed the border sign for Ivory Coast, but it almost did that to my taxi.

I leave early for N'Zoo and am at the border between Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) at 12.00. I take the first car to go to Danané. The unpleasant driver tries to cheat me on the fare, but does not succeed, because I inquired beforehand. We leave at 15.00, but already at the first hill, about 1 kilometer from the start, the car breaks down. Empty battery, not even a spark from the spark plugs. A friendly truck driver tries to help, in vain. I conclude that this car will never make it today to Danané, ask for my money back, and walk back to the taxi station. A sinister guy from the *syndicat des transporteurs* (Drivers' Union) utters dark threats that no taxi will ever take me. I quickly buy a bus ticket, before he can warn everybody. We leave at 17.00, and I am glad to get out of this unfriendly town. The *mission* in Danané gives me a cool reception, but also a room.

With my new French friends Luc and Jean-Claude from yesterday's bus, we make an early morning excursion to the (locally or world) famous liana bridge of Liéplieu. It will turn into another real Africa day. In the village of Duoplieu, one kilometer before Liéplieu, we are stopped. The bridge is being repaired and no foreigner is allowed to see it. Nobody can tell me why. An older man waves us through, but in Liéplieu two others repeat the prohibition. With their permission, I take a few photos and we drive back.



We get into a dicey situation. In the meantime, the villagers have blocked the road with a tree trunk. Impassable. Their leader, foaming with rage, insults us coarsely and threatens: “you will not get out of here”. After a while, I realize the purpose of this drama: he wants money.



Figure 198. The stilt dancer at a funeral.



Figure 199. Market, and drums at a funeral.



So I turn this around and, in front of everybody, insult the leader: “we come here out of respect for your traditions, but you betray them by asking travelers for money”, and so on. After an hour and a half, they let us go without paying anything. My two French friends are much more nervous than myself.

We pass a funeral on our way. The stilt dancer likes to be photographed, and I give him some small money. He stinks dreadfully of booze and invites me to dance with him, which I do to the surprise and amusement of the bystanders. They proceed to slaughter an ox, but I spare myself this sight. In Danané we go to the waterfalls, highly unimpressive.

After my thoroughly exciting morning adventures, I take the long walk to the bus station and buy a ticket for Man. Again, the driver tries to cheat me. The fares are fixed by the government, and if you know the prices, you do, in general, not pay more. A main source of private income for the drivers are additional charges for luggage. 10 % of the fare for my backpack is reasonable, but the driver wants 70 %. This often leads to a quarrel, which I usually win, supported by all bystanders. Also today.

The smooth ride to Man is an unexpected change from previous tortures. Nice hotel, decent food. I am the only guest in the restaurant.,



Figure 200. Jean-Claude and me soaked and resting on our way from the *dent de Man*.

Another long day begins. My right boot has a large hole, and the sand streaming in ruins my socks. I bring them to the *docteur des chaussures* (shoe doctor) who fixes the hole expertly. Jean-Claude guides me to the *dent de Man*, a prominent rock. We take a taxi to the last village on the road, and then hike upwards. The much-used trail first rises gently, then after a turn-off it goes steeply upwards. Without a guide, this turn-off is impossible to find, and the trail is hardly visible from this point on. The last 40 minutes are very steep and slippery, crawling over the rocks. The top 100 meters are in the clouds, and it starts to rain. Unfortunately, no view over the valleys.



Figure 201. My beautiful outdoor laundrette.

On the way down, I slip and fall on my bum, luckily without hurting myself. Back in the hotel, I lie down to rest at 17.00. I could sleep like a stone for the whole night. But that was not to be. At 19.00, I am at the bus station and my bus for Abidjan leaves at 20.16, with a delay of one minute. I have to laugh, such a difference with the previous days! I spent countless hours waiting for some transport to leave, promised as “immediately”. And here they guarantee a departure time and keep it. This is a sure sign that the interesting part of my trip is over.

I sit in front of the bus, the loud sound of the interminable Kung Fu movies keeps me awake, but fortunately I cannot see the screen. The bus drones through the night, via Yamoussoukro, the capital, always around 80 km/h on the 600 kilometers to Abidjan.

When we arrive at 04.00, several passengers warn me about the bandits around and advise me to sleep in the bus, which I do. After dropping my stuff in a hotel, I finally find the SOAEM travel agency, where I book my next flights. I tried this repeatedly elsewhere, consistently without success. My agent, Madame Moukarzel, is rather unfriendly and turns repeatedly to other business while we converse. But she gets it done.

Near the Parc du Banco, on the northern edge of Abidjan, several hundred *fanico* (washermen) wash mountains of clothes (and themselves) in the murky waters of a creek. They rub, beat, and brush their laundry energetically on large rocks held in place by old car tires. The hills around are covered with clothes hung up to dry. A fascinating scene, quite picturesque, but unfortunately, the people are rather aggressive and I pay for taking photographs.



Figure 202. Couturier and coiffeur à la mode.

The bald style is called *soleil* (sun).

The New York Herald Tribune: the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein has attacked Kuwait on 2 August 1990. This eventually leads to the disastrous invasion of Iraq by a US-led coalition in 1993, one of whose dire consequences is the later formation of ISIS.



The invasion of Kuwait will hopefully not cause me any problems, but my flights on Pakistan International Airways in a few weeks towards the Pacific may be in danger, since Benazir Bhutto has just been deposed.

I take a Peugeot 504 to Grand Bassam. It is a soothing drive on a good road along the coast, with palm trees, undergrowth, and many restaurants. After a friendly reception at the *mission catholique* by the abbés Lucien, Émile, and Innocent with delicious lunch, I enjoy a quiet afternoon by the beach, with its mighty surf and cold water.



Figure 203. Catholic and other friends in Grand Bassam, the guys drinking and the women working.



I sleep in and spend the next afternoon just as lazily, sitting in a beach restaurant, reading, eating, drinking, and relaxing with a view of the beach. Nice sand, cold water, nobody goes swimming. I was in dire need of some rest after many days of strenuous traveling (and waiting). At 17.00, I take a taxi back to Abidjan.

I get the tickets for my next flights at the travel agency, all confirmed except for one leg. At 11.00 I am at the airport for the 13.00 departure. A sign at the entrance: *The Air Zaïre flight is delayed to tomorrow at the same time.* The plane comes in on time, but then goes on to Conakry and Dakar instead of continuing to Libreville. Possibly Mrs. Mobutu has to buy a new piece of jewellery, or something else of supreme importance. The passengers are relaxed at this impertinence of *Air peut-être*. I get lodging and food in an expensive hotel, worth about the price of my ticket. Quite good, in particular, since in the end I will not even fly with Air Zaïre. Other passengers, all native Africans, do not get anything. Racism practiced by black managers.

My flight plans are ruined and I have to go to the travel agency again. The unpleasant Mme Moukarzel there is mad at me, as if I had cancelled that flight. She loses a quarter hour—oh my God—and does not think about the days lost for me. (Actually, I had a good time during those “lost” days.) In the end she issues new tickets with a different routing. I spend the afternoon and night again in Grand Bassam at the Catholic mission.



Figure 204. Dugout on the lagoon.

Soon after the 07.30 breakfast, abbé Lucien invites me for a visit to his family. His red Fiat Panda 2000 goes up to 130 km/h on the excellent road to Assinie. I get passed around from one house to the next one, like a game trophy. Everybody is extremely friendly. A somewhat strange custom is that after greeting me, someone will come back five minutes later and say *akwaba* (welcome) again, and yet another time after ten more minutes. All conversation is in Baoulé, one of the seventy languages of Ivory Coast. I suppose that I am the first white person to visit their homes. The house of Lucien's parents is an investment ruin, and will likely remain so. They simply ran out of money.

We sit outside, on benches in the sand. Later we take a pleasant walk along the opening of the lagoon towards the ocean, and cross it on a shaky dugout. Wonderful beach with fine white sand, we are the only people around.

In a handicraft center in Grand Bassam, I watch the batik makers and an interesting foundry, where brass models of musicians and other objects are manufactured in an intricate *lost-wax casting* process, which has been used around the world for about 5000 years. A model is made out of bee wax, then tightly wrapped in clay. The whole assembly is put into an oven, where the clay hardens at temperatures above 600°C and the wax flows out through an opening left at the bottom. Then brass is heated in a crucible to its melting point, with charcoal and vigorous action of a foot-driven bag bellow, and then poured into the clay form. Once cooled off, the clay mould is broken, and out come cute little raw brass figurines. It then requires quite a bit of filing and polishing to produce beautiful pieces of local handicraft. The instruments produced include tamtam, balafon, kora, and guitar. It is amazing how this process can produce such fine detail on small figurines. And it was fun to spend a few hours there, have everything explained in reasonable French, and take home some figures.



Figure 205. The workshop in Grand Bassam.



Figure 206. Producing and polishing brass figurines.

Overall, I had a really good time in Grand Bassam, largely thanks to Lucien with family and friends.

The next morning, I take a bus to Abidjan. They drop me off fifteen minutes of walking away from the airport. Check-in is no problem, and the plane leaves on time at 15.00. After stops in Lomé, Cotonou, and Lagos, we land on time in Libreville, Gabon. I am nervous about immigration, because I do not have a visa for Gabon. But they make no fuss.





Figure 207. The final product: brass figurines from Bassam.



Figure 208. Elegant haircuts in Libreville,  
and a market in São Tomé.

I obtain my visa for São Tomé within the morning, and my remaining flights get confirmed. On my flight I can take my backpack as hand luggage. We leave at 20.00 and arrive at 20.00—one hour flying, one hour of time difference. The friendly steward in the plane of the Equatorial airline tells me that my Air Afrique ticket is invalid. Apparently Air Afrique owes US\$ 600,000 to Equatorial and refuse to pay. So I have to buy a new ticket. This may be a scam, I'll find out later.

In the plane, I meet Aurelio who has worked for two years in Dortmund, Saarbrücken and Wolfsburg as a car mechanic. He drives me around town in search of a hotel, but everything is full. We land in the house of his friends Barreto and Bomfim, both primary school teachers. They graciously offer me a big room. Their shower does not work in the dry season now, called *Grabana*, and I pour water from a tin can over myself in their



bathtub. We stay up until early morning, with interesting conversation and plenty of wine.

Barreto and I take a taxi to the waterfalls *Cascatas de São Nicolão*. Quite nice, but far from spectacular. It is one of the main attractions on the island .... Late in the afternoon, we drive to the grandiosely named *boca de inferno* (hell's throat), which turns out to be a small blowhole with a pool and not up to its name.



Figure 209. Cascatas de São Nicolão, Lagõa azul, and a former Portuguese palast, with Bonfim.

The next day, Barreto, Bomfim, and I go to the *Lagõa azul*. The beach is black volcanic basalt, and the bay supposed to be blue, although my color perception is different.

On my last day, getting up at 04.00 is tough, but I arrive on time at the airport to fly via Libreville to Abidjan. Half of the seats in the 12-seater have been removed for freight on the flight from São Tomé to Libreville, Gabon. The airport is still under construction, to be opened one week later. After a few hours in a restaurant nearby, my flight to Abidjan, Ivory Coast, leaves with a delay but arrives on time. I take a taxi right away to my Catholic friends in Grand Bassam. My room in the mission is undisturbed since my departure. New guests are there: three young Ghanaian priests with three pretty young women. Celibacy has never been a success in Africa.

I take a bus to Abidjan and visit the horrible Mme Moukarzel again, unfriendly as ever. She does not want to accept her part of the doubly-paid ticket on Equatorial, but in the end gives me an IOU for the amount. That will be transferred back to my credit card . . . we will see. I do not really believe it.

In Grand Bassam, I sleep in, a well-deserved rest for once. After a delicious lunch, a Ghanaian *father* challenges my knowledge of the world. Iraq, Germany, the world economy, what have you. Each time, it is his last question. After an hour of supplying encyclopedic wisdom, I take leave politely.

After that, I relax at the beach. At dinner, Émile, the boss, acts the clown as usual. Loud and funny. He is rather simple-minded, but his *cofrère* Lucien is quite clever, Innocent less so.

Then comes my last day in Africa this year, but in fact the penultimate one. I go to a barber shop, really a hair butcher. His scissors are not sharp and each cut pulls out some hair. Quite painful. But then I am done with this hair-cutting business for a few months.

Goodbye to my wonderful Catholic friends. We had a good time together, much fun, and I will remember this pleasant, friendly, comfortable sojourn. Lucien drives me to the bus station, then I go to the airport. Much time for a few beers and some food. My Iberia plane is an hour late, leaving shortly after midnight.

## Liberia 2011

*Through a friend at home, I get into contact with a Swiss expat living in Liberia and enjoy his hospitality and knowledge of the country. After decades of brutal civil war, aggressiveness and corruption have eaten their way into the hearts of people. Quite depressing.*



When the civil war in Liberia has abated and peace is slowly restored under President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, I grasp this first opportunity to visit after decades of civil war and travel to Monrovia in January 2011. At the Frankfurt airport, my Royal Air Maroc flight is delayed by 45 minutes. Before we get aboard, they try to cheat passengers out of some cash: “The flight is completely full, hand baggage of more than 10 kilograms will be charged extra.”. In reality, it is just about this money. The plane is half-empty, I have three seats to myself.

During our scheduled stopover in Casablanca, I have the cheek to ask for a food voucher: “Yes, they will be handed out at 18.30.”. I am there on time: “sorry, your stay is too short. No voucher.”. I chat a bit with the guy and get a voucher. Instead of the old dragons that serve in the restaurant, a friendly young girl helps me: “Prenez place à votre table.”. Poulet frites.

We land just before 02.00 in Monrovia. The customs officer leafs a bit through my backpack, no problem. I am lucky to have a contact in this country through my friendly

neighbor Christoph Beck from the UN Volunteer Program. At a party in his house in December 2010, I meet Stefan Mangos who directed a school in Monrovia. During the war starting in 1991, he had to leave and lost all his possessions. He gave me the address of Charles Steiner. Without his help things would have been substantially more difficult in this country that lacks any of the usual structures. And indeed, outside the terminal waits a boy holding a sign with my name. Next to him are Charles Steiner and Annie Jolo They drive me home in their red Corolla station wagon—quite a familiar car to me, we have the same at home. It is an hour's drive for the 60 kilometers.



Figure 210. Charles and Annie on their terrace, also with two sisters of hers, the village road leading to their house, and the river just behind it.

Their home in the suburb of Lakpazee is down a muddy cul-de-sac. A nice spacious abode, where I am welcomed in a very friendly way and spend some days. Charles takes out a beer and we chat until 04.30. His life is the story of an enthusiastic and enterprising person, whose ambitions were largely annihilated by the upheavals in a rough country. Born in 1941, he grows up in simple circumstances, “we did not even have a radio”, becomes a taxidermist, and comes in 1962, almost 40 years ago, to Liberia for the University of Zürich. He starts an initially successful study course on animal conservation at the local university. But it fails because his Swiss colleagues involved cannot deal with



the students' lack of background and industry. Or maybe because of exaggerated Swiss expectations? Charles marries Annie in 1974, then builds up a successful children's zoo in the suburb of Lakpazee. He also succeeds with breeding. The public loves his zoo, but the low entrance fees just cover the cost of feeding. The land belongs to Annie and her family.

Starting around Christmas of 1989, Charles Taylor initiated the first Liberian Civil War, lasting until 1996, the first stage of which I witnessed from the outside in 1990, see page 170. Later he was one of the main players in the 10-year Sierra Leone civil war and in a second civil war in Liberia from 1999 to 2003. Already in 1984, he was arrested in the US for imbezzling Liberian government funds, but escaped from a maximum security prison, claiming later that this happened with the help of CIA agents. During my 2011 visit, he is on trial in The Hague, making fun of international justice. The following year, he is sentenced to 50 years in prison for being responsible for "some of the most heinous and brutal crimes recorded in human history".

In the war, Steiner stays on as one of the last Swiss. In 1991, a gang of marauding soldiers kills all his animals with machine guns. "If you are still here in 10 minutes, the same will happen to you." He hides in a shed for some time, then a German-Swiss convoy picks him up. They drive to Buchanan, in the east of the country, board a US warship, and alight in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Steiner flies to his home town of Bern. Still today, he cannot talk freely about these traumatic events. Annie then runs a restaurant in Bern.

Steiner suffers more disappointment in Switzerland. Nobody understands him, nobody helps. He later learns that the Swiss government supports others in similar situations, even if they are quite wealthy. But it is not his game to find out about such avenues. The *Auslandsschweizerhilfe*<sup>16</sup> does not help him either. He only had a tiny salary in Liberia, nothing in the bank, and did not contribute to the Swiss pension plan AHV. Finally he finds, via his brother, a position as assistant at the *Schweizer Radio International*.

They come back in 2007 for a first time. Everything they bring gets stolen, just as in 1991. Burglars take Annie's jewellery through a window with a fishing rod. Now they are back since mid-2009 and are renovating their house, simple but nice. I have a large room with a double bed and a toilet just across the corridor. Charles complains about the difficulty of obtaining good lightbulbs. Years ago, European quality lamps from Philips or Siemens were available. But since some time, Chinese bulbs sell for about half the price and have pushed all competition out of the market. But they last only for a short while, making them considerably more expensive (and more annoying) than the ones with higher purchase prices. For example, last week they put in new light bulbs. One was broken right away, another broke but still gave some light, and the one in my room just gave up.

Charles is quiet and introvert, and Annie the opposite. Once she gets going, she does not stop talking, and some of her ludicrous claims are untouched by reality.

I sleep wonderfully well until 13.00. Leisurely breakfast. I go to the downtown *Palm*

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<sup>16</sup>Agency for help to Swiss abroad.

*Hotel* with a good view of Broad Street from their top-level *Bamboo Bar*. A taxi later sets me down right next to the German embassy, but I do not find it. After calling the ambassador Bodo Schaff, I go there. He receives me very cordially and his wife joins us. His previous post was in Guatemala and we have a lot to talk about.

We drive to the *Golden Beach Club*, expat territory, and get our fill of the local Club Beer. That is, Schaff drinks two and I the rest. Around 19.00, Charles and Annie join us. I invite them for dinner. Everything is quite expensive here, my steak is US\$ 19. After that, to a disco bar.



Figure 211. The expat enclave of the Golden Beach Club, Ambassador Schaff, and Charles and Annie.

At home, one more beer. I sort my stuff, because I leave most of it here for three days. I get to bed at 03.00 and sleep very well again. It is pleasantly warm, no air conditioning, I do not even turn the fan on. We have a nice breakfast, the three of us with two sisters of Annie's. They bring me with light luggage to the Tubman Boulevard, where I take a taxi to the Red Light Motor Park. It is a long drive on congested roads, and then I am at the wrong place! I have to go to the Duala Motor Park. Lonely planet got this wrong.



Figure 212. Happy kids and adults in Monrovia—quite a rare sight.

It is another taxi ride with long delays. At one corner, my driver drops two passengers, stopping by the curbside. Completely legal. A criminal in police uniform stops him, they argue. In the end, the poor guy has to pay 50 \$L (70 cents). He calls another policeman,

who pretends to be deaf. I am rather upset and take a photo secretly. On arrival, I pay the fare plus the bribe; the driver did not even ask for the latter. In fact, on almost any taxi ride, we get stopped by some policeman extorting a bribe for some imaginary traffic infraction. Corruption is the curse of Africa, stifling all sustained economic development.

The huge market next to the Duala Motor Park is almost a kilometer long. I need to pee, and my driver takes me through back alleys to a large empty space that serves as an open-air toilet. Disgusting. I get an uncomfortable seat in a taxi to Tubmanburg; I have to get up all the time for arriving and leaving passengers. About 200 meters before the “center” of Tubmanburg, we have a flat tire. The driver does not tell me that we are almost there, and this is not visible. After the repair, I first try the Red Cross hospital, where they used to rent rooms. Not anymore. Then a 125 cc motorcycle to the *Bomi Guest House*. A rather sullen reception, but they turn more friendly later. The place is very simple, no running water, electricity only 18.00 to 24.00.



Figure 213. Policeman extorting a bribe from innocent taxi driver, Duala Car Park, and curbside gas station in Liberia with gas in plastic jars.

I walk back into town and want to go to the Bomi Lake. No taxi drives there: “bad road”. I meet a young Malian who sells sheet metal for a Monrovia company, and hire a motorbike for the 15 kilometers, mostly on a muddy track, the driver with two passengers circling around deep holes and dirt mounds. The lake is quite nice with a swimming beach and a lodge. I buy a beer for both of us. Unfriendly service. Back in town, we go to the *First Choice* restaurant. My Malian friend is very modest and only has a coke.





Figure 214. Flat tire in Tubmanburg and the *Bomi Guest House*, paid for by the EU.



Figure 215. Playful kids.

I walk back to my guest house. Little girls play *Mensch ärgere dich nicht*. The kids at the guest house are always excited and ask to be photographed when I walk by.

After a leisurely breakfast, I walk back into town. 11.00 taxi to Klay, in the direction of Monrovia. At the well-marked turnoff “Robertsport 66 km”, I wait for about an hour. There is not much traffic, and most taxis passing by are full. Finally, I get one to the next turnoff “Robertsport 43 km”.





Figure 216. A happy boy.

Again a long wait, no taxi. Finally, a large Indian family of twelve persons with two big 4WDs takes me along. Several stops on the road, with beer, coke, curry chicken, delicious homemade samosas. They are all hyper, want to go to Robertsport just for the afternoon and drive back afterwards. I warn them about night driving, but they do not listen. One of their cars has a battery problem, but still they stop at every corner to drink and pee. Finally, at 17.00 we are in Robertsport. But then about one kilometer before the beach there is another hut where one can drink and pee. They all rush in, except me,

of course.



Figure 217. Children in Liberia.



Figure 218. Bomi Lake, and the *First Choice*.

But now the car will not start at all. They brought no tools, not even the car's factory-provided equipment. Nothing to tighten the cable's screw to the battery. They hammer on it with rocks, one of them pours beer over the battery to general amusement. The innocent tires get punished with frequent kicks. Anyone with a clear mind would know that all this is nonsense.

Eventually, they come to realize that wrath and beer will not start the car. We drive to *Nana's Beach Resort* with the functioning car. Too expensive at US\$ 170 for one. "But we do not rent, there are too few guests." Not renting out is an innovative strategy to attract guests.

We drive up to *Gertrude's Oceanview Resort*, no signs posted. It costs US\$ 100, and 75 after discussion. For this money, I get a simple room, no chair, bed unmade. Dinner is downstairs. When I get there, they rebuff me brusquely. In the end, I get three eggs and rice with hot sauce. I have to fetch my beer from the village, a 15 minutes' walk away. I offer money to a young guy hanging around. "Too far and too much of a bother." What

do these people live on? How is Liberia ever going to get anywhere if even the young people are too lazy for the smallest effort?



Figure 219. Children in Tubmanburg.





Figure 220. It is only a 43 km walk or drive to the next bank . . . if you make it.



Figure 221. My beer-drinking Indian friends.

The Indians eventually get their car started again. But it makes a big jump, right onto their other car parked much too close to it, and then into the ditch. In the end, it is brought to the police station. Oh my! Liberian police! They are wealthy business people, one of their nephews worked for HSBC in London until recently. I wonder how they survive if they plan their business deals with the same care and foresight.

In the morning, I take my first hot shower since leaving Bonn. Nice breakfast, a walk on the beach, many birds and boats. Cold Coca-Cola at *Nana's* in the shade, cool calm relaxed. At 12.00, I pack quickly. The guardian sends his grandson to carry my backpack. It is much too large for him and he carries it awkwardly on his head, not elegantly as the women do elsewhere in Africa. Two friends come along, and in the end I give them the agreed amount and a bit more. They immediately stimulate the Liberian economy with it, in particular the sweets vending sector.

I get a taxi to Monrovia without waiting. Two hours for the first 43 kilometers of dirt track. Then a rapid drive to Monrovia, presenting Liberia at its worst (or rather, the worst I have personally seen). Police holdup at the Klay junction. Before the Duala Motor Park, the engine stops because of its weak battery. The driver pushes—too weak. I jump out and help—too weak. With a third passenger, we barely make it. The other



three passengers just sit in the car and do nothing, not even getting out to reduce the weight.



Figure 222. Nana's Lodge: "not enough guests, so we accept no-one". On the beach.



Figure 223. Herons on the beach.

This gets repeated in Duala. But with all the traffic, we cannot even get out. Three policemen stop the driver and demand a bribe. The poor driver gets out himself, but is too weak for pushing.



Figure 224. Three boys carrying my bag in Robertsport.

A bunch of strong young men hang around and stare with amusement at the guy's struggle. He asks them for help, two come to push, the car starts, and then they demand money. What a desolate mentality. The fifteen years 1990 to 2005 of war have traumatized everyone, killed all the normal friendliness and helpfulness, extinguished any flame of humanity. The worst thing is that this seems to carry over to the next generation. Sullen faces everywhere, sometimes I ask something and do not even get an answer. Also among themselves, there is no civility, no joy. Upcountry, the children are happy when I take their picture, here they demand money.

I go to the *Golden Beach Club*. Taxis are difficult. There are many and they are dirt cheap, but mostly full. They usually carry four passengers on the back seat. On one trip of 43 kilometers, we are four passengers in front, among (or rather, atop) them myself, five in the back, and one on the hood. A new passenger, a fat woman, entering simply pushed him out with a diabolical smile. Ugly.

Steiner has given me a mobile phone. I call him and he comes around 19.00. Cold beer on the beach, he only drinks a Sprite and does not want to eat. He is a very modest man, traumatized by life's bitter experiences. Later at home, we sit until 01.30 on their beautiful terrace above the lagoon. Peaceful, no mosquitos. I give Annie US\$ 200 as a little thank you and my good wishes.

After two more days in the Steiners' company, I leave just before midnight, staring into the face of a full day and a half of travel from Monrovia to Casablanca and Madrid, then Brazil, see page 820. Self-inflicted misery. I did not find any direct flights from West Africa to South America, so I have to make a detour via Spain. The airline bus brings me to the airport at 01.30, for a 05.45 departure. Crazy. But everybody tells me that it is impossible to find a taxi at 04.00 or so.



Figure 225. My fabulous taxi to Monrovia, with a starry view of the road.

A not so fabulous taxi, gas stations.

I go to a café, fortunately open, and put my backpack on a small table. When I lift it again, the table's single leg breaks. Much ado. They scream for my money, an amount with which they can renovate the whole place. I talk to the manager, apologize for the accident, and that's it. The check-in is quick, I can even check my luggage through to São Paulo. Not to Rio, because that is an internal flight. In the end, this does not matter. A young soldier escorts me to immigration, through a passage protected from view by tall plywood boards. I shove my passport through the slit in the glass pane. The fat guy



behind stretches out his hand. “I do not understand.”—“Twenty” says the man behind me. “I do not pay.”—“Ten”—“No, I do not pay.” And then he stamps my passport and hands it back to me. An appropriate farewell from this corrupt country, showing its ugly face one more time. Two years later, I experience an almost identical setup in South Sudan; see page 286.



Figure 226. A poor soul kicked out of my taxi to travel on the hood,  
and one who is allowed to stay inside.

Stefan Mangos comes to my home in Bonn in October 2017. We worry about Charles Steiner, but Stefan does not have any news either. I hope they got through the next scourge of their rotten country, the outbreak of Ebola from 2014 to 2015, again costing many lives and bringing the country’s development to a standstill.



## Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Zaïre, Central African Republic, Chad 1983

*This trip to western Africa holds many interesting experiences for me: interrogation in the mouldy basement of the Equatorial Guinean Secret Service, being pulled away from an airplane that I want to board, a literally stranded German family in Gabon, long challenging truck rides with friendly drivers, a fantasia in Cameroon, and a climb almost to the top of Mount Cameroon.*



In July 1983, I take a longer trip to Africa, from Nigeria to Zaïre and back. My original plan is to fly on Air Zaïre Brussels–Kinshasa, but a change of mind in the Belgian government made this impossible. Only one day before leaving do I get the flights that I eventually take. From Frankfurt to Sofia, and after a long wait in the transit zone, on to Lagos, where I arrive at 05.00.

Small disaster, my backpack is dripping. A broken bottle of red wine requires an emergency operation at the airport. Everything needs to be cleaned. Unpleasant. Even worse is the curse of Africa, corruption, here at immigration: they ask 40, then 30, then 10 US\$, finally I pay \$7. In fact, not too much for a visa, but this money vanishes in the corrupt official's pockets. I leave my luggage at the baggage deposit and make my way into town. There is little to hold my interest in Lagos.

Heaps of dirt everywhere, open sewage canals, awful smells everywhere, a slum under a bridge. An evangelical mass. Water puddles shine brightly with a multi-colored oil film. Oil brings riches and poverty to this country. Since the Biafra war over oil in the late 1960s, there have been constant fights of local movements against the exploitation by foreign companies, whose concession payments often land in the private pockets of officials. The corrupt and inept government has been unable to fight the atrocious regime of the Muslim terrorist group Boko Haram in the north of the country, who killed over 10,000 people in 2014 alone. Surprisingly, I find a nice place at the Marina, on Lagos Island across from the port. One day in Lagos is enough for me, although the countryside will have more to offer. Then it is two hours to the airport on foot and by various buses, quite interesting.



Figure 227. Downtown Lagos: the picture does not convey the smell, but gives a good idea of it.

A pleasant flight takes me to Douala, the largest city in Cameroon. Besides me sit Mary Atauwigho and her sister Dora Iweh, quite entertaining. In the Hotel Douala, the first thing is a shower—I smell like a pig. The town also has puddles in the streets, but no oil film on them and without the glaring social differences of Mercedeses driving

past beggars. Although plagued by widespread corruption and eruptions of violence, this country functions better than many of its neighbors.

I take bush taxis to Victoria and Buea. Constant rain. I meet Ulrich Bauer from Wiggensbach in Bavaria. He walked [!] from Niamey to Lomé, and is now rather depressed and a psychic wreck. He gives me a careful and valuable description for the ascent to Mount Cameroon, which I put to good use about a month later.

I fly from Douala to the capital Malabo of Equatorial Guinea, the former Spanish colony *Guinea Ecuatorial* on the island of Bioko (formerly Fernando Po) in the Gulf of Guinea. It is the biggest producer of cocoa in the world, the mother of chocolate. Walking in the warm sunshine in the cocoa plantations is a pleasure. Since the mid-1990s, oil has taken over cocoa in economic importance.



Figure 228. Cocoa, the main export of Equatorial Guinea in 1983, and mural tiles from the Spanish occupation.

The country is crazy and confusing. Many things are outrageously expensive, a can of coke is \$ 1.50, bad restaurant food US\$ 30. I try to take some photos of the beautiful *azulejos* (ceramic tiles) on the plaza, when a policeman tells me that I need a permit. Off to the tourist ministry. A friendly secretary Inez tries to help me, but her boss is sick with malaria. The next day, an angry young man at the tourist ministry tells me off in an aggressive way: no such permit is available. When his boss Toribio Obiang Mba Meye shows up, a friendly older man, obviously quite ill, I get the permit within minutes. He walks to his office from home, because the ministry has no car. We chat nicely for a while.

For decades, the country has been ruled by another one of those ugly African dictators, Francisco Macías Nguema. He was deposed and killed in 1979. The new president Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (a nephew of the old murderer and still in office in 2019) does not show a better human rights record, but he is a good friend of the US.



Figure 229. Two happy children in Equatorial Guinea.

One day, they give me an early morning scare: I am to come immediately to the headquarters of the Secret Police, a sinister colonial building. No choice, I go there and first have to wait in a mildewy room. Under the dictator Macías Nguema, presumably thousands of people have waited here, only to disappear in the bowels of the building and never show up again. The mouldy walls seem to echo their cries of pain and misery. Supposedly, this does not happen anymore . . . we'll see. After some time, a guy shows up and explains my detention as a routine measure. Aha. He asks me to prove that I am a tourist. How the hell do you do this? Show him a pair of swimming trunks? Fortunately, he realizes the futility of his request. I am incredibly relieved to leave this rotten place, haunted by the memories of thousands of victims of the dictatorship.

I take a bus to the small village of Luba. A wonderful drive through elephant grass, three meters high, and past many cocoa fincas. From the lighthouse at the end of the bay, there is a beautiful view over the steaming jungle and the beach of black volcanic sand. A stream runs right through the village, with women washing clothes and children playing in it.

The next day, I rest, working in my hotel room on my Hilbert irreducibility theorem. The room maid comes in to close the curtains, because the president will be driving by.



This was announced by loudspeakers on vans hours in advance. Everybody had to stay inside and pull curtains on windows shut. Ridiculous. How scared must he be of his own people.



Figure 230. Rain forest in Equatorial Guinea.

My departure day from the island begins miserably and ends wonderfully. At the airport, the baggage allowance is 10 kilograms, but my backpack weighs 11 kilograms. I pay a small extra charge for my flight to Bata on the mainland portion Río Muni of Equatorial Guinea. Complete confusion reigns concerning boarding passes, a guy shouts names through a megaphone. Much pushing, elbowing, shoving people aside. But I get Nr. 39 out of 50. I board through an old-fashioned gangway on wheels that they roll to the airplane. When I try to get on, the stewardess tells me that the plane is full. My valid boarding pass is of no use. People tell me later that passengers take children who do not need ticket or a boarding pass, but then still occupy a full seat. The stewardess tries to shut the airplane door, but I push against it. She gets it shut, and I hammer from the outside against it. And then something unexpected happens, which in hindsight makes me laugh: a guy from the ground staff pulls the gangway with me atop away from the plane. Interesting move. The gap widens, and I can bang no more on the door.

So now the plane is underway with my backpack to Bata. Damn it! Good-bye to all my meager belongings. I drown my sorrows in my first cold beer on the island, at the airport bar.



Figure 231. Truck from Bata, with my backpack and camera bag, and mangroves at Cocobeach.

After four hours, the plane returns and I push and shove my way on board as the third passenger. And I get a seat. The old Russian plane is completely full, Russian pilots, no stewardess bothers us with service or safety instructions. After landing in Bata, I do not have much hope of ever recovering my backpack. But there it lies in the grass, has lain there for over four hours, and nobody has bothered to steal it. I am incredibly relieved. This incident confirms my observations on many travels: the natural state of people is honesty. It is only in “better” developed countries and larger cities that theft and dishonesty are fuelled by large social discrepancies.

The small village of Bata is surprisingly nice, beautiful view from my hotel balcony over palms to the beach with the setting sun. I see colonial houses, many decrepit but still impressive, and a nice promenade along the beach. Almost no cars, no restaurant.

So here I am back on the African continent, immensely happy to have recovered my luggage, but not knowing where to go. Nobody seems to know a road in my intended direction south to Gabon, and my rudimentary travel guide does not mention one either. Asking around for some time, I finally find a Russian-made Kaz truck carrying manioc and fuel to Acalayong on the fluvial border with Gabon. Seven hours for 125 kilometers. My bum hurts like crazy from the bumpy ride along these little-traveled dirt tracks. At the beach, I inquire about boats to Cocobeach in Gabon—no problem.

At the Equatorial Guinean immigration hut, the friendly official stamping my passport seems to smile all the time. I ask him why and he tells me that he has been at this post for five years and never seen a white man coming through. Thank you, lonely planet, for keeping this little secret!

My pirogue across the river border is a fragile business, riding first through well-protected mangrove swamps, but then a bit exposed to the open sea. The little boat shakes and rolls like crazy, I get completely wet. I go to the fishing village of Cocobeach in Gabon, just across the Río Muni.

I want to push on immediately to Gabon’s capital Libreville, but have to wait for immigration’s *commandant de poste*, after being scolded by some unpleasant character

for not having traveled to Gabon by plane. The night falls and it is too late to travel anywhere.



Figure 232. Fishing boats in Cocobeach, the Rehschuhs' yacht in the background.

I hear about some Germans living in the village and meet a fascinating family. Bernd Rehschuh, a civil engineer, has been sailing aboard his yacht *Friedel 1* for 12 years around the world, with his wife and daughters Tania (15 years) and Heide (11 years). The two girls go to school and have made friends with the local boys. A truly adventurous family, I am suitably impressed. But here in Cocobeach, their luck has run out. They are stuck, without the money for boat repairs, spare parts from Europe, and fuel to get back home; because of winds and currents, this would mean first cruising to the Americas. And nobody wants to buy their boat. Many of their belongings have been stolen, including valuable fishing nets, with which they hoped to generate some fishing income for their future trips. They all suffer from malaria, but are cheerful within their misery. The kids have practically not attended any school except the local one in Cocobeach, but know much more about the world than other children of their age. The family is very kind to me and I buy some food and goodies for all of us. Then I fall into my bed completely exhausted after two exciting days, with things first going wrong and then repairing themselves in an unexpected manner.

The next day, Paul-Thomas Ndong, *procureur de la République* and the Rehschuhs' landlord, takes me to the immigration hut, where I get my stamps immediately. Paul-Thomas drives Bernd and myself to Libreville, the country's capital. We witness a little tragicomedy in his office in the *palais de justice*: a former foreign minister almost cries as he complains how his son-in-law beats up his daughter. Bernd and I visit the German consul, Herr Wagner, a rather brusque and unfriendly person. Most of the day is spent visiting friends and relatives of Paul-Thomas, eating wonderful food and having interesting conversations. These people are all well-off, but welcome us to share their comfortable day. Gabon is very rich from oil income. It used to be a French colony, and the French still dominate the country's economy. Excellent baguettes, Brie cheese, and other delicacies

are in the shops. But everything is outrageously expensive, more than in *métropole*, that is, Paris. No problem for the well-paid expatriates, but a big one for me. I am lucky to avoid such expenses by being invited to my friends' places. I also try to get three visas: Angola, São Tomé e Príncipe, Congo-Brazzaville, all without success. In 1990, I spend another night in Libreville, transiting from Abidjan to São Tomé e Príncipe; see page 191.



Figure 233. Bernd Rehschuh, the *procureur*, his wife, and a selection of their (or his?) children.

It is a long trip by taxi brousse, bus, and train from Libreville to Lambaréné. The train leaves and arrives exactly on time, not a minute late or early. Quite a rarity in Africa. The goal of my visit is the famous hospital founded by Albert Schweitzer in 1913; he was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It is still one of the best hospitals in Africa, treating 40,000 patients every year. I walk around its grounds, chat with some people, and stay in a hotel across the river. In the village, I enjoy an evening of good food and loud Gabon rock, sounding a bit like Cuban salsa music.

The next day, my taxi driver races to Mouila, much too fast for these roads. He is already drunk early in the morning, not a rare thing here. My scolding and admonitions only have a moderate effect. My next ride with Ngok Banag to Lébamba in his Toyota Land Cruiser is much more pleasant, a calm driver, we chat amiably. He is a teacher, but has to earn extra income from trading foodstuff. Today he is carrying 300 loaves of



bread, 100 kilograms of frozen fish, and 40 kilograms of turkey. He is very pessimistic: “We Africans are all stupid, we gave up our own culture and now only try to imitate the European one. I, for example, know hardly anything about the traditions of my ancestors.” But then he also muses that his ancestors did not build Land Cruisers.



Figure 234. Children in Gabon.



Figure 235. Café McDonald and *Restaurant africain Bon Gout*.



Figure 236. Hotel *Chez tonton J. F. Lopopa Lebimbi Basile*. . .



Figure 237. Ferry across the Ngounié River, towed by hand.

Ngok drops me in Lébamba, and after an hour's hike, I cross the Ngounié River on a simple ferry that is driven by the current in an interesting way. The boatsman holds on tightly with bare hands to a steel hawser stretching across the river. He puts the ferry at a skew angle, so that the current pushes it aside in the desired direction. Either going or coming, with angles in opposite directions. The Christian mission of Bongolo is high up on a hill. A friendly welcome by Lois from Harrisburg PA and her daughter Christine, four years old. She tells me excitedly one story after the other, I have a hard

time understanding her. Then I have to inspect her new fancy dresses, and she shares a chocolate with me. This little girl reminds me much of my daughter Rafaela. The mission rents rooms in their guesthouse. We have a nice evening together with all the expats in the mission. In the shower—finally—all the tan I have gathered over two days of riding on open trucks and pick-ups comes off mercilessly.

In the morning, I get towed across the river again. Catching a ride to Lébamba, I go to visit my friend Ngok. He has a nice house, friendly wife, four children. They stuff me with breakfast—I refuse politely the liquor they offer—and Ngok and I are off to N'Dendé. I wait by the road for my next transport.



Figure 238. Trucks must be unloaded before crossing the bridge.

In a crowded bar, people get into their morning stupor with enormous amounts of cheap palm wine. The truck drivers participate heartily, quite a nightmare for potential passengers. Finally, an old log truck stops by. Léonide, the driver, is mad because he does not have enough diesel and engine oil. I buy some diesel for him, and off we are towards the border with Congo. This is the former French colony of Congo, now the Republic of the Congo and often called Congo-Brazzaville after its capital, to distinguish it from Congo-Kinshasa (later Zaïre, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), a former Belgian colony. Léonide's truck carries six huge trunks of tropical trees, weighing between 1.5 and 5.5 tons. No Forest Stewardship Council in those days, and maybe not today. The virgin jungle is devastated for these valuable giants, and most of the wood cut down is left to rot. Only the most desirable part of the trunk, maybe the first twenty metres from the ground up, are shaved, carried to the capital, and then shipped to Western countries, where they are turned into beautiful furniture and wooden floors. About twenty local passengers and myself travel high up on the trunks, not very comfortable but happy to have some form of transport at all. We sometimes have to bend away from branches hitting the top of the truck, where we sit.

The truck is in dire straights, no alternator but just running off the battery. One tire on a double axis is flat, but Léonide carries neither a spare nor a jack. After a slow drive, with stops at each liquor store along the road, we arrive at the Congolese border. Everybody is drunk.





Figure 239. Léonide (second from left) with his crew, passengers, and truck.



Figure 240. Proud Léonide in the driver's seat and a view from my seat at the top.

They want to see my visa, but I do not have one. At length, I explain the fictitious Treaty of Friendship between the Republic of Congo and the Federal Republic of Germany.



They fall for my spiel and stamp my passport. My luck. And I am not really sorry for fooling these drunken officials, no harm is done.

After successfully managing the border from Gabon to Congo, some friends of Léonide in Koungoudi invite me to their house. They offer a delicious dinner of gazelle and manioc with hot sauce. There is a big festivity in the village. Seven days ago, an elder died, and today his widows are allowed to leave the House of Sorrows. Much drumming and singing, later lascivious dancing of young and old. Sorrow is out, fun is in.

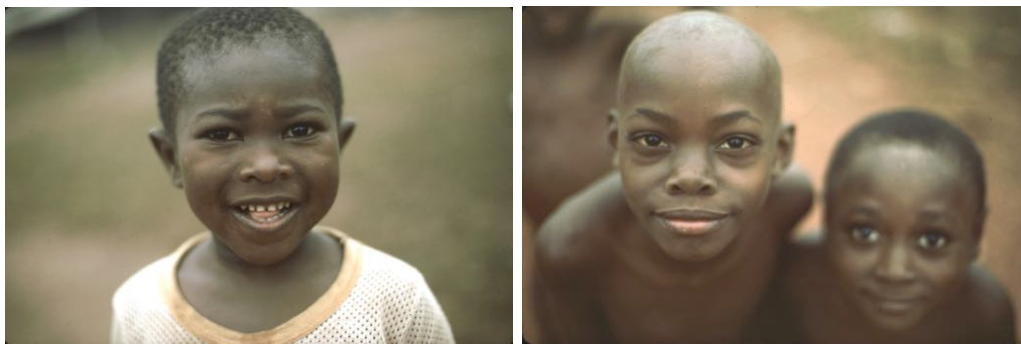


Figure 241. Loubomo.



Figure 242. Friendly welcome in Léonide's home.

The next day, Léonide drives on, with the usual drinking stops. Infrastructure hardly exists in Congo. The main international road from Gabon to Brazzaville, connecting to Kinshasa, is a miserable dirt trail through the jungle, adorned with an endless succession of water-filled potholes and sections of deep mud. But still my ride makes this a memorable trip. At some point, the truck breaks down completely. We try to push the truck, but it is way too heavy to gain any momentum. There is Léonide, in the middle of the bush, no diesel, no engine oil, no alternator, no battery, one flat tire. It will take days to get the vehicle out of here. So I give him some money, put my things on my back, and off I am. Hiking happily on my own through the dense bush, tall trees on either side of the road.

The usual “bon jour, ça va” salutation repeated many times in all villages through which I walk. After just two hours, the log truck of Boniface comes along, on its way to Loubomo. That is exactly where I want to go—not that there are any alternatives away from the only road through this wild area. The drive is, as usual, bumpy, dusty, and hot, but we chat amiably the whole way. In Loubomo, the hotels are expensive, dirty, and uninviting. My luck: Boniface offers to rent me a room in his house at Rue Mayama 37. Wonderful. His wives are both away, but six kids are around, ages 1 to 6. Very comfortable, quiet, a large bed. I buy food and we dine nicely together.



Figure 243. Léonide's family.

In the wooden train station of Loubomo, large piles of tropical woods are everywhere—limba and others. Their oily perfume is overwhelming. Their transport has to be organized efficiently, because after about three months in the tropical sun, the trunks start cracking; then they can only be used as firewood. I take an overnight train to Brazzaville, leaving in the afternoon. The train arrives from Pointe Noire on the Atlantic. In my infinite wisdom, I buy a first-class ticket, contrary to my usual rules.



Figure 244. Loubomo train station.

And indeed, the second class is totally overcrowded, standing room only. For a whole night, that would have been tough. But this way, I enjoy a comfortable train ride through the tropical night, even catching some sleep.

At 05.00, I am in Brazzaville, then spend a slow day in town. I obtain an expensive visa for Zaïre. With Steve Tuffley, a traveler from Ormiston, Queensland, Australia, we walk around town. At the statue for the first president, we are both arrested by police. Reason: we are carrying cameras. Steve has not even taken his out of its bag. A long discussion ensues with a captain, then a more reasonable lieutenant. Steve is scared; he does not understand French. In the end, they just let us go. I have gotten somewhat used to the rogue behavior of police, but it is unpleasant every time.



Figure 245. Breakfast alley in Brazzaville, and Mme. Nzita the Healer around the corner. Just in case.

From Brazzaville, I take a ferry across the Zaïre (Congo) river to Kinshasa, the capital of what is then officially still called Zaïre. As so often, there is great insecurity beforehand. Will they let me pass? Accept my documents? How much money will I have to exchange at the bad bank rate? I have to buy a return ticket, although I only go one-way. On arrival, I get my passport and laissez-passer stamped; fine. Currency declaration: I have to put all my money on the table. Except that I have most of it hidden in my shoes and elsewhere—nobody will mind the smell, *non olet*. Of course, the officials want part of my money. No, thanks. And it works, I only have to exchange a small amount, since I claim to stay for only one day.

I stay in the Lingwala quarter and set out to explore the city. Pretty soon the high-rises and modern stores of downtown Kinshasa give way to wide dirt avenues cutting through a suburb of simple mud and brick houses. My peaceful stroll is interrupted by an aggressive troop of three teenagers from the paramilitary group *jeunesse Mobutu* (Jeunesse du Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution) who patrol city districts and report conversations and rumors that are critical of the government. Now they have a chance to harass a foreigner. As if they were a police unit, they interrogate me on why I am here and what I am doing. I tell them politely the truth, which they do not believe. In particular, they cannot imagine a foreigner landing in the morning and walking here in the afternoon without being a dangerous spy. Eventually, I get rid of them, but it is a thoroughly annoying incident, teaching me a lot about how this desolate country is run.





Figure 246. Souvenir sellers in Kinshasa, and a young lady.

Another nuisance are the many friendly people who greet me with a wide smile on the street as a good old friend. “Remember how we met at the airport?” Only that I am one of the rare foreigners who did not arrive by airplane. Just a little attempted rip-off, no harm done.



Figure 247. Sunset over the Zaïre falls.

I inquire about boats to Kisangani. Unfortunately, the trip takes 15 to 25 days now in the dry season. The boats often get stuck on sand banks, and cannot proceed at night.



But that is too much time for me. Still, I spend a few days in town, without further incidents.

I walk to the falls of the Zaïre river, below the Stanley Pool. Not tall, but quite impressive. They block all river transport from the ocean to the interior of Zaïre. A fisherman collects his nets in the tranquil sunset.

I want to take the morning train to Matadi towards the Atlantic coast. The Onatra cars are all formerly from Deutsche Bundesbahn. But somewhere on the line, three cars have overturned, and so my trip does not take place.



Figure 248. Matadi train station in Kinshasa.



Figure 249. Hiking near the Zaire falls, and a market in Gemena.

While the corrupt government of President (Joseph-Désiré) Mobutu Sese Seko (1930-1997) stuffs all the oil revenue into its own pockets, the huge country is bereft of even the poor infrastructure that the Belgian colonial power left. Mobutu was overthrown in 1997 by a popular rebellion led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, fled to Morocco and died four months later. There is no functioning road or river traffic connecting the capital to the Western parts of the country. So I have to fly.

An early morning flight takes me from the N'Djili airport via Mbandaka to Gemena on Scibe Airlift. At the airport, I have to wait for over an hour, only to be told that there are no more seats on the plane. In spite of my valid reservation. After some complaining, a guy from my travel agency comes running fifteen minutes before departure and hurries me to the plane. With my backpack and all. I do not even get a boarding pass. The various “fees” for this special treatment almost double the price of my ticket, but even in total it is still quite cheap. I am happy to be able to keep an eye on my backpack during the whole flight. After all this adrenaline, I relax on board and it is a pleasant flight. My seat neighbour recommends a small hotel, which is better than the rest. Still, I share the room with several guests from the animal kingdom. One of them pulls down a bread from my table in the middle of the night. I do not see it, nor do I sleep well after this.



Figure 250. Dodo's truck with passengers.

On a day of rest, I visit a market and buy some souvenirs for my family: a small gold nugget for Dorothea and malachite necklaces. I walk early in the morning to the *grand*



*marché*, from where trucks leave for Zongo, the Zaïre border station for Bangui. No luck. I hang around all day in the heat, watching my luggage, eating and drinking very little. Finally, Kamwanga Manala, called Dodo, ambles over to talk to me.



Figure 251. Dodo's truck loading, and his family.



Figure 252. Family and friends.

He is the driver of a yellow MAN truck, former German army material, and says that he and his helper Kembo Manala, called Désiré, will leave tomorrow at 03.00. He invites

me to his home, I buy some beer for everybody, they feed me well with monkey and rice, and I get a little corner in a room to sleep on the floor.

Dodo's truck leaves at 03.00, then at 06.00, then at noon, then in the afternoon, and finally not at all. I spend my day at the market. Fortunately, I practiced waiting yesterday, so by now I am quite good at it. Everybody knows me and greets me with the standard *bon jour, ça va?*. But it is a long uncomfortable day, because there is nowhere to sit. Tonight, yummy crispy chicken with manioc and hot sauce at Dodo's house, delicious.



Figure 253. On the road with Dodo.

"We leave at 06.00, be here on time!" Of course I am, but it is 14.00 by the time we leave. One of my worst truck rides. 60 passengers on top of equally many bags of corn, peanuts, worms (for food), rice, manioc, also live chicken and three goats. There is very little space for everyone: one foot in my kidneys, an elbow in my breast, a bag of rice on my right foot, someone's leg on my left foot. The physical discomfort generates a bit of an aggressive mood among the others. Checkpoint at 16.00: apparently a new regulation prohibits transport of foodstuffs to Zongo, our destination. An angrily shouting policeman has all food bags thrown onto the ground; some of them split open. Everybody wants to kill him: this is a famished area and he throws the corn into the dust. Of course, in the end this is only in order to extort a bribe of corn, peanuts and cash. What a shameless behavior! But typical of this country. By the time we can move on, night has fallen. It



is an eerie drive through the nightly jungle, with chirping, cheeping, tweeting, croaking, roaring everywhere. The spectres of trees rush by, but the branches that hit my head are no spectres. Just before midnight, the truck has to stop at a river crossing by ferry. Finally.

I sleep peacefully on the ground, ignoring the ants that crawl over me. The ferry arrives in the early morning, and the painful ride continues. At noon, my umptieth request for a more pleasant seat is finally granted, and I spend the rest of the trip in the comfort of the driver's cabin. Just in time, because a tropical rainstorm comes down. In the back, everyone gets dripping wet. The drive is a nightmare, but this is not the driver's fault—it is just the normal way things go at the current state of roads in Zaïre. Dodo and Désiré are always kind to me and we exchange gifts at the end.



Figure 254. River crossing with Dodo.

Finally arrived via Libenge in Zongo, the exit formalities from Zaïre are easy, the outboarder to the Central African Republic leaves soon, and the entrance formalities are also done speedily by Jacques Ngaïpera, a pleasant officer. At the Centre d'Accueil Touristique in the capital Bangui (Oubangui), I find a cheap room and have dinner and a beer with some other travelers there.

This country has long been tormented by its dictator Jean-Bedel Bokassa, deposed four years before my visit. He exploited his poor country to the hilt and was famous for his golden throne and a \$5 million diamond-encrusted crown—pure kitsch. Rumors of his cannibalism were widespread, but at his trial, this charge was deemed insufficiently proven.

Unfortunately, I do not have the time to see the huge wildlife refuges in the poorly populated west of the country. They are difficult to reach, and now (in 2019) a civil war of religions and the ensuing terrorism make the country even more difficult to visit than back then.

After exploring Bangui a bit, I try to get an airlift to Bouar near the Cameroonian border with the French commando *Barracuda*; they are friendly but booked out. Thus I take a bus to Bouar, more comfortable than my last trips. We pass twelve checkpoints

en route, and eventually I am back in Cameroon, in Garoua-Boulai. I push on to Ngaoundéré.

An old yellow bus goes north to Garoua, but—not surprisingly, given its state—breaks down about 100 km before its destination. Broken accelerator cable. This will take a day or two to get fixed here in the middle of nowhere. Lady Luck smiles on me again. Two shiny GM Blazer pick-up trucks from a USAID project stop by the bus. Some local youngsters get out, dance in the street for no good reason except their exuberance, and I am invited to come along. Fine. I fetch my backpack from the roof of the bus, and off we are. Pleasant drive. I get a boukarou (cabin) and shower in the *campement Bossou*, somewhat outside of Garoua. We spend a loud and entertaining evening with the siblings Emmanuel Ayong, Berthe Bimai, and Charlotte Adriana Ngo Ngue, accompanied by lots of *Beaufort* lager beer, locally called *la rigueur*.

I hitchhike to Figuil, then on to Maroua further north. A small medical incident happens. I walk around barefoot in sandals and a crab chooses my foot as a cozy home for its eggs. These crabs strike rapidly with their tail and deposit their eggs under the nail of a person. I do not even notice the bite until I see some unusual white spots under the nail of my big right toe. What is that? People enlighten me about my mishap, not infrequent here, and I decide not to go to a doctor or hospital. The whole country is so run down that I fear more harm than good from a medical visit. So I set out to operate on myself. I disinfect my trusted Swiss Army knife, first over a flame and then with a chemical disinfectant. And then I cut those six white eggs out from under my toe, squeezing them out one by one. It hurts a bit and I bleed some, but it is soon over and carefully disinfected. And it works, I do not harbor any uninvited creatures anymore.



Figure 255. My dirt hole in Bourrha, and a bus to Garoua, soon to collapse.

A coup d'état takes place today in Yaoundé. The former president Ahmadou Ahidjo tries to depose the newly elected president Paul Biya (who governs the country until

now, 2019). Rumor has it that Ahidjo deposited some 2 billion US\$ in Swiss banks, but funnily in the name of *president of Cameroon*, and now tries to recover his illicit gains. Who knows. Biya has strong popular support, and I hope that this turmoil will not make travel difficult or impossible, as sometimes happens in a political mess.

For the next four days, I plan a hike Dourou-Rhumsiki-Mokolo, another pleasant excursion. I take a *taxi brousse* to Guider, then a bus via Mayo Oulo to Dourbeye. I stay overnight at the house of Alim Sahabo, a friendly and hospitable qur'an teacher. He first conceived ten daughters, then—relief, relief—three sons, all with just three wives. The next morning, I start early on my hike. It gets very hot, then a downpour cools everything off. I stand in the desolate village of Tchéry by the road, but it takes four hours until I get a ride on a truck to Bourrha, where I spend another mosquito-ridden night in a dirt hole. So what, traveling is fun! An organized luxury trip is physically less challenging, but also much more boring. I'd never get to meet all these wonderful people.



Figure 256. A peaceful hike in the Rhumsiki mountains,  
with the *piton de Rhumsiki*.

A cool morning hike takes me to Guili, through pleasantly green meadows and along creeks, past gray boulders, and with piercing volcanoes in the distance. In February and March, apparently everything is brown, no water. Just before the afternoon rainstorm, I



arrive in Rhumsiki. And after the rain, I still have the energy for the two-hour walk to the *piton de Rhumsiki*, an impressive vertical rock wall.



Figure 257. Hiking in the Rhumsiki mountains.  
Second row left: Red bishop (*Euplectes orix*).

In the morning, an old woman has died. A rather macaber remark by my driver: “You are lucky. You will see the funeral dance.” And indeed, this starts early in the evening



with an old woman walking along the street, singing quietly. People tell me that this is the first time in five years that she leaves her home. The funeral dance is wild and ecstatic, a woman ululates with a piercing sound.

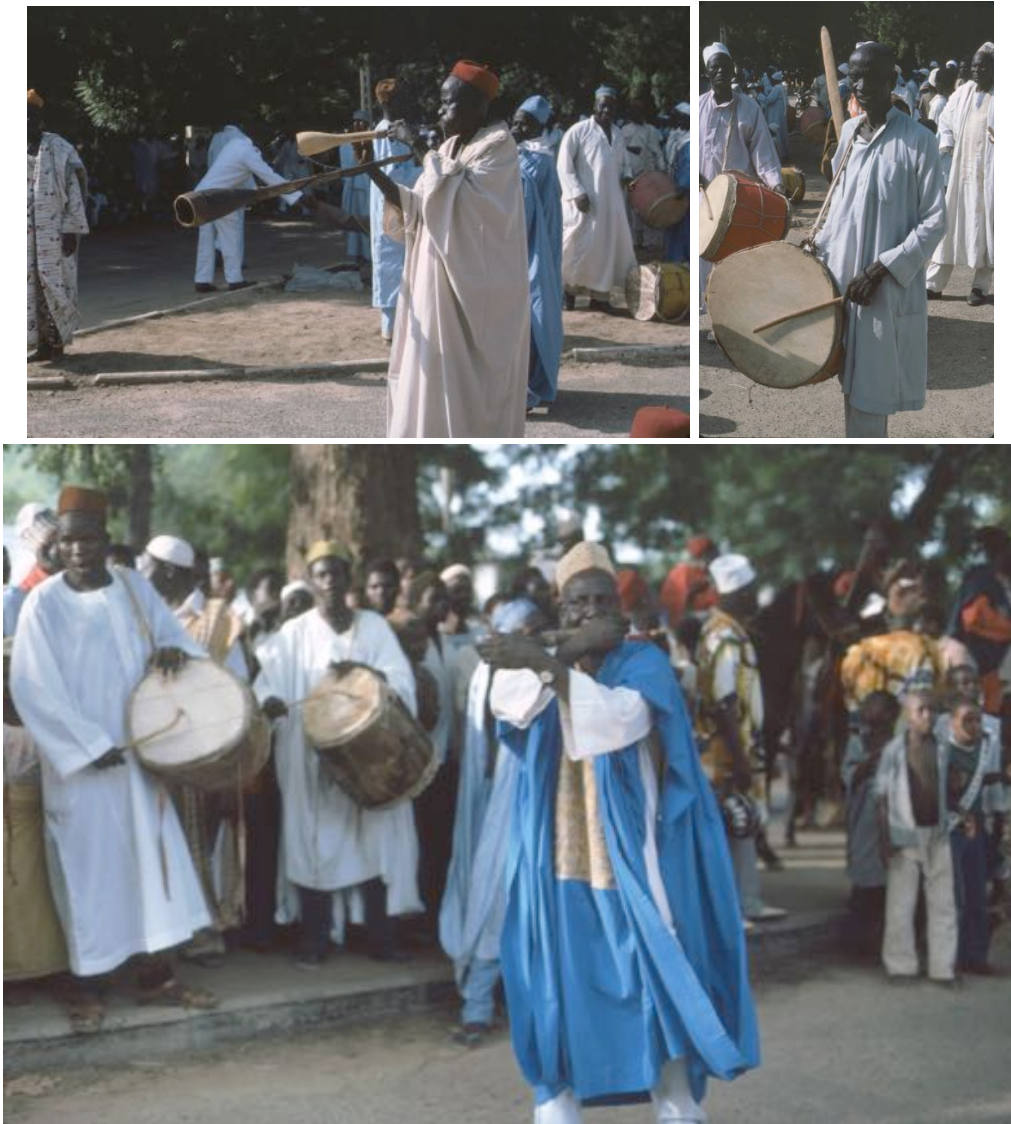


Figure 258. Fantastic Fantasia in Maroua, with drums, flutes, and trumpets.

I hike early towards Mokolo. Again, the landscape is overwhelming. And I feel so good and relaxed, walking along the trail all on my own. Feels like *me and Africa*.



Figure 259. Mock fighting at the fantasia.

In Mokolo, they tell me “no more transport today”, but I luck out and find a Haussa who drives to Garoua and drops me right at the *campement Bossou*, where my boukarou waits for me. On the drive, I see a few horse riders.

I soon learn the reason. President Paul Biya has created new provinces, and Maroua is one of the new capitals. People throng around the *préfecture de Diamaré* here in town, all excited. The new governor drives up. A long chain of policemen in white uniforms is supposed to keep the crowds in check, but as soon as the *préfet* arrives, they are the first to run into the square. What a discipline!

We endure long speeches by all kinds of self-important dignitaries, until the real thing begins: a *fantasia*! Horsemen ride in slowly, then groups oppose each other in mock battle, with drawn swords and loud shouting. In long flowing white robes, swinging their weapons here and there, always careful not to hit anyone. What a show! And the public shouts and screams for their heroes. Soft-drink sellers make the business of the year.

The next day, I suffer through a rather boring bus ride to Kousseri, on the Cameroonian side of the border with Chad. Squished in as usual, stopping at each heap of cow dung, at each place where you can eat, drink, or pee. The usual printed salutations adorn the bus: *Salut les copains. Dieu merci. L'homme propose, Dieu dispose. Inch allah. Air Cameroun. Air Mokolo.*<sup>17</sup> And the exhortations inside: *Il est interdit de crâcher, de vomir, de voler, de lutter dans la voiture. Nous ne sommes pas responsables des bagages non payés. Ne pas parler au conducteur.*<sup>18</sup> I arrive at 16.00, find a hotel room, but it is too late to cross the river.



Figure 260. War wounds in N'Djaména.

Still, I walk down to inspect the situation and—lo and behold—I get a ferry across the Chari river into Chad, walk around its capital N'Djaména for half an hour, then back to Cameroon. Wow! An easy border crossing. N'Djaména is a depressing city, most houses are pockmarked by machine-gun and mortar fire, destroyed buildings everywhere. Such a sorry sight. A poor country ravaged by war. The main culprit, ex-president Hissène Habré, came to power in 1982, aided and abetted by the CIA, and received a life-time sentence in 2016 by a court in Dakar for his many crimes against humanity, including

<sup>17</sup>Hello friends. Thank God. Man proposes, God disposes. Inch Allah. Air Cameroon. Air Mokolo.

<sup>18</sup>It is forbidden to spit, to vomit, to steal, to fight in the vehicle. We are not responsible for baggage that is not paid for. Do not speak to the driver.



40,000 dead. Besides the shot-up cathedral, there is now a new mosque. Otherwise, the city is as appealing as its political history.



Figure 261. Taxis on Lake Chad.

The next day, I make another excursion by ferry to N'Djaména, then back across the river to Kousséri and on to Maroua and my *campement Bossou*. And the following day, just as quickly to Garoua and Ngaoundéré, then by train to Yaoundé.

I afford a lazy day. I can neither get reliable information on trains nor confirm my flights back home. In fact, my first flight has apparently been cancelled; I try to reactivate my reservation. I will see whether that works. All this makes me slightly nervous, because I cannot do anything about the flights, in contrast to other travel difficulties. Coming home after a trip, you do not remember how often you have been afraid of something going wrong: Do I arrive on time for my taxi/bus/boat/airplane? Do I get a seat? Is my luggage still there? No accident? No ambush? Things stolen or lost? By then, all such concerns do not matter anymore, but while traveling, they can haunt you.





Figure 262. Market and a typical bus interior.

My train from Yaoundé to Douala stops in the middle of nowhere, at a station after Makak. Reason: “a broken rail”, whatever that means. After three hours, another train comes by. I gather my stuff lightning-quick and board; by now I am quite used to the idea of changing transport when one breaks down. The new train is completely full, but I get the last seat.

The next day, I go by *taxi brousse* to Buea and start my ascent to Mount Cameroon, over 4000 meters high. This active volcano lies only 20 kilometres from the Atlantic coast of the Gulf of Guinea. The ocean sends warm clouds inland, which hit this huge mountain first and make it one of the wettest places on earth. You can very well walk there on your own, but if the authorities know about this, you have to take a guide.

Thanks to the careful sketch that Ulrich Bauer gave me, I find the trail easily. Without such help, there are several branches offering excellent opportunities to take the wrong turn. It rains the whole time, as usual up here. First through a wide forest, then I come to the tree line, sharp as if drawn with a ruler. The trail then goes through tall grass that deposits loads of water on the weary hiker. Just before nightfall, I reach Hut II. A pleasant wooden structure, a large wooden bench serves as bed. I have to defend my meager meal of sardines and bread against a hungry mouse—sorry. I finally get dry and warm in my sleeping bag, all alone on the mountain. Rain drums on the roof, there are funny animal noises outside, and the poor mouse looks for food all night. In vain.

I start out just before daybreak and eat my breakfast while I walk. According to the sketch, it is another 2.5 hours to the top of the mountain, but after three hours of climbing only more rock walls are in front of me. I have to return today to Douala because of my flight tomorrow, and so I abandon the final ascent. Too bad.



Figure 263. Mount Cameroon: getting into the rainy mood at the Buea bus station, wet and tired on my way, and finally resting.

The hike down is difficult, because the constant rain has made the muddy ground slippery. I am tired, my feet and legs hurt, and I fall on my bum three times. I dream of drinking hot tea and putting on dry clothes—but that will have to wait. My pants are heavy with all the water and keep slipping down. I must look as if I came straight out of the sewer. Finally I get to the road and find a transport to Douala and my hotel *Foyer du marin*. People stare at the ragged, dripping, exhausted figure that I am. And then, finally, off with those clothes and under the shower. The first hot shower in a month and a half. Luxury travel.

I sleep for twelve hours. Over breakfast, I finally find the time to get nervous about my flights again. Not to worry, things work out in the end, almost. Flight Douala-Lagos, then Lagos-Tripoli-Sofia on Balkan Airlines. Across the aisle from me sits a Nigerian woman with her daughter, about ten years old. We get a nice filet steak, and they tear theirs up with their hands into small pieces. The juice splatters all over, a picturesque clash of civilizations.

In Lagos, I try to check my luggage through to Frankfurt, but they refuse and do not even give me a luggage tag. My inquiries at the Sofia airport are met with indifference: “Luggage from Lagos is not my problem.” But mine. I walk again around the baggage conveyor belt—nothing. Then I simply climb through a narrow hole above the conveyor belt into the central hall where luggage is sorted, a highly restricted area. This would be impossible today with all that security. But I find—nothing. I walk around the large hall again, and there, in a far corner, slumbers my backpack. Somewhat worse for wear and tear, but I can now take it out, through the narrow hole, and check it in regularly. Had I not had that gut feeling that something is wrong and then breached all kinds of security rules, my luggage would have slumbered in Sofia airport forever, until some kind soul provided a new home for it.

## North-eastern Africa



Rough sketch of my travels in the north eastern parts of Africa.

## Egypt 1974

*In mid-December 1974, I come down with a cold. The weather in Zürich is miserable, with cold, rain, and snow. Dorothea and I decide to go somewhere warm, and within a few days have booked our trip to Egypt. It is a conventional organized tour with the Swiss Student Travel organization (SSR). We see many of the classical sights and make friends with some of our travel companions.*





A major change has occurred in my travel equipment: I now have a decent camera, a Canon EF. I learned about photography from Maria on our trip to South East Asia earlier this year; see page 976.

Dorothea works in a hospital for epileptic patients and Fräulein Hoffmann, a colleague of hers, shows us a coffee-table book about Egyptian archeology. A nice but standard volume, but the special thing is a dedication by a friend, hand-written in hieroglyphs, the writing of ancient Egypt.

This fascinates me so much that I take up Egyptian studies at the university, together with Fräulein Hoffmann and her friend Dr. Müller. It is a sympathetic group and I quickly learn the basics of reading hieroglyphs and writing them. This is a lot of fun and years later, I almost get a degree in Egyptology, but there are university rules against acquiring a lower level degree, like a *Lizenziat* in Egyptology, when a higher degree, like my PhD in mathematics, has already been obtained.

On our trip, even my then rudimentary knowledge is helpful. I can read parts of inscriptions and am proud of that. In Cairo, we visit the suq (market), the famous Egyptian Museum on Tahrir Square, and, of course, the pyramids at Gizeh. Many tourists are around, but the majesty of these pyramids makes up for that minor annoyance.



Figure 264. In Gizeh: horse riding, Dorothea's belly dance, and climbing the Cheops pyramid.

The oldest and tallest of them, Cheops' (Khufu's) pyramid, was built about 4500 years ago, just after the end of the Stone Age, and originally rose 146 meters above the ground. It was the tallest man-made structure on earth for 3800 years. Apart from its humongous size, the workmanship is amazing; joints between adjacent slabs are only 0.5 millimeter on average. I climb to its top, which is strictly forbidden today. The climb is difficult,

because you look down a very steep incline and the blocks that you have to climb up are almost the height of a person. At the top, some of the ancient smooth casing stones covering the rougher rocks that form the core of the pyramid are still in place. This makes climbing even more dangerous; see Figure 271.



Figure 265. The sphinx in front of the Cheops pyramid.

Walking to the tomb inside the pyramid is an eerie experience. An endless tunnel, poorly lit and steeply going uphill in places. The burial chamber itself holds nothing spectacular compared to what we will see later in the Valley of the Kings.

A beautiful excursion is a horse ride of about 20 kilometers from Gizeh to the pyramids at Saqqara. Trotting on horseback through the desert, with short gallops in between, is exhilarating. Dorothea gets a difficult horse, which does not really follow her orders, no matter which way she expresses them. Pharaoh Djoser's step pyramid in Saqqara was the first large-scale stone construction in the world, built around 2650 BC. This labor-intensive work signals a new level of state control over resources, unseen before.



Figure 266. Valley of the Kings: temple of Hatshepsut and impressionist painting of a goose hunt.

We take a train to Luxor. A quiet little town, quite friendly, with peaceful walks and cafés along the Nile river. The ruins at Karnak are overwhelming. Huge pillars, bigger than any ancient pillar I have seen before or after, stretch into the clear blue winter sky and tell stories in the multitude of inscriptions on them. Some of them, in a hall dedicated to Amun-Re, are 21 meters tall with a diameter of over three meters. Awesome.

But one thing bothers me. I have studied the history and learned to read and write the pharaohs' language, but I never feel as spiritually close to this civilization as I do to the souls of many ancient Greek and Roman ruins that I visited. This may be partly due to my education, especially from the finest classical scholar I ever knew, my own father. I cannot even enumerate all the wonderful monuments outside of Europe that I have admired and that impressed me, from Babylon to Samarkand, Ellora, Beijing, Borobudur, Nan Madol to Teotihuacán and Machu Picchu. But I get this feeling of walking in the steps of my great-great-...-great-grandfathers only in the ruins of ancestral Europeans.

The Valley of the Kings holds the graves of many pharaohs from the 16th to the 11th century BC. They were carefully constructed to avoid looting, but this did not work. With one exception: the grave of the boy-king Tutankhamun. There is hardly enough space to squeeze by between the mighty sarcophagus and the elaborately painted walls, with the star goddess Nut covering the ceiling. Today, access is severely restricted; too much human humidity causes too much deterioration (fungi) of the wall paintings. All over Egypt, the ancient monuments are decorated with inscriptions celebrating the Pharaohs' victories, praying for a good after-life, and, more rarely, describing everyday life. This is certainly the most beautiful script ever created, its pictograms showing deities, birds, humans in various poses, water lines, and much more which even the layman can admire. To the ancient scribes, their simplified versions were just standard letters or words in their language. An exception occurs in Tutankhamun's tomb, where a secret religious text, reserved for the highest royalty only, is encrypted by changing the standard meaning of symbols and the direction of writing. One example is analyzed in my book *CryptoSchool*<sup>19</sup>.

The parents of Tutankhamun were probably Pharaoh Akhenaten (Echnaton, ruled c. 1353-1336 BC) and his sister [!], whose name is not known. Akhenaten started a short-lived cultural revolution and his reign was the wealthiest period in ancient Egypt. He abolished the traditional polytheism by an almost monotheistic religion centered on Aten, a solar deity. This period liberated artists from the traditional patterns, and they created the most beautiful life-like images in ancient Egyptian art. We see almost impressionistic paintings of hunting trips and festivities, more naturalistic and lively than the stiff traditional images, which do not handle perspective well. A bust of his wife Nefertiti (Nophretete) is a showpiece of the *Neues Museum* in Berlin and, with Tutankhamun's death mask, the most often reproduced image of pharaonic Egypt. Eventually, an uprising led by the traditional priests put these refreshing ideas to rest and restored the traditional

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<sup>19</sup>Springer Verlag, 2015, Section A.2.

concepts.

Crossing the Nile from Luxor towards the valley of the kings by boat, one arrives at Deir al-Bahri with its huge temple of Queen Hatshepsut (Maatkare), whose reign began in 1478 BC. The expedition she sent to the *Land of Punt*, probably today's Ethiopia, returned with myrrh trees and frankincense. Her funerary temple is very different from the monumental buildings at Gizeh or Karnak, looking more like a Greek temple, but of enormous dimensions, with three stories of large colonnades. In 1997, 62 people were murdered here by Islamist terrorists.



Figure 267. Girls near the Valley of Kings.

Before our return flight from Cairo, I take pictures at the airport of Egyptian MIG fighter planes, of Russian construction. This is strictly forbidden, a soldier yells at me, but nothing further happens. I excel at creating unnecessary risks for myself.

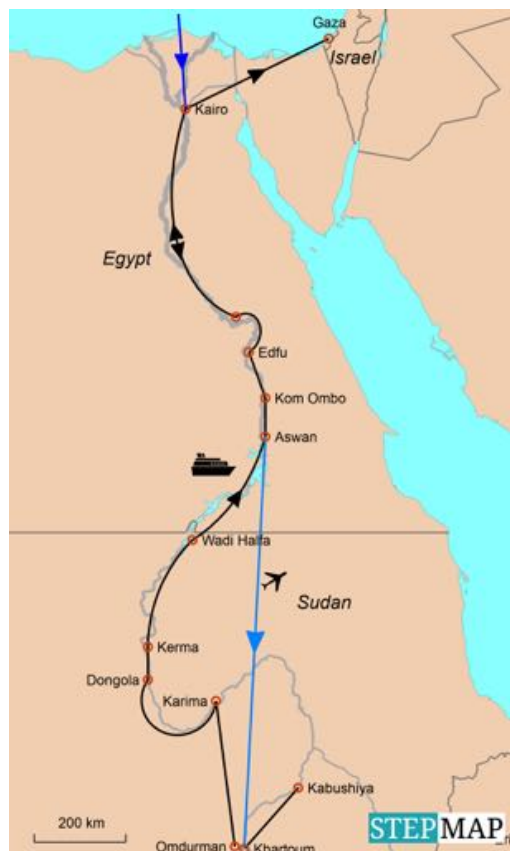




Figure 268. Dorothea and myself at the Karnak temple.

## Egypt, Sudan 1985

*In March 1985, I travel through Egypt to Sudan and back. The hospitality of the Sudanese is overwhelming and I feel perfectly secure in their country. After witnessing a dervishes' dance in Khartoum, some tough bus and truck rides take me to lonely parts along the Nile river. At the Nubian pyramids from pharaonic times, I am the only visitor of these impressive monuments, a soothing experience after the crowds at Gizeh.*



On my first day in Cairo, I take bus 116 at 06.00 from the Maidan Tahrir—the famous square of demonstrations during the Arabellion—to the Pyramids at Gizeh. This early, there are no tourists around, and I can take undisturbed pictures of the pyramids and camel drivers who, during the day, charge for each photo. The sight is just overwhelming, with the three huge pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure, graecisized as Cheops, Khefren, and Mykerinos. This time, it is not allowed to climb up the Cheops pyramid, as I did ten years ago. I walk along the causeway of two of the pyramids, around the Sphinx and leading down into the Nile valley.

Around 10.00, tourist buses start to arrive and I spend the rest of the day in town, wandering around the Khan El-Khalili market. In the evening, I take a comfortable train to Edfu in the South.

It is calm train ride through eternal Egypt: green fields, fellahin (peasants), children playing, a camel walks in a circle driving an irrigation pump, women in flowing black robes carry water buckets on their heads. Just after noon, I alight at Edfu. The famous temple has an impressive wall all around it. The inscriptions are well-preserved. A special feature of this temple is its still-existing roof. It gives an impression that the priests at the time must have felt: mysterious semidarkness, the darker the closer you get to the sanctuary. The ceilings are painted with star signs which have been darkened by the numerous candles and incense sticks that have been burned over time.



Figure 269. The three large pyramids at Gizeh.



Figure 270. Looking up the Cheops pyramid—a forbidding sight.

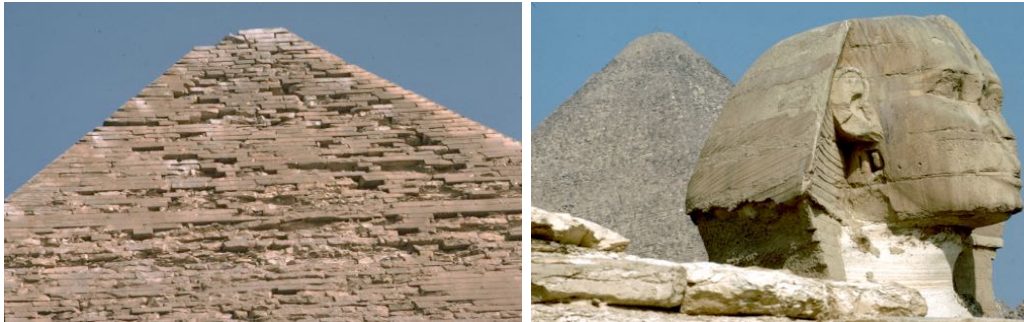


Figure 271. The smooth cover of the top of the Cheops pyramid, and the sphinx.



Figure 272. Top of pillars in Edfu.



Figure 273. Kids at Kom Ombo.



In the afternoon, I take a car to Kom Ombo, another famous ancient site. The Nile river flows peacefully past one of the temple's edges. In the evening, I continue to Aswan (Assuan). Dead tired from little sleep and much sun.

I visit the old Aswan dam, built long before the current *High dam*, and take a boat to the island of Agilika. Its *Philae* temple is in a beautiful location, surrounded by water and violet flowers. The pillars with inscriptions are impressive.



Figure 274. Karnak.

A cruise on the Nile river on board a *feluka* (sailboat) makes for a peaceful day. No engine sound, total quiet. We visit the San Simeon monastery, the Aga Khan mausoleum, Kitchener island, and the tombs of nobles at Qubbet el-Hawa. I climb around the tombs and to the top of the hill. A calm place with a beautiful view along the Nile, up to its next bend.



Figure 275. Water from the tap would make life so much easier.



Figure 276. The Nile at Aswan.

An interesting flight from Aswan in Egypt takes me to Khartoum in Sudan, over the desert and the narrow strip of the *Nile oasis*, with sharply marked boundaries. Most passengers are Sudanese cowboys who have sold camels and goats here. Their luggage is in stark contrast to the Gucci et al. trolleys at other airports: saddle bags, voluminous leather bags, blankets and mats rolled up, all with a pot or coffee pot tied to them with a string. No suitcase on board.

After passing immigration and customs, a friendly “ground engineer” offers me a ride into town. Throughout my stay in the country, I meet a lot of such helpful and generous

people. Quite regularly, when I ask someone for the way, I get invited to tea or food, or they take me to my destination. I go on a first exploratory stroll through the city, including the market suq al-sha'abi.



Figure 277. Sharp boundary between life and death: the Nile oasis. The confluence of the White Nile (left) and the Blue Nile (right) in Khartoum.



Figure 278. What the hell ... so it's burnt!



The country is in turmoil. A rebellion in the non-Muslim south (mainly animistic, also Christians) against the Muslim government has just begun. This is to flare up into a civil war of almost thirty years with about two million dead, partly due to the ensuing famine. In 2011, South Sudan gains its independence, but after two years, falls back into its own civil war; see page 280. Not satisfied with the blood shed in the south, the government supported murderous muslim Janjaweed gangs, nomadic herders, who slaughtered many of the sedentary rural population in the arid western province of Darfur. The International Criminal Court has a warrant out against the president Omar al-Bashir for crimes against humanity. Alas, he is unlikely to ever face trial in Den Haag. A pity.



Figure 279. Khartoum. Welcom to the vice.

In Khartoum, I first have to deal with some bureaucracy: registration and travel permit at the Aliens' Section of the Ministry of the Interior, photo permit at the Hotel & Tourist Corporation. I meet Kees Metselaer, a Dutchman working for a relief organization, and he suggests to share my hotel room. Good idea.





Figure 280. My truck driver to Kabushiya.

Khartoum is a laid-back city at the confluence of the Blue and the White Niles. From the banks and the bridge, you can see how the waters of different colors flow next to each other for a while, then slowly mix.

Early next morning, a truck takes me to Kabushiya and then to Bagrawiya and its pyramids at Nuri. We have prearranged a price, and on arrival, the driver refuses to take my money. Such generosity happens rarely elsewhere, but is quite typical of this hospitable country.

Egypt and its civilization has always been a major influence in the Sudan. In 1450 BC, temples were built at Jebel Barkal and the area around was called *Kush*. With the collapse of the Egyptian New Kingdom around 1070, it became the independent Napatan kingdom, and around 750 BC, Nubian (Kushite) pharaohs conquered all of Egypt from their capital of Meroë, close to Nuri. Napata was located close to Karima, see below.

At the first (eastern) pyramid, I chat with Bela Hamed Babakur, the friendly ghafir (guardian) here at Maslach Tell. He points me to the other two pyramids. I enter my name into his guest book—the first solo visitor this year, three larger groups have also been here. It is a wonderful hike through the desert, very hot, mostly rubble, and I get a sunburn on my arms. The Royal pyramids are partly restored. It is an eternal debate among archeologists whether one should do this. Certainly I like to see a complete pyramid in front of me, even if not everything is original. But archeologists often argue against restoration.



Figure 281. My truck to Kabushiya.



Figure 282. Tea break with my fellow truck passengers.

Another long hike back to the Sun temple and the Amun temple. It has a beautiful but empty pool, I feel like jumping in for a swim, but without water that is not really fun. Some plates show writing in the Meroic script which is still not deciphered. At the ghafir's hut, I take two liters of water, badly needed. Then I walk back eight kilometers to Kabushiya, where I find a night train to Khartoum.



Figure 283. Pyramid fields at Nuri.



Figure 284. Restored and delapidated pyramids at Nuri.





Figure 285. Bela Hamed Babakur (with red turban), guardian of the Nuri pyramids.

The train is so full that I have to sleep on the floor between two cars, on a steel plate above the coupling. Really dirty, highly uncomfortable, very noisy, and it gets cold at night. I am relieved when we arrive at 06.00. I pick up the luggage I had left at my hotel. Ibrahim Mahjoub, another super-friendly Sudanese, drives me to the Suq Sajjana and the place where buses to Karima leave. No bus today, so Ibrahim invites me to his house, where I am well fed. The most common food in Sudan consists of ful beans and salad with bread, a glass of water and tea afterwards. Nourishing, but not particularly

delicious.



Figure 286. Pyramids at Nuri and a wise owl, its colors merging into those of the rock.



Figure 287. Rural life around Nuri.



Figure 288. Heavy job for young Nuri women.

I walk and take a bus to the cemetery in Omdurman, a suburb across the Nile. And I have the luck to witness a fascinating display: a dervish dance. About 400 people crowd the cemetery. Green flags all around, drummers, and twenty men in flowing robes perform rather lewd-looking movements in two concentric circles. Most of the robes are plain white, but some dervishes wear a patchwork of colorful fabric—apparently the original dervish outfit.



Figure 289. Dervishes assemble for a swirling festivity.





Figure 290. Swirling dervishes in Omdurman.





Figure 291. Great fun swirling around.

Some turn around in circles and pirouettes, fast and wild, swirling their robes through

the sand. They sweat profusely in their religious furor. Completely exhausted, they meet afterwards in the mosque. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly, some boys are allowed to dance along. Nobody minds my taking photos, in contrast to some in the markets here who gruffly told me that photography is forbidden. A mini bus with only women inside offers me a ride back to Khartoum. They ululate and sing and clap their hands all the way, I join them, and we have good clean fun together—although my ululating is not up to par.

My further destinations on this trip are Karima, Dongola, and Wadi Halfa. Before daybreak (and, worse, before breakfast), I am at the bus station in Khartoum for Karima. I get the least desirable seat, in the last row, and suffer all day long through the worst bus ride of my life, among many really bad ones. The seats are narrow metal benches, the dirt road is incredibly bumpy, the driver goes much too fast, I get thrown around like a bag of feathers, my innards are shaken like in a blender, my kidneys and liver seem to oscillate wildly between my chin and my knees, springs and suspension have said good-bye decades ago, so that every little pothole shock immediately travels up my spine. My bum hurts like hell after an hour of this ordeal. Worst of all, there are sharp steel girders right above me, and time and again I hurt my head against one of them. This did not save me the next trip to the barber, but it does result in bleeding cuts in my skull. So I hate to sit on this metal bench, worthy of a Fakir's seat, and yet I have to push myself down all the time to avoid another bruise on my head. A strenuous dance between Scylla and Charybdis.



Figure 292. My bus to Karima.  
The inside is worse than the outside.



Figure 293. Water supply for the bus passengers, and the cramped inside. The passengers in the center sit on their bags or stand.  
A high way rest stop on the way.

After only 100 kilometers and a full day of this torture, I can finally rest my weary bones in a cheap place in Karima. The next day, I visit the pyramids—and, as I had hoped, get amply rewarded for my sufferings.



Figure 294. Ali Sarkhadim Ahmad and his Land Rover.  
Ferry across the Nile.

Ali Sarkhadim Ahmad from the Aziray Bank in Karima and his friends give me a ride in their Land Rover to the pyramids at Jebel Barkal. About 40 of them stand solitarily in the desert, tall and slender. On one of them, the smooth former outer shell is still visible. They are built from soft local sandstone which crumbles under my feet as I climb up. On one of them, I almost slide down on my bum. No harm done. I love to have such ancient places all to myself. There is at most a handful of tourist groups per year that pass through this far-out destination. No guardian around, no-one to offer his services as a guide, just wonderful. I climb all the pyramids that I want to, look into dark burial places and across sand-covered markets of the past. Always walking on stones that the Nubian pharaohs also have stepped on. Only I do not carry incense and gifts for the



gods. The hike back to the ferry across the river is a wonderful experience. Total silence, muddy peaceful water in irrigation channel flowing by, children play in the water and like to be photographed, adults greet me in a friendly way. In the village, large water jars are for everyone to help themselves, which I do.



Figure 295. Villages around Karima.



Figure 296. Children around Karima.





Figure 297. The Nile oasis, and a tea seller in Kerma.



Figure 298. Columns and pyramid at Jebel Barkal.



Figure 299. Everybody welcomes me with a smile.

The train line from Khartoum to Wadi Halfa passes about 200 kilometers to the east of Karima. It makes for a much more comfortable (or at least, less uncomfortable) voyage, but you are 200 kilometers away from the pyramids, which is why I chose the tortuous road via Karima. My next step is the 600-kilometer road to Wadi Halfa along the right bank of the Nile, once a busy road but now rarely traveled because of the train. In fact, my usually reliable Michelin map does not show any road for the last hundred kilometers. An interesting challenge.



Figure 300. Children vying for the best place in my photo.

Arriving back in Karima from my pyramidal excursion, I luck out: a truck leaves today to Dongola, in my travel direction. I fetch my backpack and leave it with Ahmed Mohamed Sidahmed 'Abd Al-mayid, a truck driver who says he will pick me up later at Jebel Barkal.



Figure 301. Ahmed Mohamed Sidahmed 'abd Al-mayid with truck and friends.





Figure 302. Ahmed 'abd Al-mayid's truck.

So I take another hike to that hill with its large Amun temple and more slim pyramids. One of them is in excellent shape, the smooth outer cover is almost intact. These pyramids are not as overwhelming as the monsters at Gizeh, but easier to grasp, more beautiful pieces of architecture. In the shade by the road I wait for the truck with my belongings. And then Ahmed comes and stops. There are few countries in the world where I would leave my luggage with a truck driver whom I just met. But the Sudanese have proven over and over to me their trustworthiness and hospitality, in stark contrast to the atrocities that their government commits.

At Kurru, I see a pyramid and several tombs. Piankhi, the Nabatan conquerer of Egypt, was buried here. Apparently, there were also human sacrifices and 24 horse tombs.

We drive northwards through the night, following the Nile at quite a distance. The truck gets stuck repeatedly in the deep sand. But a well-coordinated team of boys quickly solves the problem: jump down, dig out the sand in front of the tires with their hands, sand plates down, and off we roll. One hill is difficult: just after freeing the truck, it sinks again in the soft sand. And again and again.

The star-studded desert sky is beautiful, shooting stars galore. The next day is my daughter Désirée's birthday, I think of my three girls and wish something for us with every shooting star. At 06.00 we arrive at the Nile. I leave my backpack on our east bank and take the ferry to Dongola on the west bank. Back around noon, I soon find a Toyota Hilux that takes me to Kerma (not to be confused with Karima). If I continue to be so lucky with transports, then I will be in Wadi Halfa in two days. Great. But that is not to be. Instead, I spend six days in this desolate village waiting for a truck.





Figure 303. Luxury accommodation in Kerma,  
with private patio for my laundry.



Figure 304. Friendly restaurants and Musa Atiyah,  
tea seller in Kerma.

I walk to the ruins of defūfa gharbiya (western tomb structure), a short distance south of Kerma. This is a large brick building whose only entrances seem to be some covered galleries and whose purpose as a tomb is not obvious to the casual visitor. Thousands of tweeting birds populate the walls. Nearby are some smaller tombs and a circular structure, also mysterious. I buy some stamps at the local post office. In a typical Sudanese gesture,

the postmaster 'Amr Hasan Khiri invites me for lunch, a delicious kebab. Much better than restaurant food. He offers to provide a boy who takes me to the *defūfa sharqiya* (eastern tomb structure) on a donkey. I climb rather ungraciously into the saddle, and first fall down again on my bum. The boy sits behind me. We have to click our tongues continuously to keep the donkey moving. As soon as we stop clicking, the animal slows to its preferred speed: standstill. The locals kick their donkeys vigorously with their feet or hit them with a stick, but I do not use the stick they gave me. Almost arrived at the *defūfa gharbiya*, the donkey moves into the shade of a low solitary acacia tree, me on top. Ouch, those thorns really hurt. The *defūfa sharqiya* has two large rooms. In front of the entrance lie two broken granite architraves, one with an image of the god Amun Ra and the other with feathers.



Figure 305. 'Amr Hasan Khiri's donkey driving me into the acacia tree.



Figure 306. The *defūfa sharqiya*.



Figure 307. An architrave with image of Amun Ra.

Otherwise, nothing happens during my six days of waiting. I have lots of tea and *Vimto*, a lemonade that sounds and tastes like a household cleaning liquid. In the few local restaurants and tea stalls, I enjoy a friendly welcome and entertaining conversations, with much laughter and curiosity of my Sudanese friends about my travels and work.



Figure 308. 50-year-old Mohamed Hussein al-Saygh invited me to a lunch of ful and sausages. Two brickmakers.



This atmosphere makes it easy to ignore the Sudanese standards of hygiene, which would be appalling to most Westerners. I do not get sick and do not mind grinding my teeth on some sand (or whatever else) in my beans.



Figure 309. Mohamed Adam Umm Badda, the shoemaker, without his glasses.



Figure 310. "Salam Joachim".



My hiking boots are falling apart. Mohamed Adam Umm Badda, a local shoemaker, puts some nails through them and sews them with a thick thread, but this does not last. I will eventually have to bid goodbye to my good old friends. The illiterate Mohamed Adam asks me to write a letter (in Arabic) concerning his glasses, which broke some time ago. I oblige with pleasure.



Figure 311. Hassan At-tom Ibrahim, blacksmith in Kerma.



Figure 312. Butcher.



Figure 313. Let's play!



Figure 314. Feluka on the Nile.



Figure 315. Sunset.

I work a lot on my paper on factoring polynomials. In Kerma, everybody knows me by now, a friendly “salam Joachim” comes from everywhere.



Figure 316. Riding high on Dahab’s truck into a village and into the desert.

On the sixth day, I finally get a ride from Kerma to Wadi Halfa, with Dahab’s two-year old blue Bedford 8108 truck. 35 passengers are crammed into the small space of the truck

bed, everybody has someone else's leg over his own, a knee in the kidney area, an elbow against the head, or a foot squished under a body. Less than comfortable, but at least we are moving. The Bedford manages the deep sand holes much better than my previous conveyance. Almost every hour, Dahab stops to smoke his shisha in a shady place, while the passengers are left to fry in the sun. By 01.00, we get to our resting place.



Figure 317. My salvation: Dahab's Bedford truck.



Figure 318. Our arrival in Wadi Halfa, Dahab's truck at left, and a view of the town.



Excellent sleep on the ground below brilliant stars, and some shooting stars. The river Nile forms a long oasis, less than three kilometers wide and 6000 kilometers long from its Central Africa source to Alexandria. But right at the first elevation beyond the river bank, green turns abruptly into brown and the desert stretches to the horizon. All that green down there is soothing for the eyes after the glare of the desert. It fills you with admiration for the people who have struggled in this narrow stretch of fertile land for over 5000 years and produced the greatest civilization of its times, leaving for us those huge and enigmatic monuments of the pyramids.

In the early morning, we arrive in Wadi Halfa, about 1400 kilometers from Khartoum. Bad news: the boat to Aswan in Egypt left yesterday, the next one will go in three days from now. In Khartoum they had told me it was today, but such information is unreliable. That is one of those things you learn: interesting travel requires a lot of time, flexibility, and patience. Ok ... still learning. I am worried about arriving in Haifa in time for my talk. From Wadi Halfa, I try to send a telegram to Dorothea: call my friend Janos Makowsky in Haifa that I'll arrive Sunday. But Wadi Halfa is "out of communications", and I would have to send the telegram by train to Khartoum.

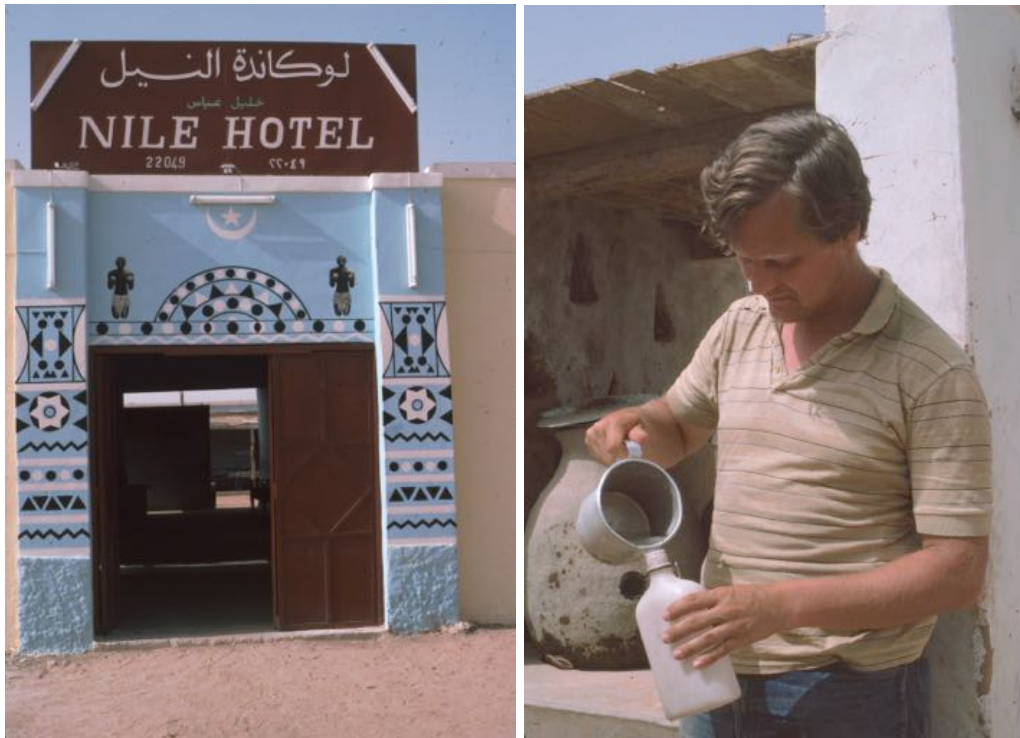


Figure 319. My *Nile Hotel* with drinking water from a jar.



Figure 320. View into a courtyard, and the train from Khartoum has arrived, just in time to miss the ferry.



Figure 321. The people are friendly, as everywhere in Sudan.

Good news: I find a reasonable hotel. In the shower, a fat brown gravy comes off my body after a week without proper washing. My room is shared with three Sudanese. Fortunately, I can leave my stuff, camera, films and all, safely in the room. The Sudanese are perfectly honest. Already in neighboring Egypt, this would be imprudent. In the

courtyard, one can take rich, creamy, viscous, full-bodied muddy drinking water from large jars. During my involuntary stay in Wadi Halfa, I work on my paper relating primitive elements to efficient polynomial factorization over special finite fields. I spend some time with three other travelers, also stranded: Holger from Stockholm, and Chrissie (Christine) and Nicky Hides from London. Nicky picked up malaria in eastern Sudan, in spite of prophylaxis, and suffers terribly: fever, sweating and shivering attacks, aching joints, and vomit.



Figure 322. Dry earth at Wadi Halfa and the ferry.

The Aswan High Dam in Egypt was built in the 1960s, created Lake Nasser, over 500 kilometers long, and was supposed to regulate the annual flooding along the Nile. But, as with the disaster of Lake Aral (see page 974), the Soviet engineers did not consider that they were working against nature. Namely, the flooding brought rich silt from the mountains of Central Africa and Ethiopia along the first few thousand kilometers of the Nile, and provided free fertilization which had kept the Egyptian agriculture going for thousands of years. The dam at Aswan in Egypt now blocks this flow of silt. The lake is filling up and has to be dredged regularly, and the Egyptian peasants now have to buy Western fertilizer for their crops. The dam does provide much-needed electricity for all of Egypt, but in the long run it may turn out to have been an expensive miscalculation.

Wadi Halfa is the Sudanese terminus of the ferries that plow across the vast Lake Nasser. Three days later, our ferry to Aswan in Egypt finally leaves at 11.30. We find a reasonably comfortable place on the deck in front of the bridge, stretching out on our sleeping bags. Crazy Holger has bought a bicycle (for what purpose?), which now serves well as a divider from the other passengers. Their boxes, suitcases, bags, mats, pots, and shoes make walking difficult. We advance at a good speed of about 16 knots. At 14.30, we pass Abu Simbel, the famous Ramses temple that was relocated for the building of the Aswan dam. There is not much to see from the distance.

After we arrive at the High Dam, the border and currency formalities take a full five hours. I stay overnight in the pleasant hotel *Rosewan* in Aswan. Early morning, a train takes me from Aswan to Cairo, quite comfortably. I am dead tired.



Figure 323. Sharing the deck space with Holger, Chrissie and Nicky.

And in a hurry to get to Haifa, as promised. Ten years ago, a bus from Cairo to Tel Aviv was unthinkable. But now I leave on one at 06.00. A garrulous Australian women in the bus peels an orange and then pulls out a wet wipe to clean her hands. I have a fit of laughter ... a wet wipe! ... after weeks of my crawling through the dirt in Sudan. Sorry, Ma'am, culture shock. We drive across the endless desert, something that I am quite used to by now. All of a sudden a *fata morgana* appears—an ocean-going freighter steaming right through the desert! I realize that this must be the Suez canal. Because of the high banks, I do not see the water, only the ship's superstructure. An unreal spectacle.



Figure 324. Ships lined up in the Suez canal and the Egyptian-Israeli border post on entering the Gaza strip.



## South Sudan 2013

*I profit from a narrow window of opportunity to visit South Sudan. After decades of civil war in Sudan, the country gains its independence in 2011, but just a few months after my departure, it sinks back into the throes of a new and bloody civil war. Consistent with the general atmosphere of aggression and corruption, I am arrested for a few hours by a rogue band of soldiers, but after the intervention of a whole parade of higher-ups, they have to let me go. Tough country.*



The decades-long civil war in Sudan had a Muslim vs. Christian or animistic slant to it, but in addition the curse of underdeveloped countries: oil. After two decades of bitter fighting, with atrocities on both sides, South Sudan gained its independence in

2011. When I call the German ambassador in 2013, he severely disrecommends overland travel from Uganda. So after a lengthy trip to Namibia and Botswana (see page 468), I fly into Juba, the capital. At the airport, I snap a picture of the sign “Juba”. Later I learn that this could have been an expensive action; see below.



Figure 325. Juba airport and the *Grand Hotel*.

My hotel, the *Juba Grand Hotel*, is a soulless ensemble of prefab huts, expensive but reasonably comfortable. A nice person, Marta, works at the reception. Her not-so-nice boss watches over a strongbox full of US dollar bills. You can only pay in cash, no credit card accepted. One wonders where all that money goes ...

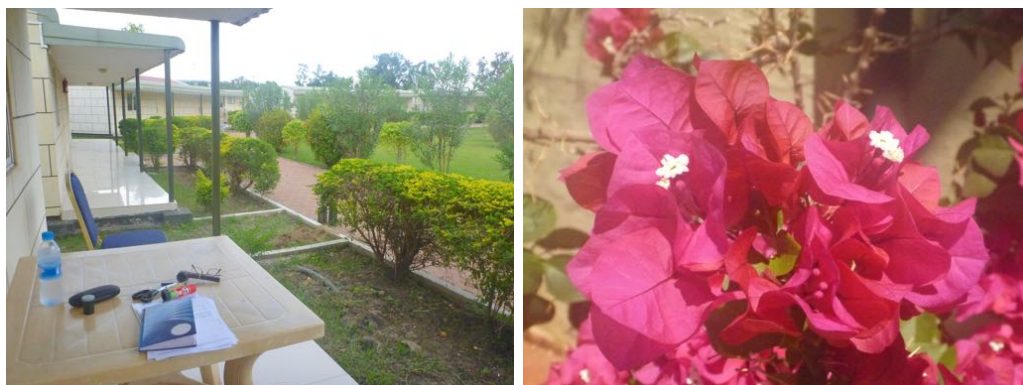


Figure 326. In front of my container room at the *Grand Hotel* and an orchid in their garden.

Less than two months after my visit, the situation erupts again, this time South Sudanese tribes fighting each other, as mercilessly as in their war against the North. Again, this is mainly about the oil revenue into the one's or the other's private pocket—corruption killing thousands of people. I am to feel the explosiveness of the situation.

The hotel manager Fray, Eritrean by origin, is very helpful and drives me into town. We talk about a monument to John Garang, hero of independence and of the country. He brings me there, opposite a stadium, and I get ready to take a photo of the (unimpressive) statue. Someone walking by waves and says “No photo”, so I skip this. Too late. Already two lanky soldiers come running and shouting towards me, and I quickly put my camera away. To no avail.

They pull me up the stairs of an adjacent sports stadium into a makeshift open air prison. One of them fetches a chair for me. But there is no doubt: I am arrested. In the claws of the largest criminal organization in this country, the armed forces. The band of soldiering misfits interrogates me harshly, pointing repeatedly their guns, fortunately not directly at me but at the ground in front of me. The interrogation is unpleasant, but it helps that the soldiers do not speak English and I no Sudanese dialect. The gang’s leader, let us call him A, is particularly aggressive and takes my little Panasonic camera away, into his pocket. That was that. Only eight pictures are on it, none of the statue. I had misgivings about strolling around with my big Nikon D800 SLR camera, and that turns out to have been a wise idea. I would certainly be a spy in their eyes with such fancy equipment. They drag poor old Fray from his car, take away his keys and mobile phone. He is shivering with fear and crying outright. I remain calm and polite, but am concerned at this outbreak by a man who must know better than me what is expecting us. At least he is allowed to call his hotel, so that someone knows where we are.

The two of us sit on our chairs, surrounded by five to thirteen soldiers; they come and go, and some are quite aggressive. It is a game drive of a different sort from those that I have done in the last weeks in Botswana; now I am the hunted game. Soldier A keeps playing with my camera, he obviously likes it. He makes wild threats, accusing me of not having a tourist permit. Of course, there is no such thing in this tourist-free country. But he soon comes out with the real reason: they want 150 Sudanese pounds (US\$ 40) per person and my camera. Two soldiers play demonstratively with their whips, wooden handles with lashes from old truck tires. They make it clear to us that it is either 150 pounds or 150 “latchas” (lashes).

By chance, the head of the hotel department of the secret service drives by. He plays along with the soldiers’ game, but now it cannot remain at this level. The local boss B1 of this gang of soldiering miscreants wears a red beret and does not speak English. He vanishes with my camera and our passports. After a while, his boss B2 shows up, then the higher-up B3 who speaks English well.

I remain cool calm collected all the time. I tell B3 that I did not take a picture (which is true), that at immigration, nobody advised me of the mysterious tourist permit, and that there is no sign here saying “no photography”. And that someone higher in the government might ask whose responsibilities these things are. This puts some thought processes in motion, except that A does not really listen. My reasoning that any people would be proud to have their hero’s image shown to my friends falls on deaf ears.

Finally, head honcho B4 arrives, a hefty guy named Jackson and probably high up in

the secret service. All the others did not offer their names. I repeat my story to him, he listens quietly, and makes a phone call. Probably to his own boss B5. This drags on for a while. In the end, he says that we can go and orders A to return his loot, my camera and our passports. After winning this round, I almost feel like asking for a photo of the whole gang, but am wise enough to suppress this idea. As we drive away, soldier A may have shed a tear over his missed bargain acquisition of a camera at a rock-bottom price.

Fray is still shaken. He is only a tolerated foreign worker and it is not clear what this episode will do to his life. I try to comfort him. After all, he wants to remain in this country. For myself, I was never really worried and believed that I would somehow get out of this mess, like so many times before. And I did. My main concern was that one of these simple-minded guys might as well go berserk. It was a scary incident, and more of an adventure than the lion walking one meter from our car a few weeks ago in Botswana; see page 463.



Figure 327. Juba: the big intersection with a clock, and street scenes.

The next day, with my adrenaline level back to normal, I stroll through the small city, still marked by the signs of war. A block of houses here, and one there, and in between



lots of empty space. In the center of an intersection, a large clock shows four faces, all with the correct time. That is totally incongruent in this country.

I am invited by the German ambassador, His Excellency David Schwake. His building is the fanciest in the EU compound, down a muddy street. Extensive but ineffective security checks. It would have been easy for me to smuggle in some bad stuff. We have a pleasant talk. Among the diplomats that I have met abroad, he is the one most interested in local culture and affairs, beside his job. He travels a lot, has a backpack in a corner of his office, and is quite positive about the future development of the country. Alas, he is wrong, and a few months later, a civil war between the tribes of Dinka and Nuer ravages South Sudan again, with about 400 000 dead until 2018.



Figure 328. The street leading to the EU compound, and the German embassy building.

I take a boda boda (motorcycle taxi) to the *Da Vinci* restaurant right on the banks of the White Nile, a pleasant place. For the following morning, I have arranged a boat ride on the river with my new friend Johnson. It is a peaceful outing on the wide waters, many vortices and small islands of vegetation floating by. A large island, about 14 kilometers long, divides the river, and there are many small islands. Five people row across in a boat. Johnson comments: “They partied yesterday, are again drunk now in the morning, and go to another party, where the drinking continues. They do this every day. No thought about tomorrow, no intention to work, but they demand that someone gives them money.” Oh well, sounds familiar.

Johnson is from Kampala in Uganda and used to own and run a truck bringing fresh Tilapia fish from Lake Victoria to Juba. One way, this can take two weeks. But then there was an ambush that destroyed a whole column of trucks, including his. Now he plays the captain on a small outboarder, but is not happy with his life.



Figure 329. Captain Johnson, the *Da Vinci* hotel,  
and the White Nile.

When I leave the country, chaos reigns at the airport, undisciplined crowds in front of the check-in counters. Eventually, I get my boarding pass, not without using my elbows. At the security check, the machine beeps and they wave me through. Right in front of me, a traveler carries a shaver with huge blades in his hand luggage. He explains that

he needs it for shaving (really?) and they wave him through. Have a safe trip!



Figure 330. My boda boda driver in Juba,  
and a ray of hope for Juba's girls.

Then comes a narrow passage with high plywood boards all around it to avoid people's looks. Why is that? The big man at immigration control takes my passport and stretches out his hand: "Twenty dollars". I refuse. He insists. I refuse again and mention my friend, the ambassador, and my uncle in the UN High Commission, invented on the spot. Eventually, he caves in, I get my passport, duly stamped, and am happy to leave the sordid corrupt bureaucracy of this poor country.

My Ethiopian flight stops in Addis Abeba, where they play little games with my luggage. I have to get my bag and check it in for Frankfurt, my final destination. Luggage delivery is behind passport control. To pass this, I need a visa, which I do not have and cannot get for such a short time. I make a bit of fuss and after some time, an enterprising young lady from Ethiopian solves my problem elegantly. She takes me through immigration, drops my passport there, we find my bag, march back together with it through immigration the wrong way, and she picks up my passport again. Very nice. An interesting sight is a large area, cordoned off with tape, containing about 200 items of "lost baggage". The poor owners. My luggage would probably also have landed there without our energetic intervention.

## Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somaliland 1999

*Two things stand out on this trip: my flight from Djibouti to Somaliland (and back), purchased at midnight with take-off six hours later. And the rock churches at Lalibela in Ethiopia, hewn out of the bed rock and the center of lively religious ceremonies as they have been for eight centuries.*



On my flight in 1999 to Ethiopia, I work on *Special powers*. My coauthor's (Michael Nöcker) English is atrocious, his math sometimes sloppy. My Saudia airplane has the usual geo information screens in the cabin, but with a pointer to the Ka'aba. It turns as we fly, and on our landing approach for a stopover at Jeddah, 70 kilometers from Mecca, it goes spinning in circles. I get an entry card with the red imprint: *Warning: death for drug trafficker*. Well, I'm not. Backpackers must be quite a rarity here. I am led to the



transit lounge al-Fursan in the Saudia terminal 4, where I get some rest in a chair. In the middle of the night, someone comes and picks up my backpack for check-in. Not a thief, but an unexpected service. The flight to Addis Abeba makes a wide curve west around the war zone in eastern Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Addis Abeba is home to five million people in 2019 and colloquially called Addis. On arrival, I go straight to the *Taitu Hotel*. This colonial building was built by Empress Taitu in 1907, the wife of Emperor Menelik II, and the first government hotel. It is the oldest hotel in the country, but now it ranks in the budget category. Fine with me. The huge rambling place has creaking wooden stairs and floors, simple furnishings, and is slightly musty everywhere. It shows its age and wear and tear, but is totally charming. My room's ceiling is over three meters high. I feel quite comfortable.



Figure 331. The venerable *Taitu Hotel* and Lucy's home.

Strolling around town, the lack of posted street names makes orientation difficult, but everyone is friendly and helpful. At the Immigration Department, they do not issue me a *second entry visa*; I will have to obtain one in Djibouti. All government buildings have tight security, I have to hand in my camera. At the post office, a young “Abraham” gives me a spiel about his sorry life in the war with Eritrea. I give him some money for his asthma spray, but probably this was just a con story. At 21.30, I fall into my bed, dead tired.

The next day is my daughter Désirée's birthday! I wish her all the best. At the National Museum, I say hello to Lucy. She is tiny, just one meter tall, about 3.5 million years old and world-famous. I share a coffee with the curator. Ethiopia runs on its own calendar. On a single day, I get two food bills at my hotel, one dated 23.3.99 and the other one 14.7.91.

In the Second World War, the British ejected the Italians from Ethiopia and Eritrea, their colony since 1890. Ethiopia was independent again, and Eritrea was federated to the country. In 1962, the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie cancelled this federation agreement unilaterally, incorporated Eritrea as a province into Ethiopia, and a struggle of about thirty years ensued. Breaking agreements can have disastrous consequences. Eritrea

gained its hard-fought independence in 1993. Its current government has a disastrous record on human rights and hundred of thousands Eritreans fled the country.

A war erupted on 22 February 1999, shortly before my visit, between the two countries over conflicting border claims. The British drew precise maps to delineate the borders, mainly following the middle line of rivers. Good intentions, but nature decided otherwise. These rivers frequently change their course after heavy flooding. Also, border markers were removed for building houses. Ethiopia and Eritrea went to war again over these conflicts. It lasted two years and cost each of these countries, which share brotherly the bottom end of the world poverty list, hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of dead. The result was a basically unchanged border line in this economically useless arid savannah of thorny bushes and acacias.

The TV is running all day long in the large reception area of my hotel, showing just one program: war. Not a fictional war movie, but the real thing. People are glued to the screen which shows—nothing. At least to my untrained eyes. We witness live reporting from the front line, a skirmish over a deserted piece of dry land. Nothing happens, except from time to time the boom of a tank or artillery, and then a big dust plume in the distance. Nothing else. The Ethiopian TV watchers seem just as bored as I am, but real people are really getting killed. War can be so boring—except for those unfortunate who die in it.

This was terrible for the unlucky young soldiers, poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly commanded, and their families. For me it had the much minor effect that all flights near the area are cancelled. My trip to the rock churches of Lalibela becomes a lengthy and arduous bus ride of four days, instead of two hours' flying, see page 293.

From Addis, I leave for Djibouti, a former French colony that became independent in 1977. There is still a strong military presence of the French, riding in their Toyota Land Cruisers all around town. An unfortunate effect, for me at least, is that prices in town are incredibly high, especially after low-cost Ethiopia. Non-local items and hotels cost more than in France. My money evaporates as fast as water in the Danakil desert. A 4WD rental for the Danakil desert is unaffordable for me. The amount of dirt everywhere is incredible. Still, there are plenty of tourists, almost all French, staying in posh hotels. The tropical heat is suffocating, in contrast to the pleasantly warm climate of Addis Abeba. I have to stay in abominable places. In my first hotel, there is no hot water, but they brush this off: "our climate is hot enough". True, the temperature is stifling and I sleep badly.

My hope is to go to Somalia or Somaliland, but I have no idea of how to arrange this. Because of the Somalian war, it is too dangerous to go to Mogadishu. This neighboring country has been wrecked by civil war for decades. Brutal war lords have subdued their part of the country, and there does not exist a functioning government. A failed state, harboring terrorist training sites that eventually may threaten Western countries and in the past have led to disastrous attacks on the neighboring country of Kenya. I mention my interest to anyone who will listen. Everybody says "no way".

But at midnight, someone knocks on my hotel door. He wants to sell me a ticket to Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland! Wow! He asks US\$ 91 for the return ticket. This is a part of Somalia that has not suffered as much from the civil war as other parts, and declared itself independent in 1991. We have bought Aeroflot tickets from Bangkok to Moscow under similarly dubious circumstances in Luang Prabang in Laos, see page 978. But that was on the recommendation of someone for whom that had worked, as it did for us. Now here is a person about whom I know nothing, wanting my money for something that everyone tells me is impossible. I look at him, weigh my chances, judge him to deserve my trust, and give him the money. Good decision! But still the thought plagues me: will I ever get anything for it? Or did I fall for a con man?

And indeed, at 04.15, a taxi waits in front of my hotel, and it's off to the airport. At 06.15 I sit in an airplane of Daallo Airlines to Hargeisa. A miracle. Until midnight, I did not even know whether such a flight exists, and now I sit in the plane! Such are the true pleasures of adventure traveling: you never know what will come up tomorrow. And then you take your pick.

The two-propeller plane is a 16-seater Russian Antonov with a Russian crew. We take off without further ado, no announcement. No TV set, no window. No flight attendant celebrating the usual pre-flight encantations. Maybe they do not speak enough English. But in contrast to the few other people, all Somalis, I even fasten my seat belt. We fly fairly low, at 500 to 1000 meters above ground, well within the range of anti-aircraft guns.

We stop in Burama in Somaliland. A desolate village, gravel runway, no facilities. Stones and rocks are hurled against the airplane body on landing. Nobody else gets off or on, but I walk the grounds. The two-storey tower is impressive, but the passenger terminal has no café or the like. Really cozy, I like that kind of airport. Most passengers have not yet eaten anything, but that does not bother anybody except themselves.



Figure 332. The Burama airfield and a clinic in Hargeisa.

The Hargeisa airport was inaugurated in 1958 by the Duke of Gloucester. Somaliland was then a British colony, which became part of the former Italian colony of Somalia at independence in 1960. The central government accused Somaliland leaders of participating

in a 1978 coup, and executed many of them. An independence movement formed. The central government responded violently, and their bombings destroyed much of Hargeisa. But in 1991, the government fell apart in one of its civil wars—and Somalia continues to be a failed state to this day. Somaliland unilaterally declared its independence, and there was nobody to bomb it back into obedience. Conditions then improved rapidly. The people I meet are enterprising and energetic, eager to help their country back on its feet. I see Hargeisa as a sleepy village, but apparently it has grown immensely since then. The city of about 750 000 inhabitants bears the wounds of war: destroyed buildings, the surviving ones with bullet holes all over them. But the city functions, plenty of simple but nice restaurants, and it is perfectly safe to walk around and to sit in the sidewalk cafés. One can only admire these people who rebuild their lives after the ravages of war. There are still border disputes with Puntland in the west, but mainly this is an island of peace within Somalia, most of which is still wrecked by constant fighting between warlords.

The Hargeisa airport has an asphalted runway and a tower. This is, after all, the capital of Somaliland, a country which lacks a lot of things, including diplomatic recognition. Unfortunately, I also lack diplomatic recognition: I could not obtain a visa between midnight and 04.00! The head of the immigration office explains to me that on special order of the minister of the interior, nobody without a visa can be admitted. End of story? Very politely, I explain my situation and my deep respect for the Somalilandian law and its enforcers. How I have heard about the ravages of war in this country and how well it is recuperating. How friendly and welcoming its people are supposed to be. (This is actually true.) One official tells me that they have never seen a tourist here before and suspect me to be a journalist. Just as with the accusation of being a spy, it is, in principle, almost impossible to disprove. So I will be deported back to Djibouti on the next flight, around noon. Too bad.

They treat me politely, and we chat a bit. I tell them about my job and myself. Somehow, they soften up. Maybe mathematicians have a good reputation here, but more probably they have no idea what that is. In any case, after a while, I hear that if Daallo Airline vouches for me, they will give me an entry visa. And the helpful airline manager has no qualms about doing this. Wow again! Here I am.

The airport manager even takes me into town. My hotel room is tiny but quite ok and costs all of US\$ 3. Here and everywhere, there is a lot of renovation going on. Badly needed after the civil war damage. The town itself is not particularly interesting. It consists of three parallel streets and streets connecting them. I get accosted all the time: “Hello, how are you?” “What is your name?” “Where are you from?”. They do not see many foreigners here. The destructions of war are visible everywhere: bullet holes in façades, piles of dirt everywhere, dust swirling in the streets.

I spend the next day quietly. A Somalian asks me for a German news magazine. He has studied economics in Karl-Marx-Stadt, now Chemnitz again, in the former East Germany. When he returns it in the evening, he asks me for money for his medication, and I give him what he needs. He is an unfortunate guy, stranded in his poor home



country.



Figure 333. War damage in Hargeisa.

Eventually, an Antonov-24 takes me back to Djibouti. In front of my seat, there is a large empty storage hold with wooden floor. Rather like a shed upcountry. This is rustic flying. At take-off, a suitcase tumbles out of its hold and stays on the floor during the flight. Nobody worries that it might turn into a dangerous projectile.

Back in Djibouti, the train station is a pretty colonial steel construction, but not much used. Two or three trains per week. Unfortunately, their schedule does not match mine. I spend two days looking for nice places to stay, without much success. I make the big mistake of moving into another hotel, in a slightly less dirty part of town. But the disco music downstairs runs until 05.00. A cockroach the size of a pidgeon, it seems, gives me the impression that it is only tolerating me as a guest. The thought of this beast crawling over me at night gives me the shivers. Yuck. There is no electricity, but in the beam of my flashlight, a few hefty doses from my insect repellent transport this ugly creature into cockroach heaven (or cockroach hell, I hope). Ugly ugly ugly. And this is not to mention flies and mosquitoes.

After not sleeping at all last night, for the noise and pests, I go to the airport at 05.15 to leave for Addis Abeba. I am happy to get out of Djibouti.

After my return to Addis, I fall into my bed at the Taitu Hotel, dead tired after two sleepless nights. The Saudia office has bad news for me: my transit stay in Jeddah on returning is 14 hours, more than the 12 hours allowed without visa. So I need a transit visa. But the Saudi embassy is closed for several days because of the Hajj and Eid al-Fitr (end of Ramadhan). In the end, I reluctantly leave my passport with the lady at the office, hoping that I can manage without my passport for my next excursion and get through all checkpoints with just a photocopy.

In the evening, I fall for another con artist. He tells me that today is King Haile Selassie's coronation day, and there is a big party in the villa of the artist's family. Well, even after quite a while, we are the only people in attendance. Four dancers show up in costumes, snake dance and lion dance. Quite nice, but then I am asked to pay a round.

Later, the lady of the house turns up and asks me to buy her a drink. In her own house. I ask for the price, but my “friend” whispers to me that if a member of the royal family wants something from me, then I have to oblige. I finally understand the setup, get up, and say I want to leave. They present an outrageous bill, I fling some money on the table and storm out of the house. My “friend” tries to stop me, but I push him aside. A narrow escape.



Figure 334. All dressed up in a German mail bag,  
and a market on the way to Lalibela.

Besides the adventure excursion to Somaliland, my main interest on this trip are the rock churches of Lalibela, about 330 kilometers north of Addis towards the border with Eritrea. Because of the ongoing war, all flights to the border area are cancelled, including Axum and Lalibela.

After last night’s excitement, I sleep well but too little. At 05.00, I get up for the bus station for my excursion to Lalibela. Demoji, a slim young man at the Taitu reception, has worked there for a year and gives me useful hints. Total mayhem, but eventually I get a ticket for the 07.00 bus to Mekele. This is further than I want, but I hope I can get off somewhere in between. The bus driver’s style is much more reasonable than elsewhere in Africa. Our average speed is somewhere around 30 km/h. We pass through fertile valleys, often with irrigation systems.

After a lunch stop in Debre Sina and passing through Dessie, we arrive at 18.30 in Hayk. My fellow passenger Tesfay Teklehaimanot shows me a good hotel, and we have a nice dinner together. Most restaurants are unmarked, and you have to know where to go. Without his help, I would never have found this place.

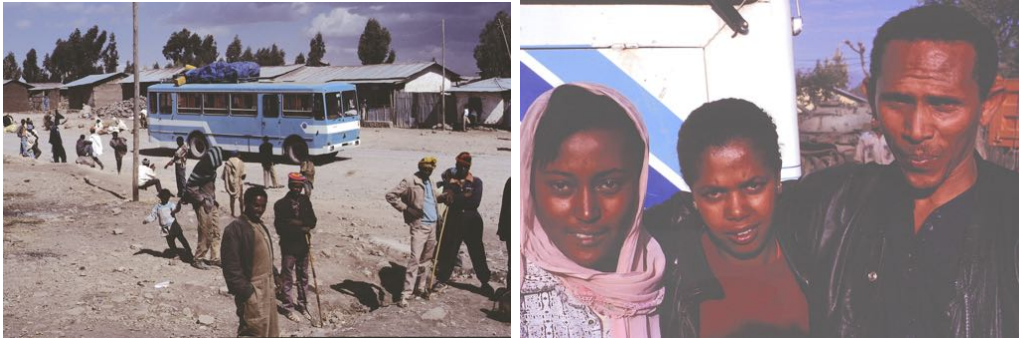


Figure 335. My bus to Hayk, and Rachel Ts'has and Tesfay Teklehaimanot.



Figure 336. The Ethiopian highlands and a stop on the way.

Up at 04.00, at 08.00 we are at Woldia, where I bid farewell to my bus friends. I wait for a bus to Lalibela, and wait, and wait . . . this is Africa. Three hours later, a bus leaves and I meet the first tourist on this trip. An overweight Frenchman from Mulhouse, rather a caricature of a tourist in his khaki shirt and khaki pants. Missing is only the pith helmet. But he is a friendly person and we get along well. The gravel road shakes my bum and innards implacably, I can hardly sit anymore after two days of this torture. We arrive at 18.30, I am too tired to look for a nice hotel and take the first one I see. I sleep comfortably well after two strenuous bus days.

I start my visits to the famous monolithic rock churches, the reason why I came here. They were hewn out of the bedrock under King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela around 1200. Instead of building brick upon brick on the ground, they carved out the terracotta-red rock, up to twelve meters of depth. Their roofs are at the ground level of the terrain. "Negative architecture"—a marvel. This must be difficult to build. You cut away one corner too many, and then you cannot repair it. This way, a mighty church is created underground, its top at level with the surrounding rock. The process is similar to the creation of the cave temples at Ellora and Ajanta in India; see page 948.





Figure 337. Sisaynesh Kasy's restaurant in Lalibela,  
with my French friend.



Figure 338. Some rock churches in Lalibela.

Most churches are covered with scaffolding and tin roofs to protect against the rain. I wonder why—it must have rained a lot in the past 800 years. They number about a dozen in close vicinity and are locked, but if I hang around for long enough, a priest shows up and opens the door for me, for a small donation. They like to pose in their ceremonial dress, sometimes white, sometimes yellow, with staff and silver (or tin?) cross.



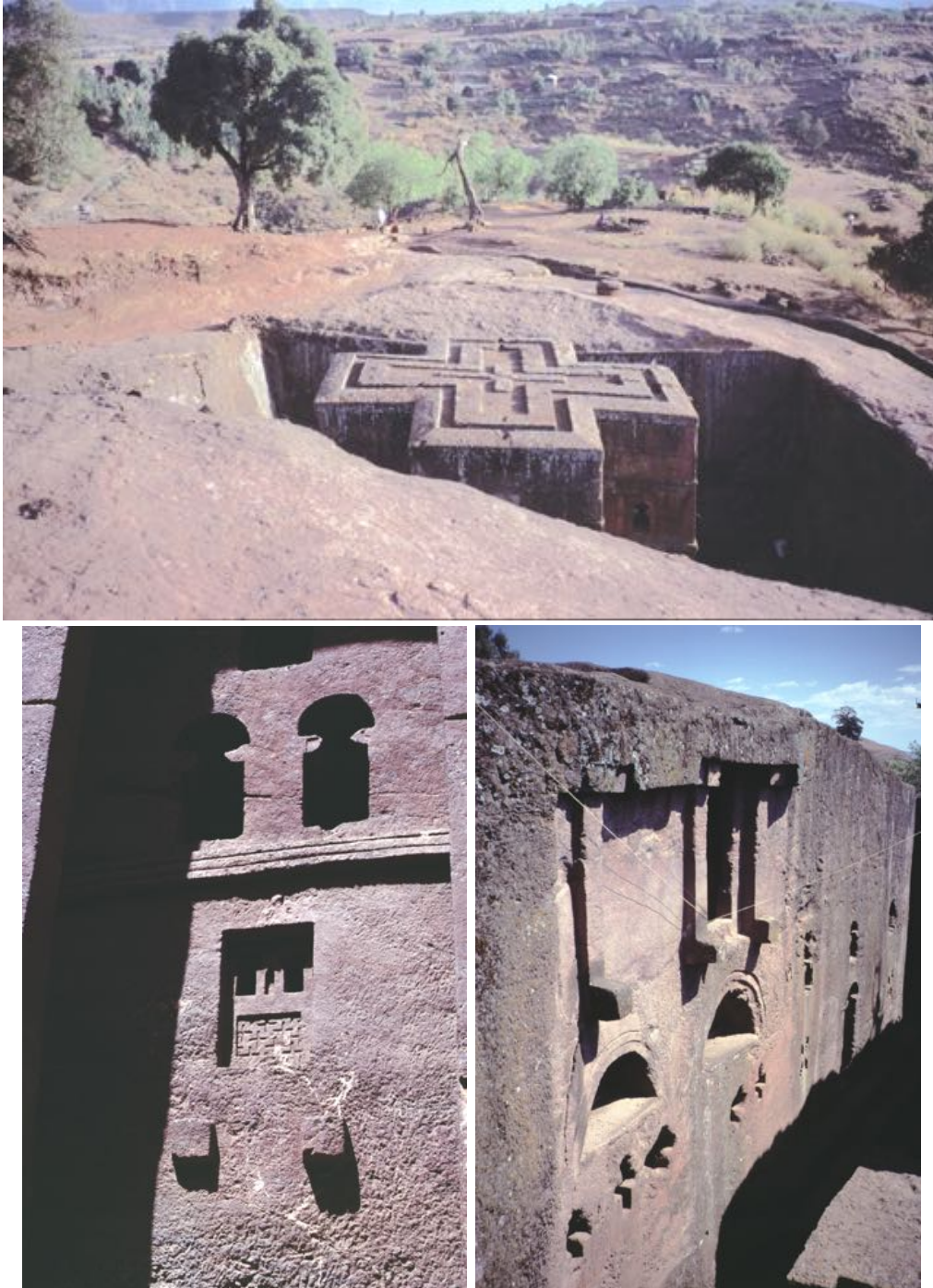


Figure 339. The Beit Georgis church; most of it is underground.

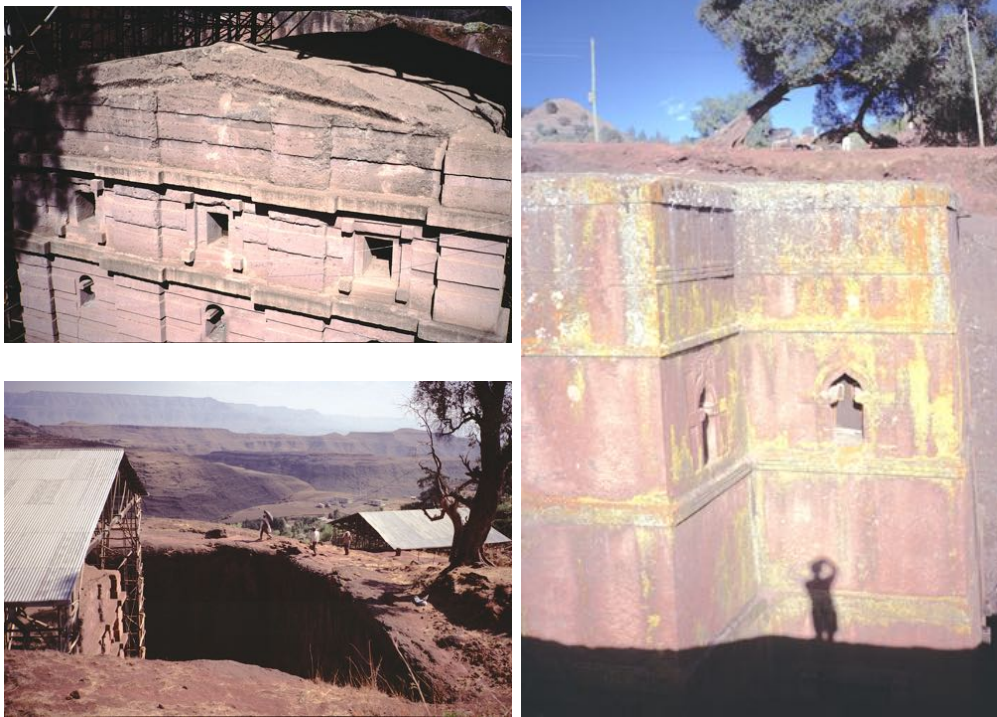


Figure 340. Some churches in Lalibela, and a shadow-selfie.



Figure 341. Windows in Lalibela.



The next day, instead of following my body's orders to sleep in, I get up really early. Mass is celebrated today, Sunday. At Biete Golgotha Mikael and Biete Giyorgis, large and colorful crowds of Orthodox Christians have assembled outside and the priest performs his rituals in the church. There is not enough room inside for everybody.



Figure 342. The faithful in attendance.

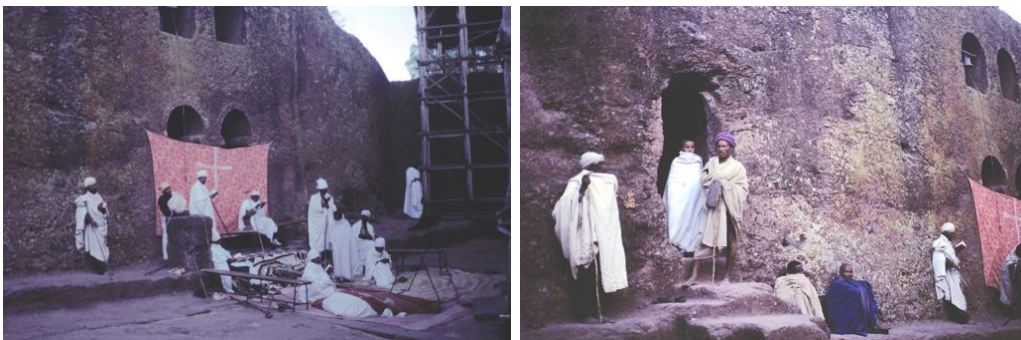


Figure 343. Orthodox priests.

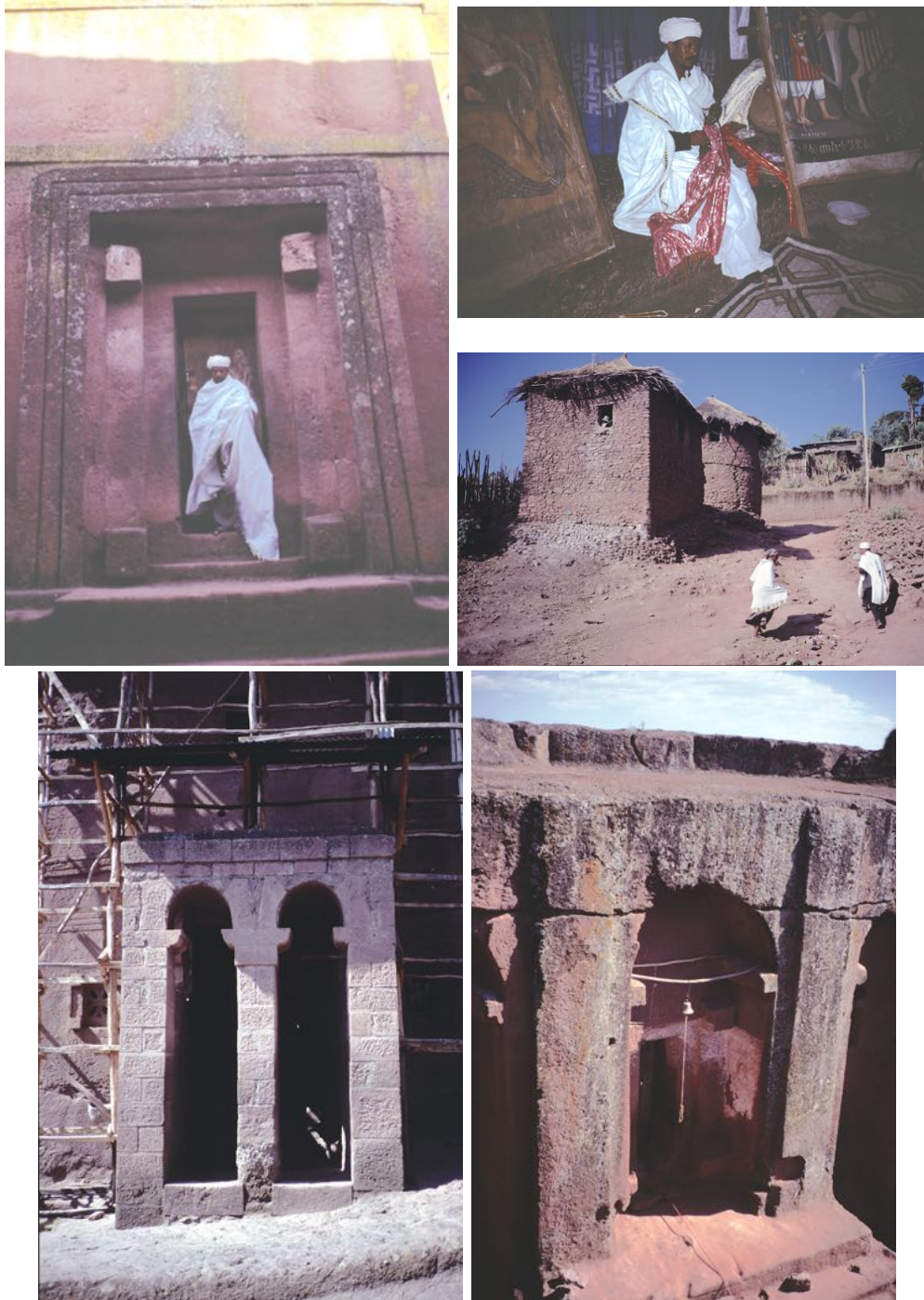


Figure 344. Priests, a road, and arches in Lalibela.





Figure 345. Evening procession through the narrow alley around the church, and assembly on the hills.

My camera Canon A-1, otherwise reliable, does not work. My French friend kindly lends me one of his three cameras, so I can at least take some photos of these colorful scenes. People are happy to have their picture taken. It is a pastoral and traditional display, all these people dressed up in white, often with multi-colored ornaments, marching to the churches, listening to the sermons, praying in silence. I feel like being transported back eight centuries to medieval celebrations, but people just go about their business of kneeling, praying, and giving donations, not aware of the fact that others have done the same in the same places for hundreds of years.



Figure 346. A day of orthodox Christian celebration.



Figure 347. Bean counters and happy children.



Figure 348. Not rich but happy.

At sunset, a vendor comes up to me and offers prayer books: two meter-long rolls and two books. The parchments are inscribed with illustrated biblical texts in Ge'ez, the old language of Ethiopia whose first inscriptions date from 350 BC. Fascinating objects, and I cannot resist the temptation, with a pang of guilt about the export of cultural heritage. He gives me an export licence, but I doubt that it would have been of any use at the border.

After a colorful and quiet day, I am up at 04.15 and take a bus towards Woldia. After one hour, the first breakdown: a flat tire. All plies of the tire are worn down, and I can stick my finger through the hole in it. After we get going again, a Land Cruiser overtakes us with screeching tires. The manager of my hotel jumps out and an ugly scene ensues. Yesterday evening, I have asked four times for my bill, but did not get it. They said they would bring it to my room, but did not. Now he wants his money, quite correctly, and of course I am perfectly willing to pay. But he is livid with rage, screaming all kinds of invectives, and wants more money than agreed. I explain the situation which he knows very well, but he is incapable of listening. To my detriment, I do not speak Amharic and nobody else understands English. He tells the frightened bus driver to kick me and my



luggage out of his bus. In the end, I have to cave in and pay the extra unjustified amount he demands.



Figure 349. Ge'ez bible written on a parchment roll.

Our next breakdown is at 10.00. The front left stabilizer rod has jumped out of its joint. Not to worry: a piece of rope ties everything together again. At that point, I estimate my chances of getting to Woldia with this wreck as close to zero. But I am wrong, we get there and I find other buses to Dessie first, then to Komboldia. The next day, I catch a bus to Addis Abeba at 06.00. It is a long drive with innumerable stops. We pass some camel caravans, each carrying two or three white bags. In Addis, I drop my things at the Taitu Hotel and run to the Saudia office. I am totally relieved when the lady behind the counter recognizes me immediately and hands me my passport. With a Saudi transit visa, for free. Yeah!

I send some postcards from the post office. All of the sudden, con man “Abraham” stands beside me; see page 288. One look from me is enough for him to scuttle away.

At the hotel, Yusif has put some of my luggage into a safe. I do not have cash and tell him that I will give him some money tomorrow. But he says that he needs the outrageous amount of US\$ 100 now. Ok, if that is so, he is unlikely to get anything.

I sleep well and late, inspite of some flea bites. Around noon, I go to the airport. My Saudia flight to Jeddah is on time. There we leave the airplane into a funny bus which lifts its whole cabin hydraulically to the plane door. In the transit lounge, someone takes care of my luggage. Very professional, very efficient. At 22.00, I relax upstairs in the Fursan lounge, and then fly home.



## Eritrea 2007

*On this trip I see glimpses of Eritrea's rich history, from 2000 years old temples to Italian Art Deco buildings from the early 20th century and an engineering marvel of a railway track covering over 2000 meters of difference in altitude. It is now essentially defunct, but kept alive by some old-timers. Everywhere I find grisly reminders of the recent wars with Ethiopia.*



On my 1999 trip to Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somaliland, I wanted to visit Eritrea as well and even obtained a visa. But then war broke out, and I could not go, see page 289. At that time, the German Foreign Office strongly advised all Germans to leave Eritrea.



Figure 350. Italian Art Deco in Asmara.

Years later, I spend a week in Eritrea. The capital city of Asmara has some beautiful Art Deco buildings dating back to the Italian occupation from 1890 to 1941, maybe the most impressive collection of such edifices in the world. Life is peaceful and the cafés are full of people chatting.



Figure 351. Street life and a hibiscus in my hotel's garden.



Figure 352. Colorful street signs in Asmara.



Figure 353. The Eritrean advertising industry.

I get invited to a fancy wedding party, with loud music and dancing. Guests stuff banknotes into the bride's and groom's dresses.

The *tank graveyard* Tsetserat is full of destroyed and rusting military hardware. It is a visual reminder of the high cost that Ethiopia and Eritrea bore to fight their wars. And even more sobering is the military graveyard next to it. The soldiers that lie here were all in their early 20s.

UN reports accuse the Eritrean government of massive violations of human rights, there have been no elections since 1993, and the compulsory *National Service* has no time limit; some people serve ten years or more. During my week there, I can freely walk around everywhere, unmolested by police or government. In other countries, the brutality of a totalitarian dictatorship is visible at the surface, whispered warnings to me and hand signs "don't do that". But not here. I have a doubt in my mind in how far those reports



reflect the truth.



Figure 354. My big fat Eritrean wedding.





Figure 355. *Tsetserat* and graves of soldiers.



Figure 356. Overloaded truck and the power of nature (or bio fuel?).

An excursion takes me to the ruins of Qohaito, from a civilization that flourished about 2000 years ago. Not much is known about it, even the dating is unclear. My excellent guide Ibrahim shows me the ruins that stretch over a large area. Of the Temple of Mariam Wakiro, four columns still stand among a mass of fallen stones and pillars. The remains of other temples and buildings are hard to identify, and it takes a bit of imagination to be impressed by them.

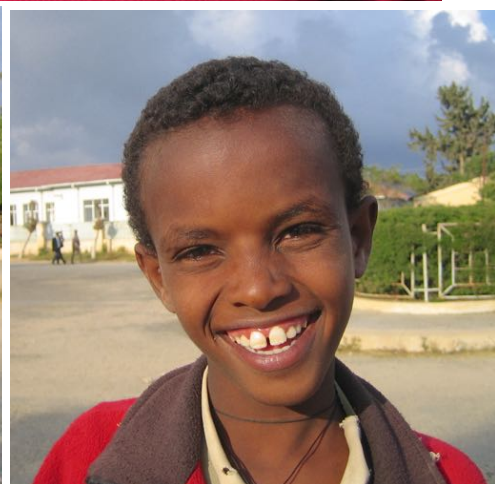




Figure 357. Eritrean school kids.

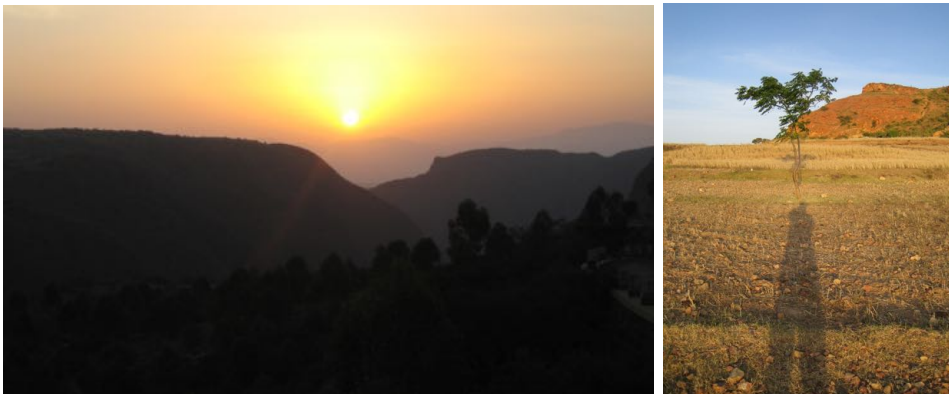


Figure 358. Sunset on the way to Qohaito.

Ibrahim takes me to an overhanging cliff with ancient rock paintings. Just the hike there, on a perilous trail next to a steep abyss, is fascinating. In the background loom the mountains of central Eritrea.





Figure 359. Qohaito: Mariam Wakiro and another temple, and a grave, with me crouching inside.



Figure 360. Trail to the rock paintings.





Figure 361. Ibrahim.

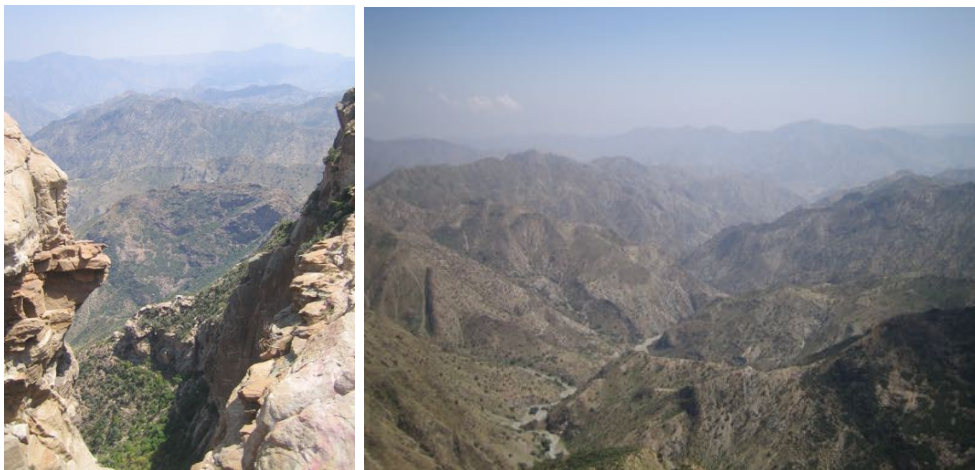


Figure 362. Hiking in the mountains of central Eritrea.



Figure 363. The rock paintings.





Figure 364. Kids, fruit by the road, and an injera (Eritrean/Ethiopian soft bread) lunch with my driver.



Figure 365. The Asmara train station.



Figure 366. Brhane Mehari.



The Italians built in 1911 a spectacular train track with a narrow gauge of 0.95 meters down the 2340 meters of difference in altitude to Massawa, a port on the Red Sea. The distance is just 70 kilometers as the crow flies. But this train does not fly. It passes 80 tunnels, bridges, and viaducts, and the short track comprises 667 bends—an engineering marvel called the *serpente d'acciaio* (steel serpent). The trains carried still in 1965 almost half a million passengers, then the civil war killed it. Tracks were blown up by both sides, and regular service stopped in 1974.

In the classical Asmara train station from 1911, some old-timers keep their dreams alive. I chat at length with Brhane Mehari, an 82-year old toothless mechanic who speaks excellent Italian and keeps the old steam locomotives in good shape, with four like-minded friends: *La mia vita è la ferrovia*. (My life is the train.) The government does not pay them anything. He started his work in 1943, two years after the British chased the Italians from Eritrea in the war. Brhane's pride is a four-cylinder Mallet steam engine, built by Ansaldo in Genova in 1938. Today she carries, quite rarely, tourist groups on expensive trips up and down.

It is heart-warming to an old railway buff like myself to see these old technicians hold on to their past and see this venerable machinery in action. I am even allowed to crank a turntable from which the heavy locomotives can move off to various rails.



Figure 367. Immaculate trains.



Figure 368. Cranking it up at the Asmara train station.

But I have to take a minibus down to the sea, stopping near the village of Ailet for freshly-prepared Eritrean coffee on the way, with a marvellous view of the Red Sea.



Figure 369. Roasting the coffee.

Making and serving coffee is a highly valued tradition in Eritrea, performed with religious dedication. The beans are roasted over charcoal to the degree that you desire,



then poured into a copper pot, and the coffee is served, with lots of sugar. A delicacy for every coffee aficionado. All this is achieved in total calm and quiet, no machines huffing and puffing, and teaches you about the value of time—no espresso hurry, but total relaxation.



Figure 370. A coffee ceremony in the hills of Eritrea.

On our way down the mountains, we cross the train tracks several times.



Figure 371. Train tracks in the mountains, and mountain dwellers.

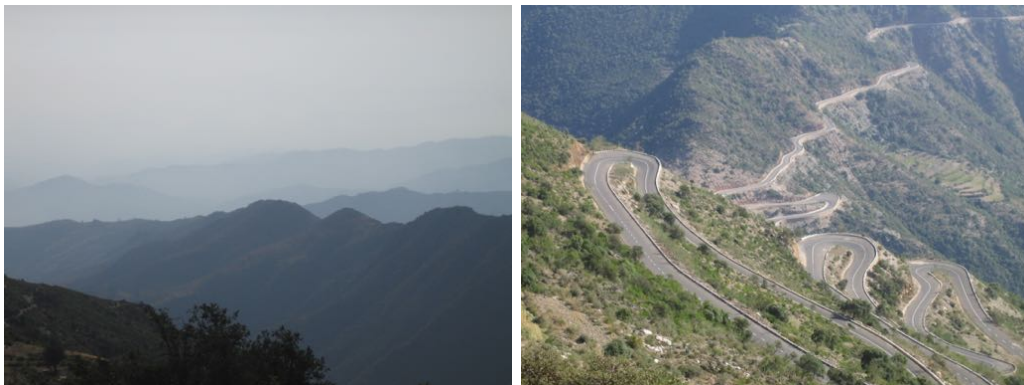


Figure 372. Descending the mountain.





Figure 373. Mine warning and a shot-up tank by the road.

In the port town of Massawa, memories of war abound: a memorial with a tank that had taken a fatal hit, and destroyed buildings.

Near the central bus station in Massawa, a wrecked Russian Antonov-12 cargo plane has been converted to a night club, but that also has been given up a long time ago. It entered service in the Soviet Air Force in 1967, crash-landed and has been sitting there at least since 1994.



Figure 374. Shot-up tanks and buildings in Massawa, the former Banco d'Italia in the center.



Figure 375. The Red Sea Hotel and a Beauty Salon with a chink in its armor.



Figure 376. Markets in Massawa.





Figure 377. Soviet bomber turned disco turned ruin.



Figure 378. Grain mill and back alley in Massawa.

I go on a snorkeling expedition to Green Island in the Red Sea, just off Massawa. This is not impressive, most of the corals are dead, the fish are few, and around noon, visibility is reduced to below one meter.



## Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda 1975

*In 1975, Dorothea and I spend three weeks in East Africa. This is the first time we see big animals in their natural habitat—a marvellous experience. It is also my first larger trip with a real camera, my Canon EF. Besides the only fatal road accident we ever caused—the chicken just ran into the road—we enjoy fancy accommodations in our tent in the Serengeti, on a table in a village invitingly named Tse Tse fly, and with a latrine being emptied while we try to sleep.*



Nairobi is quite an unpleasant place, with plenty of warnings from the locals about theft, robbery, and violence. Apparently, it has gotten even worse since then. The one place we go to is the National Museum. It is well made by people who love their job, know a lot about it, and are blessed with a sense of humor. Exhibits show the prehistoric anthropological finds from Olduvai Gorge and elsewhere. And it has humorous signs. At the crocodile hold: "Anyone throwing litter into this tank will be required to retrieve it.". A low tree: "Do not damage this tree with your head.", "The brown sand viper is so called because it is not brown and is almost never found in sand."

In our rented VW beetle with licence plate KQB 637, we drive to the Meru Game Reserve, north of Nairobi and near Mount Kenya. A sign marks the place where the equator crosses the dusty red road. After a long day of driving, we are both incredibly tanned, but the tan washes off in our first shower. In the shower, I forget my beloved Tissot watch, which even resisted a deliberate destruction attempt in Saudi Arabia, see

page 941. When I return five minutes later, it has evaporated. In a bar, we hear a catchy tune *sweetly sweetly*, which stays in our memories until today.

In the Meru Game Reserve, we have the first encounter in our lives with the big animals of Africa; many more are to follow. We see elephants, rhinocerus, antilopes, giraffes, ostriches, monkeys, zebras, warthogs. As we turn around a bend, we are facing a herd of a hundred buffaloes, whose hooves stir up clouds of dust. These are impressive animals and quite dangerous. I reverse slowly, our beetle would not survive a confrontation—nor would we. We camp in the Meru Park and take a marvellous midnight stroll in the full moon.



Figure 379. An impressive herd of buffalos.

From Mount Kenya, we go to the Thomson Falls on Ewaso Ng'iro river. The drive down from the mountain is precarious on a bad road in incessant rain, hilly, muddy, and full of potholes, and we have to cross a river. We barely make it to the other side, Dorothea is scared to death. It has rained a lot, and at one point the car slides slowly down the road towards its edge. I have a hard time steering it back onto the slippery road.

After this horror trip, the Nakuru Bird Sanctuary is an ornithologist's paradise. Flamingoes, pelicans, cormorants, storks, ducks. The whole shore of Lake Nakuru is pink. Large flocks of birds fly overhead, and we see hippopotamus, water bucks, otters, mice, and blue Duikers.





Figure 380. Driving down from Mount Kenya.



Figure 381. Flamingos, including a crazy human one.



Chacma baboons (*Papio ursinus*) play on the dirt road. They look like cute little monkeys to us, but when I stop for a few photos, zap! three of them are in our car and all over us. No decent manners! They steal all our bananas and almost tear off the windscreen wipers. One of them poses on the car's hood, clearly showing who he thinks is the master of this vehicle. Next time, no open windows and no bananas in the car!



Figure 382. Monkey attack..

Lake Naivasha is surrounded by dry savannah of bushes and trees. An augur buzzard (*Buteo augur*) holds a mouse in its fangs, is alarmed at our arrival, flies to a branch, and

drops the mouse. Sorry for disturbing your lunch! From here, we cross the border into Tanzania.



Figure 383. Sorry, Mr. Buzzard, for spoiling your lunch. And some guinea fowl (Yellow-necked spurrow, *Francolinus leucoscepus*).



Figure 384. Dorothea on our sleeping table.

Some Massai on the road wave in a friendly way, others throw rocks at our car. Past the towering massive of Mount Kilimanjaro and through Arusha, we get to the Momella Lodge, where we spend a whole evening with my camera mounted on a tripod and taking pictures of the hippos at the pool. But all they show is their eyes and ears, glistening just above the waterline.

At Mto wa Mbu (fly river, referring to the tsetse flies) we spend an uncomfortable night in a gym hall, on a soiled mattress high up on a table because of all the bugs on the floor, but rather expensive.

The Lake Manyara Game Reserve is famous for its lions on trees, but we see only the trees. Rather unimpressive. Similarly, the Ngorongoro crater, part of the East African rift, is well known for its wildlife. But we have weather like November in Switzerland: eerie fog, low clouds, cold, rain.



Figure 385. Ngorongoro crater in the Great Rift Valley.

The Serengeti is the most famous game park in East Africa (and maybe in the world) and fulfills the promises of its name. We are allowed to drive around the park ourselves, on well-marked trails. The abundance of large animals is overwhelming. Elephants, giraffes, cheetahs, zebras, gazelles, ugly wildebeests, warthogs, monkeys of all sorts.





Figure 386. Serengeti wildlife. Bottom row center:  
a hardly visible leopard with its Thompson gazelle.

We see a larger tourist bus standing by the side of the road. We stop at a respectful distance from it. Is there something interesting? Indeed, we see a pack of adult lions, lying in the shade at noon under trees and gazing lazily at us. They are on the passenger's side, and I ask Dorothea to take pictures. She is so nervous that even at a shutter speed of 1/1000 second, some images are blurred. The bus driver is mad at us for "taking away

his lions". Strange attitude. With our next sighting of lions, we are even luckier: just three cubs playing in the trees, they look so cute one might want to take them home. Their mother must be away on other business. We are inexperienced and foolish enough to get out of our car to take pictures; this could have ended unpleasantly. But then I realize that I just inserted a new film into the camera incorrectly. We drive back to our lions, find another pack, but not the cute cubs again.



Figure 387. Serengeti. At left a Defassa waterbuck (*Kobus defassa*), center impala.

Later we see the largest warthog ever, at least four times as large as a normal one. We take pictures and wait for a while. Eventually, the four warthogs that were lying together get up and walk away. We have a good laugh at our misconception. Leopards are notoriously hard to observe, but I am lucky to see one high up in a tree. It is lying on broad branches, lunch ready besides it: a Thomson gazelle that it has dragged up there to protect its prey from other customers. Quite a rare sight, and it is almost hidden from us by its prey. It is not bothered by us and continues sleeping peacefully, its tail dangling down.



Figure 388. A monkey crawling out of our tent, and the Seronera lodge, built against a huge rock and with active impalas in the foreground.

The luxurious Seronera Lodge is too expensive for us. So we stay on the nearby campsite in our tent and go into the lodge for dinners only. Very nice dinners, laid out for



about 150 people, but with only two other couples in the huge dining hall, with a lofty ceiling five meters above the floor. The dining room's back wall is formed by a huge rock, about 50 meters high. It is an impressive sight.

The campground is even more impressive. We are the only people staying there overnight, our tent out in the open. Throughout the night, all the sounds of the savannah are around us, silent steps, animals scratching at the tent canvas, grunting and other noises. I sleep blissfully, but Dorothea hardly closes an eye. The next morning we see that the animals—we never knew what they were, because I am too afraid to stick my head out of the tent door—created overnight a well-marked trail around our tent.

Leaving the Serengeti from its south-western end, we drive around the huge Lake Victoria towards Mwanza and Rwanda. We need gas for our car, but there is none. We cross the lake from Gheita, on a free ferry, and finally get some gas, served by hand and mouth from a tube. At the Tanzanian border to Rwanda, we have some trouble because we do not hold a *Carnet de Passage*. Eventually, they let us pass with a Temporary Permit. But the reception on the Rwandan side is extremely friendly. We chat and joke with the officials, and are even offered a deliciously cold local *Primus* beer, a light but tasty lager that we become to like a lot. Rwanda is a beautiful country of green rolling hills, densely populated and with rich crops growing everywhere. It has taken the name of *mille collines* (a thousand hills) as its proud national designation. When Dorothea has to go to the toilet by the roadside, first one, then two, then a dozen heads pop up behind the bushes, where we thought nobody was. A white bum must be a novelty for them.



Figure 389. Flamingos and a quick view of Lake Kivu.

We spend a few days in Kigali, the capital, then drive to Lake Kivu. After four hours of driving, we spend just ten minutes high above the lake. Dorothea invents a little song to keep us in a good mood on the long drive: “Lake Kivu, Lake Kivu, oh wie schön bist du. Wir sahen dich nur kurz, und ließen beide einen Furz.” (Not translatable and not the highest level of poetry, but we had, and still have, a lot of fun with it.) At the Rusmo Falls, many Chinese are building a road.





Figure 390. Driving in Tanzania, and a Massai.

On our way back through Tanzania, Dorothea is driving at one point, rather exceptionally. On the dusty road through a village, she hits and injures someone running unexpectedly into the street. We have been told about the lynch justice that can take place after such accidents and I urge her to drive on at high speed. Which she does, and we escape. Fortunately for our conscience, the “someone” is a chicken.



Figure 391. Baboon and Massai village.

We drive through the mountains, beautiful views, hot and dry, real Africa. In our hotel in Mikuma, we wake up in the middle of the night from annoying noises and smells. Something is splashing into a well, then silence, then splash again. Dozens of times. The stench is suffocating, and we hide our noses in our sleeping bags. It takes a while until we

realize the source of this disturbance: they are emptying the latrine of our hotel. Good night!

Daressalam, the capital of Tanzania, holds much less of interest to us than the wildlife in the country. But at least we enjoy the first hot shower since Kigali, at least thirty minutes for each of us.

We drive via Bagamoyo to Tanga, through a tropical landscape with scattered huts and Ujama villages. In Tanga, I meet a Tanzanian, 70 or 80 years of age. He has served in the army of the former German colony of Eastern Africa, until the beginning of the First World War, and still speaks a few words of military German: *stillgestanden! zu Befehl* (attention! at your orders). He sells me a few copper coins from the German occupation.



Figure 392. Dorothea on the beach.

Our last stop is Mombasa in Kenya. Dorothea stays on for a few days in a beach hotel, while I fly for some days to Israel.

## Burundi, Tanzania, Rwanda, Zaïre, Uganda 1991

*In June 1991, I visit two small East African countries, Burundi and Rwanda, torn by internal strife and civil war. In Ujiji, Tanzania, I see one of the most famous places in travel history: I stand under the mango tree where Henry Morton Stanley met David Livingstone in 1871. A tranquil boat ride on Lake Kivu takes me past the guns of civil war in Rwanda, roaring in the distance. Later I sit beside a huge peaceful gorilla silverback in the Virunga mountains of Zaïre.*



I fly to Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, a poor city in a poor country. My airline is SABENA, a well-known acronym of *such a bad experience, never again*; see page 352



for an illustration. In my pleasant hotel, the concierge Jean-Baptiste is very helpful. He even lends me money for dinner on my first day here.

Burundi was part of Germany's colony of East Africa until after the First World War, when it was handed over to Belgium. It became independent as a monarchy in 1962 and became a member of the UN on 18 September, but has been tormented by bloody civil wars since then, mainly between the two major tribes, the majority Hutu (85 % of the population) and the minority Tutsi (15 %). These continue until today. Indeed, a few days before my visit, rumours had it that there was an attempt to shoot down the president's airplane as it approached the airport. Tension is high in the city, curfew and a lot of military and police in the streets. Not a pleasant situation for a tourist.



Figure 393. Street name in Bujumbura celebrating Dorothea's birthday.

This may have been fake news, but in fact, an airplane carrying Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana and Burundian president Cyprien Ntaryamira was shot down as it prepared to land in Kigali on the evening of 6 April 1994, three years after my visit. This assassination was the catalyst for the Rwandan genocide.

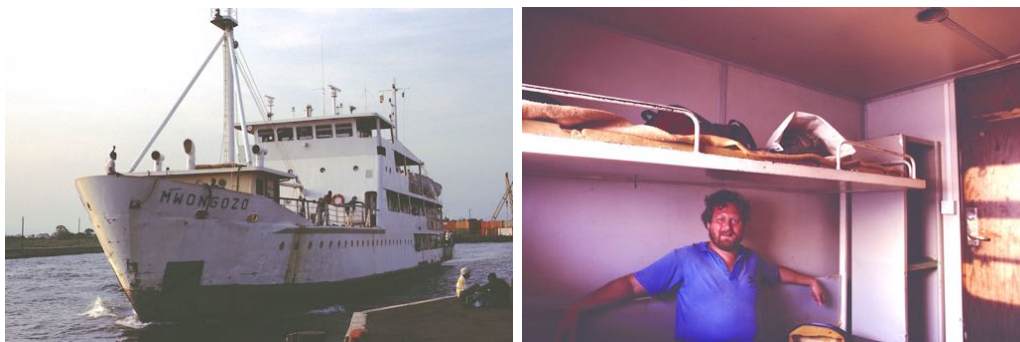


Figure 394. The MV *Mwongozo*.

I travel with the MV *Mwongozo* on Lake Tanganyika south to Kigoma in Tanzania. This lake is the second largest (by volume) in the world, after Lake Baikal. The old MV *Liamba* served on this lake as *Graf Goetzen* for Germany until the First World War and

still sails south from Kigoma. The 1951 movie *The African Queen* is roughly based on its story. Unfortunately, its route does not coincide with mine.

We sail in the late afternoon. Wonderful sunset over the lake. We pass many small villages, all apparently without road connection to the interior. No cars in sight. Just after leaving, the slopes to the lake bank are very steep, some fields look like vertical. Afterwards, the bank smoothes out. On our left hand side, the flat lands of Tanzania, on our right hand side the hills of Zaïre, in which pygmies and the rare lowland gorillas live. Dinner is not great, and I sleep like a stone.

In fact, I do not even realize when we arrive off Kigoma at 02.30, although I have put my watch in sight. At 08.00, we land at the quay and I go ashore. I realize that I have forgotten my watch and rush back—too late. On all my travels, I was much better at losing things rather than having them stolen.



Figure 395. Ujiji: the guardian, plaque, and the rather funny figures of Livingstone and Stanley.

I take a taxi to Ujiji, 10 kilometers from Kigoma, the location of one of the most famous episodes in traveling, and my reason for coming here. Dr. David Livingstone was exploring Eastern Africa with modest means from 1852 on. One of his goals, which also attracted other European explorers at the time, was to find the source of the Nile river. When nothing had been heard of him for six years and he had in fact been reported as

having died, his friends and relatives back home in London began to worry. No letter, and, of course, no email. The *New York Herald* newspaper sent the journalist Henry Morton Stanley on an expedition to search for Livingstone. On 10 November 1871, he arrived at the latter's hut in Ujiji, and under a mango tree uttered those famous words: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?". Ridiculous formalism in those days, when there was no white man for hundreds of kilometers around them. The sentence may be Stanley's fabrication—*se non é vero, é ben trovato*. Livingstone later wrote: *Bales of goods, baths of tin, huge kettles, cooking pots, tents, etc., made me think, This must be a luxurious traveler, and not one at his wits' end like me*. I sit in front of Livingstone's hut under a mango tree which is allegedly a descendant of the tree under which the two explorers met. A great moment for any traveler to be in such a place of historical significance. A pleasant garden surrounds this idyll, and a small museum boasts two paper-maché figures of them. All this is very simple, very nice. The bronze plaque on the Livingston-Stanley memorial, erected by locals and the Royal Geographic Society, is withered.

Some years later, Stanley undertook a rough expedition through the jungles of Zaïre all the way to the Atlantic coast, getting help from the notorious slave trader Tippu Tip. His book *Through Darkest Africa* about this journey makes you shiver. In contrast to the gentle Dr. Livingstone (or Heinrich Barth, see page 101), who cared for the local people as a medical doctor, Stanley treated the 230 people on his expedition harshly, not worrying much about losing the one or other team member from time to time; only half of them survived. Callous Western arrogance.



Figure 396. Ujiji to Kigoma on foot and by pirogue.

Back in Kigoma, I chat with some Aussies and Kiwis in the evening. The ferry does not run until several days later, and the eight of us decide to walk to a small village, about 6 kilometers away on a track that is hard to find. There, we get a pirogue to take us north, leaving at 10.30 and arriving at 16.00 in Kagongo, still in Tanzania. We paid the boat's owner to be dropped in Banda, Burundi, but the boatsman refuses to do that. His engine stopped about ten times en route, requiring each time a careful cleaning of the carburetor. And then he even complains about the amount we arranged, asking for more money. No luck for him.





Figure 397. Children splashing in the water near Kigoma.

The Tanzanian customs official is of a similar ilk. He asks for my currency declaration and to show him my money. I have too little on me, and his face lights up at the prospect of some blackmail. But then I find some more in a wallet, just enough to suit the declaration—someone is deeply disappointed.

Overall, I observe quite a bit of aggressiveness among the people. Not so much against myself, but against each other. Rather annoying to watch.

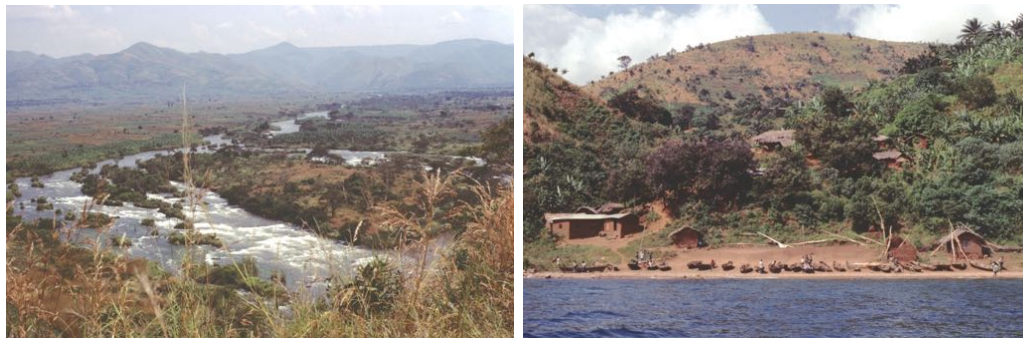


Figure 398. The Rusizi river and a fishing village on Lake Tanganyika.

I walk to the Burundian border town of Banda. After wading through the border creek, I forget to put on my socks, the second thing I lose on this short trip. It is quite late in the day and I have no real hope of getting to Bujumbura today. But then a minibus is still waiting, maybe for me, on I hop and off we go. Straight to my hotel.

I get up early to catch a bus. The view of the large *gare routière* (bus station) in Bujumbura is impressive: not a single vehicle in sight. Just empty. No hustle or bustle. I soon learn the reason: the government has increased the annual taxi driver licence fee

and the *transporteurs* are on strike. Demonstrators build up barricades of cars, deflate tires, and are happy like children when something breaks. There is quite some violence in the air. Military controls with pointed bayonets. I almost get caught in a trap, when two fronts of demonstrators and military march against each other, but can just escape into a side street.

At night, I stroll around a bit through the unlit streets in search of a restaurant. I stumble into a water hole, sinking to my knees. All is wet and filthy.

Up early again, but today the buses run. I catch one to Rugombo, another one to Ruhwa, where I cross the border with Rwanda on foot. It is always a good feeling to walk across borders. No buses run on the Rwandan side, and I walk the 8 kilometers to Bugarama. The sun beats down, and I hire someone to carry my backpack. This way, the hike is pure pleasure: beautiful views of the Rusizi river and its rapids, part of the Great Rift Valley.

In my bus from Bugarama, they offer me the luxury seat on the toolbox right next to the driver Emmanuel Mihigo. We spend the time chatting amiably about the differences in life here and in Canada. He drops me at a pleasant hotel in Cyangugu at the southern end of Lake Kivu. The atmosphere in this part of Rwanda is relaxed, very soothing after the havoc in Bujumbura. A wonderful little outdoor restaurant on a hill high above the lake offers stunning views, fresh tilapia with tartar sauce, and cold *Primus* beer, the local Rwandan beer, quite tasty. The chief of police and some of his friends provide interesting company and conversations about Burundi and the rest of the world. Thoroughly enjoyable, we laugh a lot.



Figure 399. Emmanuel Mihigo and friends.

Starting in 1994, Rwanda is devastated by a civil war, in which the majority population of Hutus kills about 70% of the minority Tutsi population, who dominated the country's politics and economy previously. Almost one million people are brutally killed, and the

country is still working on its transition to a normal situation, perhaps even peaceful coexistence between these two tribes.

The bad news now is that civil war has broken out in Rwanda, a precursor of the bigger one later. All land traffic is cut off, no ferries run on Lake Kivu. I ask around, but nobody knows how to travel there. Until my friend, the chief of police, mentions a company that exports coffee to Gisenyi in Rwanda, at the opposite end of Lake Kivu and close to the border with Zaïre. I go to the small port. The company owner, Abdulatif Ahmed, commands a crowd of packers and sorters who pack the beans into large bags. Very stern, very paternalistic. Quite a difference between the porter in rags carrying 50 kilogram bags on his head, and Abdulatif with his cell phone, into which he barks his commands. I have to take pictures of his boys and girls. The good news is that in two days, a convoy of his coffee-laden barges will depart for Gisenyi. Maybe I can come along ... Some more evenings of fish and *Primus*, and eventually my magic boat ride on Lake Kivu begins.



Figure 400. Abdulatif and his boys and girls.

On the day before leaving, I walk across the border to Bukavu in Zaïre. At noon, this is a dead city, nothing moves, no soul around. I see a yellow truck by the *Overland* company, who do long-range tours in Africa and elsewhere. I had seen them before in Kigoma and in Bujumbura and am happy they exist, because otherwise there would be



more individual travelers like myself. I would be unhappy on such an organized tour: the time it takes to offload and reload the group and the impossibility to stay in places that I like would bother me. Also, when I travel alone and something goes wrong, then I have just myself (or the circumstances) to blame, while on a tour, I would be unhappy about the organizers.



Figure 401. Magic boat ride on Lake Kivu: the whole crew assembled on land to say goodbye, and my travel companions, the motorized boat steaming far ahead.

As agreed with Abdulatif, I arrive on time for the 11.00 departure at his company. Well, this is Africa, and we finally leave at 18.00, after a theatrical good-bye from Abdulatif. This is one of the most wonderful boat trips I ever took. The convoy consists of a

motorized boat in front which pulls two barges, tied by 100-meter long steel hawsers. I travel on the last barge, sitting on bags of coffee and cement. Rather less than comfortable. With my three local companions, the *Primus* and cigars I brought are enough to make for a happy trip. Conversation is difficult, because I do not speak Kirya-Rwanda, and they no French. But it is a totally friendly atmosphere. The sky is lightly overcast, and slowly the lights of Bukavu vanish behind the last bend. There is no light on board and we are not bothered by any engine noise from the motorized ship 200 metres ahead of us, only the light washing of the waves. Total tranquility under a starry sky.

But on land, the Rwandan civil war is raging. We hear the boom boom of heavy artillery and the tak tak tak staccato of machine guns. Out here on the lake, with no lights on, we are invisible to the bad guys on the shore. It is almost hilarious to be so close to disaster, but yet so far away. I have worked at University of Toronto since 1981, starting as a PostDoc. And now I have a private reason for celebration: I have been appointed Full Professor as of today! In a normal professorial career outside of administration, this is the highest level one achieves. On a lake in the center of Africa and encircled by a civil war! But I cannot even come close to explaining this to my travel companions. At 07.30, we stop at a small village in Rwanda with a market offering bananas and peanuts. Access is via a shaky plank, full of mud and delicate to balance on. I spend most of the day on the boat, and at 18.00, we arrive at the coffee port of Gisenyi, 5 kilometers from town. Large refugee camps of displaced Rwandans circle this port city.

As I start on a long walk to Zaïre, a VW bus with some Belgians working here picks me up and kindly drives me to the border. There, the official cannot read my passport and I have to write everything down on a piece of paper in capital letters. Oh, what a pleasure! Hand-written entries in a ledger that no-one will ever read. So much more comforting than today's digital border data that allow governments to trace your steps. From the border, it is just a 30-minute walk into Goma, the largest city in this part of Zaïre.

It is another large African town, run down, with a million inhabitants. It has suffered terribly in the last decades: the kleptocratic government of President Mobutu, then an overwhelming influx of refugees from the Rwandan civil war, followed by two civil wars in this province, mainly fired by Rwandan parties, and the 2002 eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano 15 kilometers to the north, which covered about half of the city below two meters of ashes and lava.

The sights of Goma are quickly explored, since none exist. I get my (expensive) permit to visit the gorillas in the Virunga mountains, and then take a bus to Rutshuru, three hours for 70 kilometers. The head of the catholic mission is a Polish priest, somewhere between unpleasant and impertinent. He lies to me, but in the end I get a simple but adequate room. After asking around a bit, I find Donatius (Dona), a pleasant young man, to carry my stuff on the long hike tomorrow.

Later I meet eight Americans from an *Overland* tour. Three of their trucks with about 60 passengers are stuck in a huge mudhole in Zaïre, since a week and a half. Finding a

way to get out of there could be fun for an independent traveler, but that is not their mindset. They have paid Overland inclusive and now own the whole of Africa. They do not want to pay extra for anything. In particular, not in advance for their rooms in the mission, and they get thrown out at 23.00. Serves these greedy neo-capitalist “travelers” right. They do not understand that the mission has nothing to do with *Overland*, and they do not speak French (or Polish, for that matter).

The next morning, Dona is at my door at 06.00, as arranged. After a modest breakfast of some bananas, we take off. It is a strenuous hike of 35 kilometers taking seven hours non-stop, always uphill. I probably would not have managed this while carrying my full backpack. But my friend Dona marches on happily with his load while we chat.



Figure 402. Hiking towards the gorillas: poor but happy children with a self-made scooter, not from ToysRUs, that can serve as a truck for my backpack.

During the whole day, not a single car comes by. But the area is densely populated for the first 26 kilometers to Jomba. I have to play the flight attendant: always smiling, greeting everybody in a friendly way: *jambo - jambo sana - habari? - muzuri*. I am not happy when people call me *jambo muzungu* (hello white man); it sounds to me like an equivalent of the despicable *hey nigger*. On the other hand, it is nice to see that the Western scourge of political correctness has not attained these lands. Some people smile back and are friendly, others are not. I have the impression that some make fun of me:



why does this sweating muzungu torture himself this way just to see a few monkeys? It rains for two hours, then stops, and the last steep hike upwards is in a tropical downpour. When we arrive at the hut, I am thoroughly soaked. But a wash and some canned peaches restore my spirits quickly. Later, the hut ranger Didi brings a plate of beans and potatoes, and I go to bed dead-tired and happy.



Figure 403. Evening in the Virunga mountains,  
with late arrival at the rangers' hut.

The next day is another highlight on this trip, pure magic. An absolutely marvellous experience of nature, getting close to large animals in their natural habitat. All this in a carefully organized way, designed to impose as little intrusion on them as possible.

The *Parc National des Virunga* was created in 1925, flourished and attracted tourists for decades, but poaching, snaring, and then the civil wars in Rwanda and Zaïre wreaked

havoc on it. Dian Fossey lived with a group of gorillas and her book *Gorillas in the Mist* was made into a movie. She lived on the Rwandan side and was called *Nyiramachabelli* by the locals—the woman that lives alone in the forest. Sadly, she was murdered with a machete in December 1985, presumably by poachers. During the civil war, whose precursor I witnessed from the distance on Lake Kivu, marauding fighters slaughtered gorillas by machine gun as *bushmeat*, and about 140 park rangers were killed. The gorillas are now on the rebound, numbering around 900. Besides these wonderful animals, the park hosts a greater variety of species than any protected area in Africa. In 2013, a large-scale oil concession, covering about 80 % of the park's area, posed a new threat. This has been diverted temporarily, but the long-term future is not clear.

Of the 900 gorillas in the Virunga mountains, three families are located in this part. For each of them, the number of visitors per day is limited. Their habitat is overshadowed by the dormant volcanoes Muside and Sabinyo. We take off in a group of nine people, plus a guide and a ranger with a gun. We stroll through dense (and wet) undergrowth, with no trace of any gorilla, but eventually our guide points out broken twigs and gorilla droppings. And then we are there, meeting the Rugabo family of gorillas, 25 animals with their dominant silverback Marcel, weighing about 200 kilograms.



Figure 404. Marcel, the silverback, reigns unchallenged.

The young and adolescent gorillas jump around noisily in the trees, breaking off branches, almost falling down, being carefully watched by their mothers. Babies, about

three months old, come and play with a boy in our company. The adults walk more sedately on large branches and collect food. The females groom each other and the kids, removing parasites. Everybody munches on twigs all day long. I sit for an hour next to the big guy. My presence and our distance of about one meter do not seem to bother him. I am tempted to stroke him, but refrain from it. He just sits there and shoves one branch of leaves after the other into his mouth, gentle and shy. He belches contentedly, a sign of being at ease. The atmosphere is totally peaceful. It is a wonderful feeling to be so close to these big animals. Complete harmony, especially after seeing refugees and hearing the sounds of war just a few days ago.



Figure 405. Marcel munching right next to me. Bottom row: family.





Figure 406. Marcel's family.

Today, tourists can again visit (at the price of US\$ 1500 per day from Rwanda), but the rules demand a distance of at least seven meters. No more cuddling up with silverbacks.

Back at the hut at noon, I decide to go on to another adventure, crossing the Zaïre-Uganda border on foot. Again I hire someone to carry my backpack. He takes a bewildering number of shortcuts and turns, but the hike only takes about two hours. I am looking forward to the rare occasion of crossing a border on foot. I have been warned about the corruption at the Zaïre border post: clothes and luggage searched, currency declaration demanded, local currency taken away, small items like pocket knives stolen. I am prepared and start by explaining to these official bandits that I expect to leave the country without problems, how back home we treat Zaïrois tourists so well, and more bullshit. It works. I am through in a jiffy, nothing taken away. Once on the Ugandan side, I take a matatu to Kisoro. I fall asleep without any problem, dead tired after a long and satisfying day.



Figure 407. Marcel's family.



Figure 408. Hiking from the gorillas in Zaïre into Uganda.

The *shopping center* in Kisoro is a sad sight. The shops, previously run by (Asian) Indians, have all been expropriated under Idi Amin's dictatorship and now are bare ruins. Once all the goods are gone from the shelves, the locals do not seem to have the wherewithal to run this kind of business, maybe any kind of business.



Figure 409. Crossing the equator.

Various buses take me via Kabale and Mbarara to Kasese. We travel past steep terraced fields, volcanoes, lakes, and across the equator. In my hotel, some friendly neighbor starts entertaining everybody with loud blaring music at 05.00. This is Africa. With four other travelers, I take a taxi to a lodge in the Ruwenzori National Park. We cross the equator again, but this time towards the south. Past the Kabatoro gate, we come to the pleasant lodge where I decide to stay for a few nights, getting some rest after the exertions of the last days.



Figure 410. Ugandan roads can be difficult, but the Kazinga channel is beautiful.

A first excursion by boat takes me to the Kazinga channel which connects Lake Edward (formerly Lake Idi Amin, in the southwest) and Lake George (in the northeast). Hundreds of hippos, buffaloes and many waterbirds, including yellow-billed storks. Quite a sight.

The next day I rest, finally. I work a bit, on factoring modular polynomials, but do not get far. Not even the simplest case, with nonzero discriminant, is clear. It will take some years until I get the final result. I agree with Edward, who works for the UNDP, to go on a car excursion tomorrow.

As arranged, we start out at 07.00. Well, this is Africa. So first the tires have to be changed and pumped up, all this takes its time on the African scale. We drive to



Katunguru and Ishasha to see many buffaloes, impala, Uganda kob, topi, gazelles, and turtles. The advertised lions do not know about the advertisements and are all hiding somewhere out of sight.

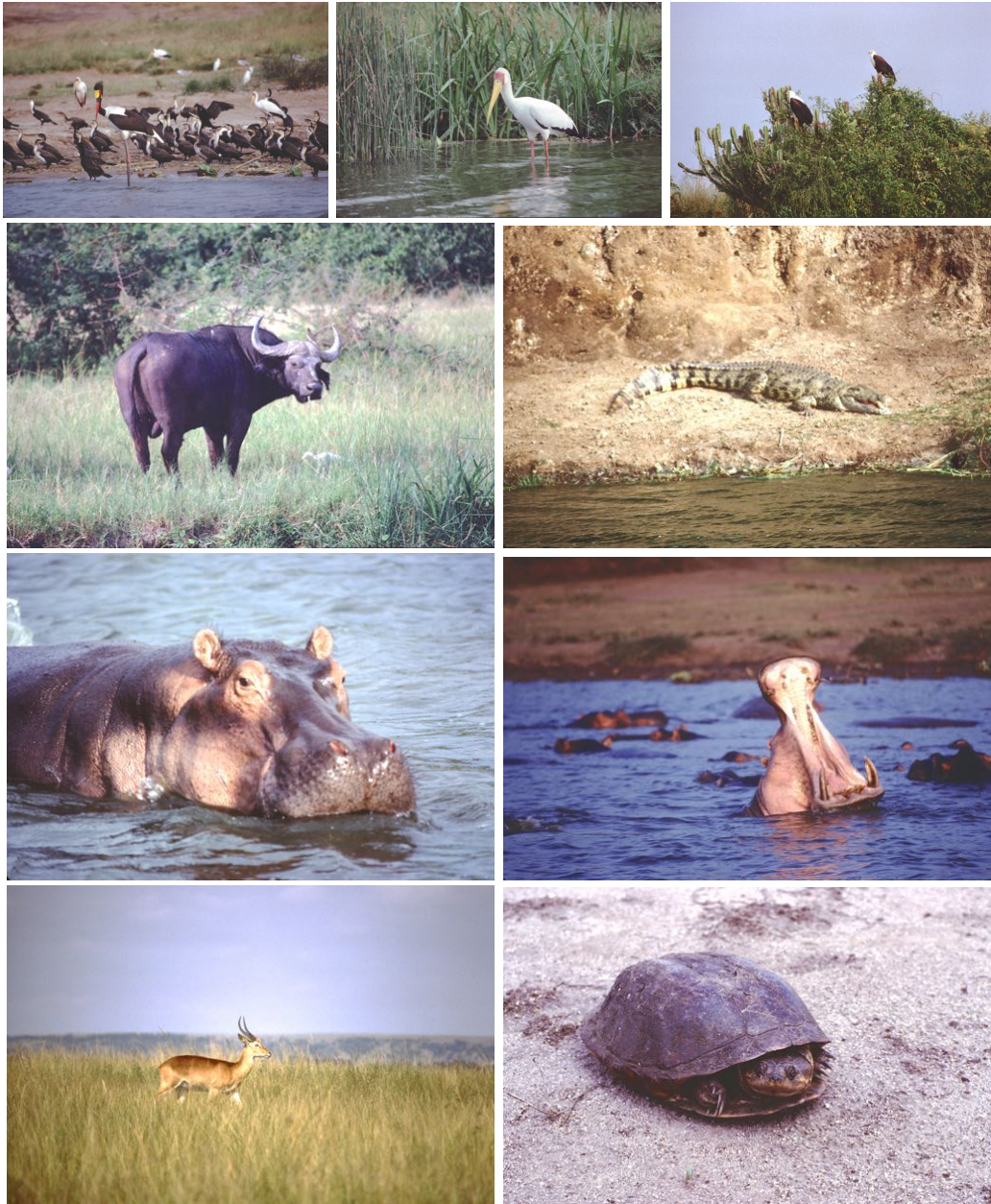


Figure 411. In the Ruwenzori National Park. Turtle: who's knocking?

In the afternoon, I take another boat trip: many hippos, a crocodile, buffaloes, yellow-billed stork, shoebill stork, marabout, egret, tern, heron, Egyptian duck, pelican, African fish eagle, and even a fisherman. A peaceful trip in a marvellous scenery.

With Edward, I drive to Kasese, then a bus to Kampala, Uganda's capital. This is another African bus driver training for the Formula-1 bus race. At 100 km/h through villages full of people, children, animals, bicycles. Breathtaking. Via Mbarara and Masaka we arrive in Kampala, only six hours for 400 kilometers. This must be my speed record in Africa, paid dearly for with adrenaline flooding.

*Kabaka's Palace* near Kampala is an impressive house made of wooden posts and bark cloth, with a reed roof. Its grounds include the (locally) famous *Kasubi tombs*. Some kings of Buganda were buried here: Muteesa I, Mwanga, Sir Daudi Chwa, Muteesa II († 1969). The site burnt down in a fire in 2010.

Two days later, I am up at 04.10, after three hours of sleep, then go to the Entebbe airport. A customs official tries to confiscate my Ugandan shillings. I refuse adamantly, and after some discussion he caves in. Chaos and anarchy at boarding: *free seating*, the nightmare of travelers.

45 minutes flight to Nairobi. We are ready to resume our flight at 10.35, but the runways were closed at 10.30 for repairs. Our Sabena captain obviously did not take the Kenyans seriously. He has 40 000 liters of kerosene taken out of his tanks, and we wait for three hours in the plane. We can only use half of the runway and his DC-10 lifts off just before the construction workers. This take-off is rather dicey, but Sabena and its pilots are known for taking risks. It works. We have to land at Athens, because we do not carry enough fuel. We land at Brussels at 21.30 instead of 17.30. No more connection flights, all passengers are stranded except for the few who stay here. Yet another awful airport hotel, a Sheraton.

## Southern Africa



Rough sketch of my travels in the southern parts of Africa.



## South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi 1987

*This trip starts with the big animals of the Krüger National Park in South Africa and in Botswana's Okavango delta, an ecological paradise. One night, a lion roars just a few meters away from my flimsy tent. A descendant of a Zulu king tells me proud stories of his great-great-grandfather and other warriors. After days near the roar of the Victoria Falls, an adventurous bus ride through Zambia takes me to Malawi for a strenuous hike in the Mulanje Mountains, followed by a tranquil boat ride on Lake Malawi.*



I land around noon in Johannesburg, and pick up my Avis rental Volkswagen Jetta II. The regular price is 40 Rand per day with unlimited mileage, they give me a rate of 27 Rand, and on return, do not find the rate sheet and I pay 21 Rand (US\$ 10) per day. Good car, excellent deal. I drive to Nelspruit. This is a long weekend in South Africa, almost all hotels are full, and I end up in the upscale *Paragon Hotel*. Dinner is a fine filet steak with garlic sauce, a delight after the drab food during my one-week stay in East Germany just before. I learn the hard way about the tradition of *early morning tea*. At 05.30, a servant knocks on the door of my room and brings me a highly unwelcome tray of hot tea. I like hot tea for breakfast, but this is not my usual time for it.

I start out early in the hope of getting to Maputo, but at the Moçambique border they do not let me into the country. No visa, no entry. Getting a visa takes about four days. I had applied at their embassy in New York and sent the fee of 9 US\$, but my passport came back without a visa. So I spend the afternoon in Lebombo, sitting on the dock of the bay. Relaxed.



Figure 412. A giraffe in happy symbiosis with red-billed oxpeckers, and one with two heads?



Figure 413. Strong giraffe bull and a Southern ground hornbill (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*).



Figure 414. Elephant and an Eastern black-and-white colobus (*Colobus polykomos*) monkeying around.

The next day, I get up at 05.45 and am at 06.30 at the gate to the Kruger National Park. I drive around all day, about 300 kilometers. Rhino for starters, then lots of elephants, giraffes covered with red-billed oxpeckers (*Buphagus erythrorhynchus*) that eat their insects, zebras (much thinner than in the Serengeti), baboons, gazelles, wildebeest,



duikers, and one kudu. The park is full of white families driving around in shiny new cars, many VW buses. The park is much better organized than in East Africa, in Kenya and Tanzania, and thus less interesting.



Figure 415. Impalas and a zebra crossing.



Figure 416. The Swaziland highlands.



Figure 417. Mbabane: Captain Zulu, and a hybrid Toyota.

I take an interesting drive through the hills of Swaziland, to its capital Mbabane. Then further south, to the Mantenga Falls. They are about 15 meters high, glittering in the backlight.



Figure 418. Mantenga falls.

By the end of the day, I have crossed more mountains and land in Hlangano. I share a few drinks with new friends, prison wards. They tell me about ritual killings, where parts of the corpse are cut off and used for feats of sorcery. Unfortunately, no killing is planned for tonight, in particular, since it now carries the death penalty (also for the murderer).

After a murderless night, I get up early and drive to Durban along the coast, without ever seeing the ocean. Then into the hills of Transkei, and I stop in Harding. The stylish *Southern Cross Hotel* is over 100 years old.

Transkei used to be a so-called Bantustan (homeland) and is now part of the South African province of Western Cape. I drive to its capital Umtata (now Mthatha). It is one of the places I love just for their names. This one always reminds me of the umtata music at carnival in Cologne. Then I drive through wide valleys, mountains in the background, low vegetation, often only grass and bushes. Some areas are densely populated, one homestead after the other. And then I come through regions without seeing a soul. I end up in Matefeng in Lesotho.



Figure 419. The OMO woman.

I make a morning excursion to the bushman rock paintings at Ha Khotso (or Ha Baroana). They are difficult to find and I hire a boy to guide me, another one volunteers for the completely unnecessary task of guarding my vehicle. The river has washed out an overhang in a bend. Bushmen have drawn figures onto the walls, mainly animals grazing or being hunted, also humans, hunters and dancers. The unprotected figures are not in good shape, because too many visitors have touched them. Then I go to the village of Thaba Bosiu, dominated by a rock on which Moshoeshoe's village was located. A great-great-grandson of Moshoeshoe I (1786-1870) takes me on a three-hour private tour, a great experience, "Africa live". He talks without interruption, telling me the heroic stories of Moshoeshoe, his victories over the Boers and the British, Mzilikazi, their warriors, hunters, and princes, and about Louw Wepener and the other narrow-minded Boers. At the trailhead, we put a rock on a cairn in memory of Moshoeshoe I. He shows me the footprint of the lovesick prince who was not allowed to marry his half-sister and threw himself from the rock.



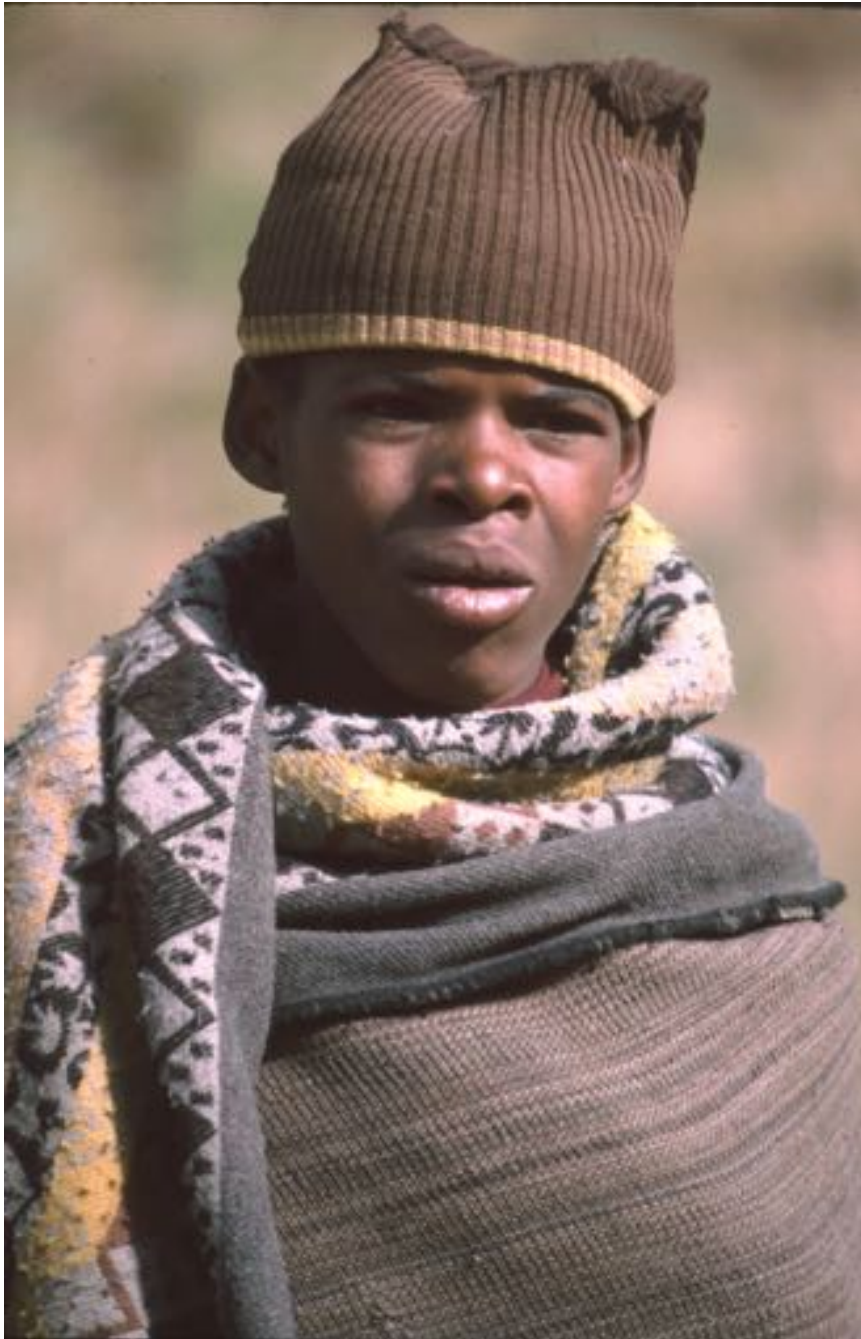


Figure 420. Young Swazi man.



Figure 421. Proud Swazis.



Figure 422. Rock paintings at Ha Khotso.

Then he takes me to the grave of the Great Moshoeshoe, a large disorganized mound of rocks and pebbles. Pilgrims sometimes throw money into it, and then children dig through the mound. He poses proudly in front of the graves of his father (died 1936) and mother (died 1980). We sit under the tree where Moshoeshoe held his court of law: absolute monarchy, no court of appeal. My guide speaks good English, but it is more fun

to listen to him in Basuto, a language full of clicking sounds, glottal stops, and sibilants. Amusing to hear, difficult to reproduce within my limited phonemic abilities. His tales produce vivid images of sitting around a campfire, the elders telling tribal stories to the young ones. I enjoy this live experience of African traditions immensely, and he senses my fascination and is pleased. After this wonderful afternoon, I drive quickly to Maseru and then to Kroonstad.



Figure 423. Proud great-great-grandson of the Great Moshoshoe I at his great-great-grandfather's grave.



Figure 424. Piling rocks onto a memorial cairn, and a view of the land.





Figure 425. Another view from Moshoeshoe's grave,  
and children playing.



Figure 426. Fisherman in Lesotho.

The next day takes me to Pretoria, where I buy a train ticket Pretoria - Johannesburg - Mafikeng - Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. Very cheap at 20 US\$—it is not going to work, but will make an interesting experience. After returning my car (and being charged much less than agreed—show me the car rental agency where this happens!), they drive me to the university, where I meet Eugen Sträuli, who used to be at Universität Zürich, where I got my PhD, and invited me here. We go for dinner with his colleague Rosinger, killing a bottle of white wine at their department's expense. I give a talk about *Computers and algebra*: Maple, factoring polynomials, Hilbert's irreducibility theorem. The audience is fascinated, and we have interesting discussions afterwards. Eugen drives me around town, into the government quarter and upscale residential areas, and he invites me for a drink to his apartment. Finally, he takes me to the train station. Eugen is frustrated in Pretoria: very conservative, only 50 of their 19,000 students are non-white, in the train station one waiting room is labeled *whites*. He would like to leave South Africa; apartheid is a terrible

thing. We leave on time at 18.00. I travel third class, only blacks in my compartment, no lighting. All is very peaceful. In Johannesburg I change into a different train, a compartment with three beds all to myself. We traverse the *homeland* of Bophutatswana and its capital Mmabatho. This and other homelands have been created by the apartheid regime of South Africa. They resettled blacks in these bleak areas, depriving them of residence titles in the Republic of South Africa and of their civic rights. We also come past Sun City, the infamous version of Las Vegas in South Africa.



Figure 427. Pretoria train station: Apartheid!

We arrive on time at 05.30 in Mafikeng. Little surprise: the train from here to Gaborone does not operate. The border between Bophutatswana and Botswana is closed for locals, and the trains do not carry enough passengers to be viable. The schedule is not valid anymore. They sold me in Pretoria a ticket for a nonexistent train! And there is no platform  $9\frac{3}{4}$  for a magic continuation of my voyage.



Figure 428. Marvellous steam locos at Mafikeng.



Figure 429. Huff puff chuggalong.

What to do? I ask around at the train and bus station, but nobody can help. So I resort to an unusual way of traveling: hitchhiking a train. I see a middle-aged white



guy being busy on a platform, and ask him about possibilities of continuing my trip. Big surprise: he offers me a ride, which turns out to be on a freight train. He emigrated from Germany to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and lived there until four years ago, rails about the communists (meaning Mugabe's freedom fighters), was a station master at the border station of Ramatlabama, and now drives trains. He tells me some horror stories, like the car crossing the track last week right in front of his train and getting tossed into the air—four dead. And about the child playing on the tracks, the mother running to pull it away, the father running to help the mother—three dead. And about his huge salary, just his pension will amount to 4000 Rand (2000 US\$) per month. I am not sure what to believe, but he is great at telling these stories. At 08.00, we start. I travel for some time in the caboose at the end of the train, with red rear lights and brakes. He drives the steam locomotive in front. This is the only time I hitchhiked on a train. Wonderful! Again I was miraculously saved from a difficult situation, and all turned out well.

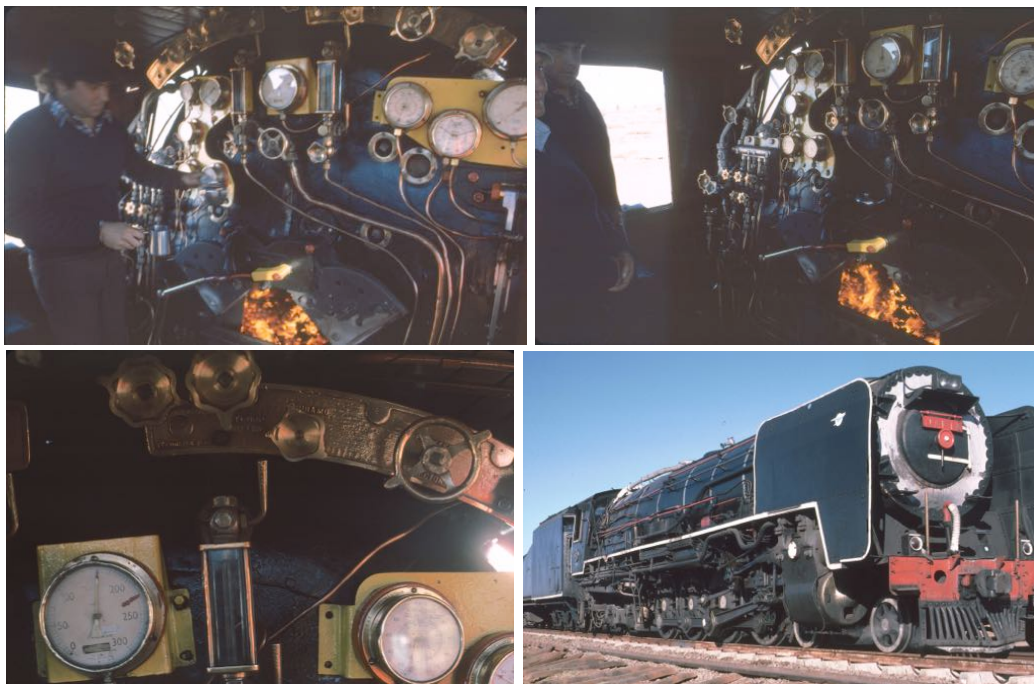


Figure 430. Steam trains galore.

With us also rides Steve Kennedy, a carpenter from Lincolnshire, who is traveling in South Africa. Nice guy, we end up traveling together for almost a week. At a tiny railway station, really just a tin hut, the steam locomotive is detached and replaced by a diesel engine. The railway staff, all white South Africans, distribute hot coffee liberally. In the caboose, we continue to Lobatse in Botswana. This is the end of this train route. Roy Williams, the station master, does not know about any connections towards Gaborone.

Nor can we get a Botswanan entry stamp here. I am changing some money in the butcher shop next door, when Steve comes running and tells me to hurry up.



Figure 431. An untrained driver on his first trip, without a driver's licence.

Around the corner waits an ambulance. The friendly driver agrees to take us to Lobatse, the next train station, for a train to Gaborone. In fact, he even drives us back five kilometers to the border station for our entry stamps, which we get easily. So funny, driving back to a border in an ambulance and asking to be allowed into the country from which we just arrive. And just on this little trip, I meet so many friendly and helpful people. We stop again so I can thank everybody for their support. If only the dark shadows of apartheid were not looming all over the place... Our night train to the capital Gaborone and Francistown, about 450 kilometers, is quite comfortable, beautiful wooden cars, rather clean, everything works.

We are fast asleep on arrival in Francistown at 06.00. Leaving our luggage with the station master, Steve and I walk around the town, still fast asleep (almost like us). When the clock shows a more decent time, the major hotel opens its royal breakfast buffet with all a traveler's heart and stomach desire. Big mistake, they did not count on two hungry guys who have eaten very little over the last two days. We wolf down huge quantities of goodies, and for good measure, fill our pockets with apples and oranges. *La grande bouffe*.

Like reborn with new strength, we march out on the highway towards Maun, trying to avoid local traffic when we hitchhike. A pickup truck offers a ride which we gladly accept. The first 200 kilometers to Nata are asphalt and pass quickly, but then we take five hours for the remaining 300 kilometers. A merciless gravel track along the eastern edge of the Kalahari desert, shaking, rattling, and rolling us around in the back of the pickup. My bum hurts, we swallow dust galore from the strong wind out of the desert, and even packing ourselves in jacket and blanket does not keep the sand out. Steve sits in the back and ends up with his face painted with white protective coating. In the evening, I take a South African *shower*, pouring water over me from a bucket. The runoff is impressive.

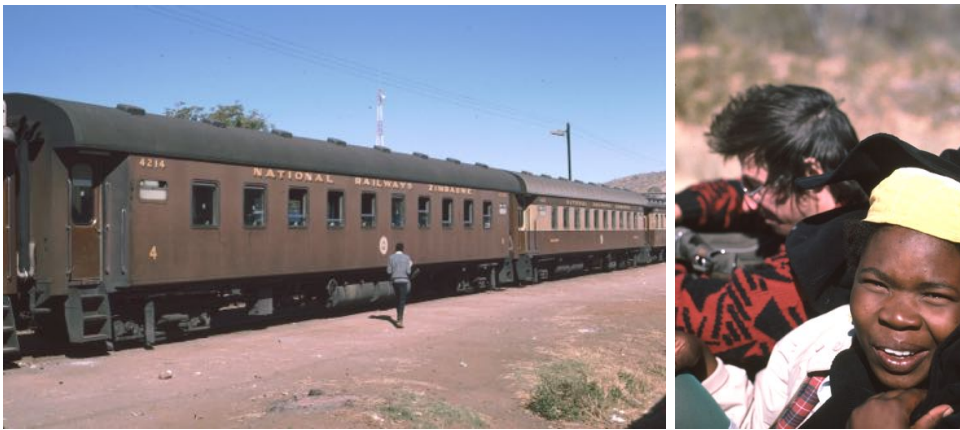


Figure 432. Our train to Gaborone, and Steve and a local woman blasted by the sand on an open pickup truck.

The mighty Cubango river flows out of the tropical mountains in Angola into the northern part of the Okavango delta. And there it stops! The Kalahari desert drains all energy from the river and it simply gives up, evaporating completely under the hot sun. But in its death throes, it creates a large swamp, whose waters provide rich feeding grounds for animals, small and large. Nothing remains of the river except what it created upstream. Clash of water and desert. Different from the Niger, which simply gets scared at Timbuktu and turns away from the desert to the right, or the Nile, which conquers the Sahara and created a mighty civilization. Steve and I book a six-day tour into the Okavango Delta and buy some provisions for the trip. Right away, we are driven to the airport and board our Cessna 206. Neil from Ireland is the third passenger. The flight alone over the Okavango is worth the trip's money. At first, there are some villages, but then the many branches of the river become visible. This is the southern end and we can see how it literally disappears in the sand.





Figure 433. Maun.

After a smooth landing in Xaxaba Camp, a pickup truck takes us to the camp site. Dusk is nearing and we quickly put up our tents. Neil tells us his life's story over dinner. He is a currency broker, about 35 years old, presumably becoming stinking rich, now has two weeks of holidays to rush through Africa, and then starts a new job with the First National Bank of Chicago. He carries huge amounts of booze: expensive wine, Drambuie, Whisky, Gin, and other stuff. His two backpacks jingle with the bottles clanging in them, and tomorrow morning he will load a dozen beers into our canoe—for just four days. We all have a pleasant evening, and the barman gives me a few useful hints for Malawi.

The next morning, we start early and I buy four beers from Shylock, our guide. Our *mokoros* (dugouts) lie low in the water, and are not really watertight. (They have been completely replaced by fiberglass versions around 2010, thus abolishing an age-old handcraft tradition, see page 459.) We sit on a layer of straw, and constant bailing is required to keep ourselves moderately dry. These *mokoros* are carved from a single tree trunk, hollowed out for its passengers and typically about four metres long. The perfectly round bottom of these conveyances provides little stability, such as a keel would, and they easily tip over in the hands of a non-expert.



Figure 434. The Okavango.



Figure 435. Steve and myself in mokoros.

But, of course, our guide Benoli is an expert at rowing this little boat. He advises me not to stick my hands into the warm brown water, and I soon see why. In some parts, the banks of the stream are lined with crocodiles who stare at us malevolently (or so I imagine) and silently slide into the muddy water. I cannot see where they go in this opaque liquid, but understand that they would not mind a delicious meal falling

from a mokoro. All they would have to do is catch a hand and pull hard on it. Not a pleasant thought. In this huge swamp area, the depth of the water is usually ten to thirty centimeters only, grass and peet at the surface. It is like paddling through a meadow. Hundreds of insects cover us; they look like mosquitos but are harmless. Birds populate the swamps: fish eagle, blacksmith glover, cormorant, red-backed stork.

At noon, we put up our tents and go for a game walk. Antilopes, kudus, giraffes, springboks, elands, impalas, zebras, baboons, wildebeest, warthogs. This is particularly exciting since we hike out in the open, not protected by sitting in a car like elsewhere in Africa. Our guide Benoli teaches us how to climb up a tree in case of an aggressive buffalo. At dinner, our two drivers keep to themselves; later they read the bible to each other and practice reading and writing. Charming. Instead of a toilet, we have a spade for digging a latrine.



Figure 436. Camp in the Okavango.

On a long hike next morning we see a lot of wildlife, in particular during the first two hours. The early lion catches the zebra. Then a peaceful afternoon, loitering about.



Figure 437. Red Lechwe (*Kobus leche leche*) antilopes, and a crocodile waiting for a tourist lunch from a mokoro.





Figure 438. Breadfruit tree and baobab.



Figure 439. An outing in the Okavango.

After an early breakfast, Steve's and Neil's mokoro takes them back to Xaxaba Camp, while Benoli, the driver, steers mine further north to new adventures. A totally relaxed

ride through the swamps. At one point, we cross two motorboats that make an incredible din. So much more peaceful to be rowed.

After putting up my tent at the next overnight stop, we go for another bushwalk. It is lovely to walk around in the savannah-like open country. Just before dinner, the mosquitos come out of their hiding. Their buzzing is as loud as a highway in the background. The concert is enriched later by frogs, crickets, cicadas, and other animals practicing their vocals.

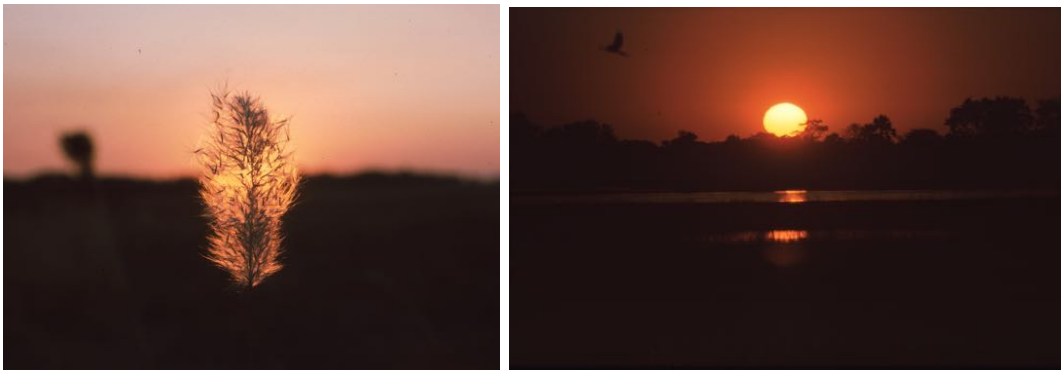


Figure 440. Sunset in the Okavango.



Figure 441. Impalas going wild at sunset.

On a long morning hike, Benoli looks for buffalo tracks, but we do not see any, except one from far away. Lots of other animals. After dinner, I kill the last of my four beers, pleasantly cooled in the river waters.

My last day in the Okavango! (Until two decades later.) Benoli is, as usual, quite passive without much initiative, but I persuade him to an early morning hike. We see a buffalo, Benoli is very cautious, moving only from one flight tree to the next one. I follow him closely. It is exciting, but we do not get really close. I dismantle my tent and Benoli rows me back along the Boro river. Again, total calm and quiet. We see two crocodiles fairly close up, before they vanish in the brown floods. We arrive at Xaxaba Camp in the afternoon. The luxury of a hot shower from the *monkey oven* awaits me, it is wonderful to get rid of all the dust and sand. And I am lucky: just after me, the old pump breaks down and later arrivals have to go without this pleasant respite. Over beers, a group of South Africans and I sit together, including Walter, a restaurant manager from Cape Town. “Please, no politics!” “But you cannot defend the system at all.” They all think that the big change will come, but hope that that will be as late as possible. And come it did, in 1991, under the leadership of the great Nelson Mandela, see page 392.



Figure 442. Jackson's Toyota and a gazelle.

At 09.00, I fly back to Maun in a Cessna 206. Low-level flight, the pilot keeps her plane at not more than 100 meters of altitude. I pick up my rental car, a Toyota Hi-Lux 4WD, with Jackson as a driver. We cover the 160 kilometers to Savuti in the Chobe National Park in about five hours. Many animals: giraffes, wildebeest, baboons, warthogs, great bustards, kudus, elephants, gazelles, ground hornbill. In the evening, we sit around a campfire in front of our tents. Animals stroll around, hyenas and others whom we do not recognize in the dark. In the dark, a terrifying roar of a lion awakes me. It is a frightening thought that the thin fabric of my tent would not do much to stop a lion's paws. He roars again, this time closer and louder. The situation is too scary for me to go out and check things, or consult with our drivers. In the morning, they tell me that there are always lions in this area, but that the numerous gazelles are their preferred food. I am glad they stuck to their traditional menu the night before. During the night, I recognize the



silhouette of a giraffe inspecting my tent. I hear many other animal sounds, but cannot see any. It is an interesting night; with all the wildlife just feet away and the cold setting in after midnight, I can hardly sleep.



Figure 443. Don't laugh at me just because I have a broken tooth!

We get up in the moonlight, ok with me since I was not sleeping anyways. I warm myself a bit at the fire, but my feet take hours to get back to normal temperature. A lonely hippo and two elephants have gathered at the Hippo Pool. We drive around most of the day without seeing any lion, the object of our interest. At the Moremi North Gate, we set up camp again in the Khwai River Camp.



Figure 444. Elephant size dwarfs human size.



Figure 445. Elephant destruction and a nondestructive bird.



Figure 446. Elegant waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*) and ugly wildebeest.

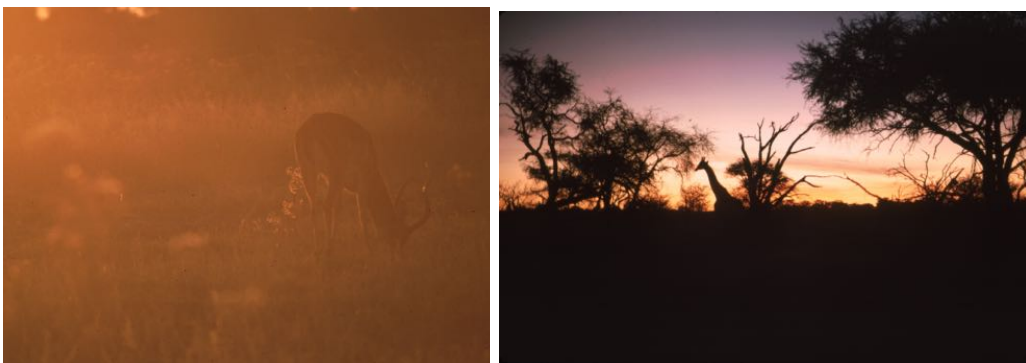


Figure 447. Evening in the Savuti.

Four hippos, one crocodile, and a group of elephants share the Hippo Pool here. It looks a bit like Noah's Ark, but each of these animals is strong enough to defend itself



against the others. On an afternoon drive, we move through the savannah as it is getting dark. “Stop, Jackson” I shout, as a lion grins at me from behind a bush. He reverses, but the lion is already trotting away. I am proud to have seen him before Jackson, the trained guide. Finally, we are rewarded by the sight of two lionesses near the Hippo Pool. The night is again filled with sounds of hyenas, jackals, and other wildlife strolling around my tent.

Shivering with cold, I wake up at 05.15 and am happy to get up at 05.30. Still shivering, I share a coffee with Jackson around the fire. Our morning game drive was not announced to the local population, so no game showed up . . . . We drive towards the Third Bridge, where we camp. In a starry night, the impalas make their “fa fa” sound. And then again, the roar of a lion, perhaps a few hundred meters away. My blood runs cold. And I have to sleep here, just protected by my flimsy tent! Jackson comforts me with stories of lions eating whole families, kids, parents, and grandparents.



Figure 448. Camp in the Savuti.

The next morning, Jackson and I stand, as usual, shivering at 05.30 in front of the fire. The day’s drive starts deceptively quietly. A hippo trots across the road in front of us. Jackson positions our Toyota so that the lighting is just right. Via the South Gate, we race over the dirt track towards Maun for me to catch my plane. He has to shift constantly between regular,  $4 \times 4$  high and  $4 \times 4$  low. The latter brings him through anything, except sometimes through wet mud. 10.45 at the Island Safari Lodge, then calmly to the Maun airport. I meet Peggy Brown and Scott McGovern again, whom I have seen in Francistown. They are originally from Lake Forest IL. They did not fare too well, had to stay in Nata for three days, then some days in the Oddballs Camp, and now have been waiting in Maun several days in vain for a transport to Moremi and Savuti. Tough luck.

Savuti and Moremi hold too many elephants, their vegan diet leads to wholesale destruction of the ecosystem. They bend over fairly large trees until they break, feed on



the leaves and bark, and leave the rest to rot. Even at night, we hear the crunching sound of trees being knocked over.

Unexpectedly, my flight to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe is rather boring, no animals to see, nor the Falls. Similarly unexpected is the smooth asphalt road into town, something I have not seen for quite some time. I find a nice lodge *Chalets* with roundabouts, on the Zambian side of the falls. They are spectacular. David Livingstone (see page 338) was the first European to see the falls and named them after his queen, in 1855. Water gushes down 108 meters over a width of 1.7 kilometers into a narrow gorge and then flows sideways along the gorge. On the Zimbabwean side, I get thoroughly soaked from the spray. It creates gorgeous rainbows above and even under the spectator. The trails around the Vic Falls are well designed, with many side tracks to view points. The falls make a deafening noise, and the locals call it *Mosi-oa-Tunya, the smoke that thunders*. The earth trembles, lots of spray and mist inhibit views, and I feel the size and power of the falls more than I see it. For visual impression, the Iguazú and Niagara Falls are more imposing. At the *Danger Point* I get so wet that I have to wring out my poor T-shirt—an involuntary wet T-shirt contest. The best photo opportunities are from *cataract view*. David Livingstone wrote: “No one can imagine the beauty of the view from anything witnessed in England. It had never been seen before by European eyes; but scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight.”



Figure 449. Victoria falls.



Figure 450. Flight of angels.



Figure 451. Over the falls and upstream homesteads by the Zambezi river.

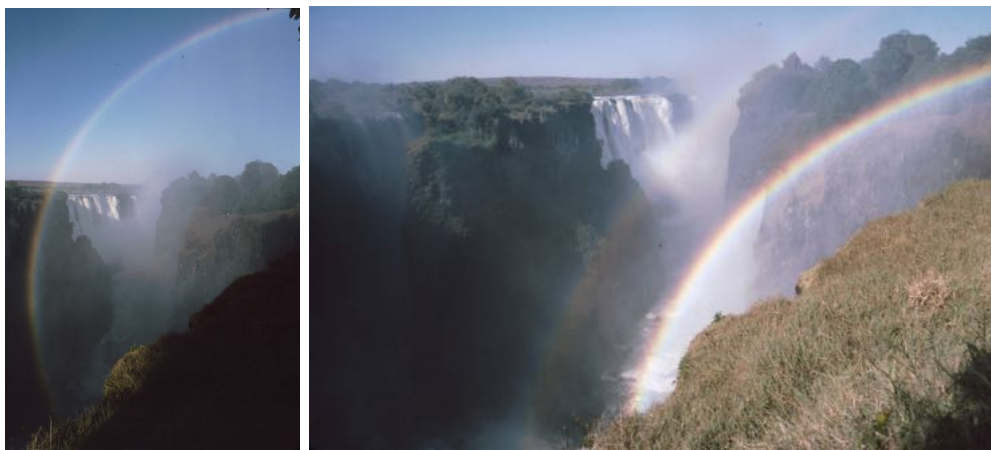


Figure 452. Rainbow falls.

There were no human angels in Livingstone's age, but these days it is easy to become one. Namely, I took a short flight over the falls, aptly called the *flight of angels*. A wonderful experience. Since the spray inhibits views so much, I only get a good impression

from up in the air. We do three circles around the falls, then upriver to Kandahar Island, over a band of 15 lions, hippos in the water that look quite different from the usual eyes and ears only, more like submarines. with spectacular views of the waters and the large rainbows they generate.

I have a braai (barbecue) dinner with Peggy and Scott in the historical *Victoria Falls Hotel* from 1905. In their beautiful garden, we stuff ourselves at the braai buffet, with steaks, sausages, spareribs, burgundy, salads, dessert, and coffee, all at a ridiculously low price. At the end, I fill my pockets with apples that they generously distributed and which are otherwise a rarity in Africa. It is dangerous to offer such an all-you-can-eat to hungry travelers like us. And just yesterday, I sat with Jackson around a fire, with a lion roaring nearby! Peggy's comment: *yin and yang*. This diversity in traveling, the ups and downs and ups again, the total change of culture, environment and people—that is what fascinates me.

I sleep in for the first time in days, until 08.00. This time I bring a rain jacket to the falls, and later take a long hike downstream along the river. Dry savannah vegetation, completely different from the rain forest around the falls. Baboons, vervet monkeys, waterbuck, and warthogs all take flight when they hear me approaching. Fishermen cast their lines along the Zambezi river.

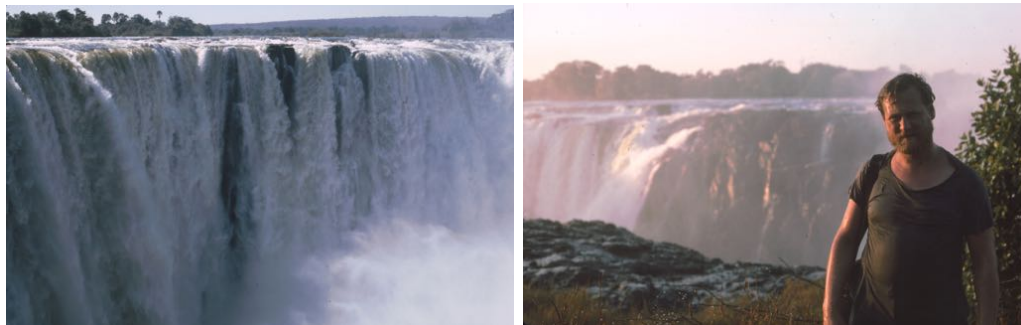


Figure 453. Wet T-shirt contest.

The next morning, I take another *grande bouffe* at the breakfast buffet of the *Victoria Falls Hotel*, for little money. This breakfast has to last until dinner. I walk across the Victoria Falls Bridge into Zambia. Easy crossing. It is always fun to cross a border on foot, as the Allenby bridge, Lefkosia, Tabatinga/Leticia in Perú/Colombia, Zaïre/Uganda. At the *Rainbow Lodge*, I enjoy the view of the Zambezi River, here still tame and calm. Later, at the knife-edge bridge of the Falls, the view is much better than on the Zimbabwean side. No more mist and spray.

From the *Intercontinental Hotel*, a truck takes me and twelve others to the Zambezi river for our rafting tour. At the end, on a steep climb down the bank, most stumble and slide along—I am the only one with proper hiking boots. Mel, the guide, is about 30,



from Alaska, and has been skiing instructor, carpenter, and worked in many other jobs. He explains the many ways a raft can overturn, and what to do against it: high-siding, tube-crashing and body-crashing. Some prospective rafters look rather queasy. Finally, we get going in two rafts. Daniel and I have been appointed tube crashers on our raft, and we have to put our noses right into the highest waves. Two backers throw their weights onto us to increase the weight at the front. We drive through 12 rapids, a total of 13 kilometers. The standing waves at one of them are two meters tall, which we take heads on. We hold on to our lives at the lifeline. Our clothes are completely soaked—great fun. During lunchtime, we try to get warm and our clothes a bit dry. Then we continue downstream. Unfortunately, it is impossible to hold on to a camera—these would have been great pictures. At the end, we have to scramble up the steep bank again. The truck takes us back; the shout “low clearance” means that branches from a tree are about to strike us in the open back.

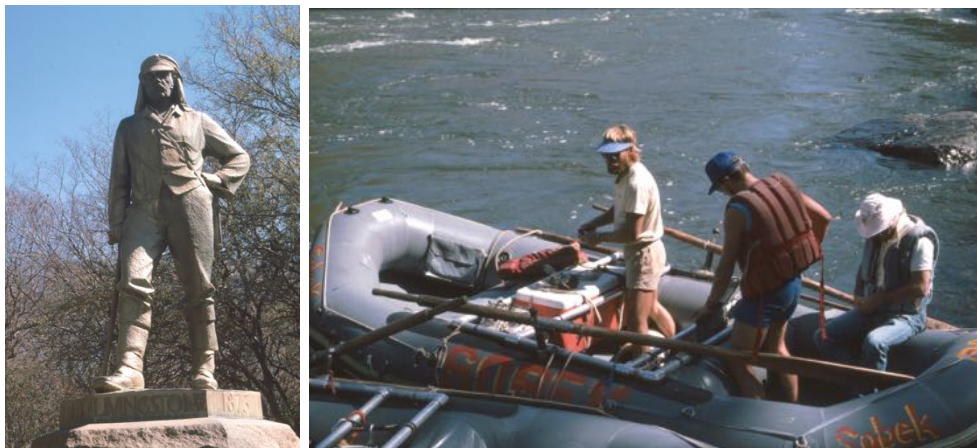


Figure 454. David Livingstone did not have such comfortable rafts.



Figure 455. Train and the railroad bridge by the falls.



Figure 456. Steam locomotives.

I take the night train to Lusaka, Zambia's capital, leaving on time at midnight. I have a two-bunk cabin all to myself. Very comfortable, with a bottle of Château Gué and a Davidoff. The train's ratatata music is a soothing good-night song. We arrive an hour early in Lusaka—that seems to be an exception, sometimes it takes all of two days. I stroll around town, a depressing city. Nothing moves, even the market is almost empty. Warning: "For security reasons, photography of public buildings is not allowed." I buy an orange on the market and take a picture of the vendor. A group of youth screams: "A spy. Hold him!" Fortunately, others shout "Leave him alone", and I can escape. A scary moment, like in Kinshasa, see page 222.

Chaos reigns at the bus station. At 14.00, they hope that the 10.00 bus will eventually arrive. I am happy to buy a ticket for the next bus to Chipata. But then a private bus going there shows up, and I quickly exchange my ticket. People warn me that these buses often break down. Duly noted, but the governmental 10.00 bus is still not in sight, even when we leave at 16.00. After one hour, a one-hour stop at a restaurant. Also in the bus are Wil and Ger Jonkergouw-Botden, a Dutch couple from Eindhoven. They had gotten up at 04.00 to be at the bus station at 06.00, only to wait for ten hours! I have an uncomfortable seat in the last row. The window in front of me is broken and a strong draught makes me cold and miserable. The bus continues coughing along the dirt road,

and finally has a heart attack at 18.20 which terminates its trip in the middle of nowhere. The brakes are gone, you can push the brake pedal to the floor and nothing happens. The end. We spent one full day to travel 40 kilometers from Lusaka, and there are only 570 more to go to Chipata. Fortunately, there is a sort of hotel not far away, in the jungle. The two Dutch and I go there, eat some dry biscuits and oranges we had taken along, and drink a lot of beer. Everybody throws round after round, we are raucous and have a lot of fun. Celebrating being stuck in the middle of nowhere.



Figure 457. Bus station in Lusaka and train station in Lilongwe.

We stand by the road early in the morning, trying to hitchhike. Little traffic, four cars in two hours. All are loaded to the brim, and even the trucks have no room. Just as desperation is threatening, salvation arrives in the form of St. Martin from Switzerland, a Catholic priest with a pick-up truck, a nurse and a teacher. Nice people, they give us a ride of almost 500 kilometers to Katete, only 100 kilometers away from Chipata. It is freezing cold out there on the truck's back, although I wear all the clothes that I carry, including my sleeping bag. All our gear flutters in the wind. We arrive at 16.30 at Katete, it is slowly getting dark. But we luck out, a Punjabi working for the FAO gives us a ride to just 5 kilometers before Chipata, and then a police Land Rover kindly takes us right up to the Chipata District Council Motel.



Figure 458. Markets in Lilongwe.



I first take a long hot bath, the first one on this trip. After dinner, the bar is crammed full of people, with loud music, until at 22.00 the beer is finished. The bar empties within five minutes.

Next morning, we walk with all our luggage into the dreary town of Chipata. Ger and I joke about our next holidays in the Club Med Chipata or the Chipata Hilton. Another 8 kilometer hike to the border. No problem on the Zambian side, but an aggressive Malawian official tells Wil that she cannot enter the country unless she puts on a skirt. She had already wrapped a Jara, a piece of cloth, over her jeans, and now simply takes off her jeans in front of everyone. Ridiculous, but the official accepts it.



Figure 459. On the road in Malawi.



Figure 460. Picking and carrying tea near Blantyre.

More luck: Bryan Martyr, an Englishman driving an empty Peugeot 504, takes all of us to Lilongwe. From there, I take a bus at 16.00 to Blantyre via Zomba. Absolute luxury, comfortable seat, toilet on board, and cold drinks.

I prepare a three-day trip into the Mulanje (Mlanje) mountains. The bus for the first leg is supposed to leave at 12.00, is not there at 13.00, at 14.00, at 15.00, but finally leaves at 16.00. Not for long, in Thyolo, 30 kilometers from Blantyre, it breaks down. Something is burning and produces a lot of smoke. Better get out quickly. Everybody waits, and at 18.00 a replacement bus turns up. To make up for the day's hardships, I have a great night in a raucous bar with a lot of new friends. Life is good again.

At 07.00, I start my hike towards Likhubula. With two lifts, I am at the Forest Office already at 09.00 and make a reservation at the Thuchila hut for today, and at Lichenya for tomorrow. I cross many forest workers coming down the *skyline path*. In continuation, the *Chapaluka trail* is quieter. I miss the turn-off point for the Thuchila hut and have to walk back for an hour. It is a delightfully cool hike through a dense pine forest, lots of shade, and soft walking on the needle carpet. Upwards to Thuchila the vegetation becomes more alpine. It is still a long walk and it slowly gets dark. Fortunately, the trail is easy to see even in the starlight. Then I catch the smell of fire and know I am almost there. Indeed, the hut is there. A group of eight South Africans, all white and medical doctors, welcome me. They have heated a pot of water and washed themselves in it, and I do the same. Japanese style, ok with me. We chat amiably until the candles go out at 21.00.

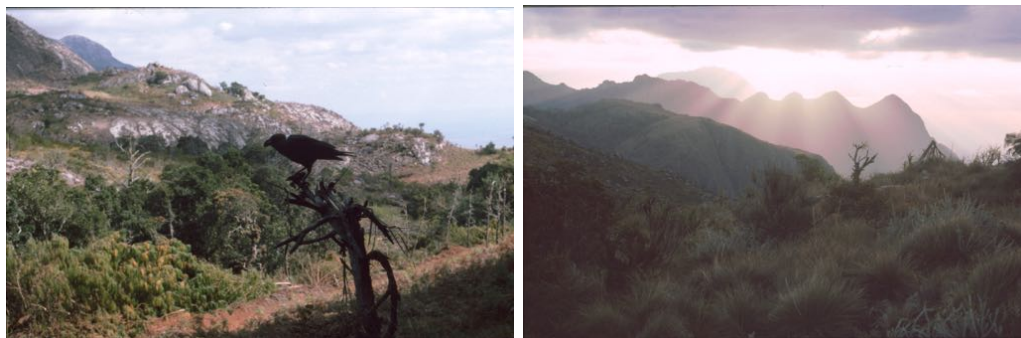


Figure 461. The Mulanje mountains in Malawi.

I get up late at 06.30, then take forever with a frugal breakfast and leave at 08.00. 2.5 hours to the branch for Chosipo Hut (and Sapitwa). I hide my luggage under some tree branches; this turns out to be an imprudent decision. The ascent towards the summit, at 2996 or 3001 meters, depending on your map, is long, steep, and tiring. I slip a lot and have to pull myself up on rocks, crawling over them on all four. At the top, it is bleak, the area is covered with impressive blocks of granite. I am rather surprised to see puddles with ice on them, and suck on such a piece.



Figure 462. At the top.



Figure 463. In a hut.

Fortunately, I am not even freezing, just in my T-shirt. The weather changes a lot, sunny at times, then clouds and fog come up. It will be freezing cold at night. On my descent, I arrive at the branch only at 16.45, much too late. 3.5 hours up to the summit, 2.5 hours down. My luggage has been mutilated. Some animal has torn out all plastic bags, taken an empty tin can, but left the full ones, and took my bread. This serves me right: it is stupid to leave food out in the open, even if hidden. More depressing is the fact that it is still four hours to the hut at Lichenya that I booked, too far to make it. So I decide to go to Chanbe instead. Sunset at 17.30, total darkness at 18.00, and still far away from Chanbe. The dirt trail is full of rocks and I realize that I will either break a leg or lose the trail. Considering my dreary options, I decide to camp right here and now, in the middle of nowhere. My sleeping bag rests on a soft carpet of pine needles, a thousand stars shine on my simple dinner of pineapple slices and cold spaghetti, my first meal since 07.00 except for two oranges. I have not seen many animals during the day, and hope that none will consider me dinner out here.





Figure 464. Home alone in a pine forest on the Mulanje mountains.

My decision to sleep here turns out to have been absolutely right: I have already lost the trail and was walking along a firebreak, not having seen the sign towards Chanbe. Fortunately, I find the trail back again, scrambling uphill. This time, I hike along the Chapaluka trail, very pretty. A little pond by the way, crossing a river on huge boulders. I have no more food, but there is plenty of water. I feel strong after 27 hours of hiking, no blisters, almost no muscle ache, it feels like I could go on forever. I lost a bit of weight, but that is ok. After my descent with beautiful views I am at the Forest Office at 11.00. Two South African women do not want to listen to my well-intended advice. There is quite some foot traffic on the road to Mulanje. A group of local women with firewood on their heads follows me laughing and giggling: “gimme 10 Tambala”. In the end, I catch an overloaded coffee truck that takes me to Mulanje. Feels like home. But it is not the end of a wonderful day. After just 15 minutes waiting by the road, Tony Rix gives me a ride to Blantyre in his shiny white Rover 2600. He works for a Lonrho company producing cotton material. He invites me to his home, then I deposit my stuff at the hotel, and we go for a sumptuous dinner at the Maxim’s, steaks, two bottles of red wine, and plenty of Irish coffee afterwards. These are the best travel adventures: up and down, sleeping out in the woods because my plans failed, and then a gorgeous meal in full comfort.

Early awake, my bus for Mzuzu leaves on time at 07.10. After Nkhotakota, the road turns bad, bumpy and dusty, my camera bag accumulates a thick layer of dust. At 16.30, about 100 kilometers before Nkhata Bay, the bus breaks down—the usual story in Africa,

vehicles just do not last long on such roads and with maintenance à l'africaine. Today, the rear brake line is broken. Everybody prepares for an overnight stay. A friendly local, Overston John Chirwa, offers me to stay in his house, which I gladly accept. But, surprise surprise, soon after they tell us that the break line is fixed. Half of the rear brakes work again, much more than needed. Our driver continues cautiously, no more Formula 1 training today. And indeed, we arrive in Nkhata Bay at 21.00 safe and sound. I find a hotel; pleasant surprise: they even give me some chicken stew with chips and beer. Unexpected at this hour. Unpleasant surprise: my "room" is a chicken coop, with dirty bedsheets spread on its floor. Disgusting. After complaining, I get a bedstead, but it still is filthy as hell. I persecute a large cockroach scurrying from my pillow to its hiding hole, but my anti-vermin spray gets it in time. I cannot wash off the accumulated grime. Well, another day with ups and downs.



Figure 465. My chicken coop, and village life.



Figure 466. Lake Malawi.

I am sufficiently tired from the last days' exertions that I sleep quite well, in spite of all the creepy-crawlies around me. On the well-stocked village market, I watch the blacksmith Peter Mbweza Phiri making pots. Many travelers at Chikela Beach. Then

begins my last African excursion this year: a relaxing boat trip on Lake Malawi (Lake Nyasa). It hosts more species of fish than any other lake in the world, and its rich fishing grounds provide food for the regions around it. Late afternoon, I take the *MS Ilala*, which entered service in 1951. My cabin is comfortable, lots of wood, a wash basin, writing desk, the works. I feel really well.

Early morning tea is served at 06.00. We have anchored off Chisimulu. Under my first shower in days, I bid goodbye to the layer of grime and dust that covers me. As we follow the coast towards Likoma Island, I sit in a comfortable lounge chair on the deck, a strong wind is blowing. On the island, the cathedral holds about twice as many people as live in the village.

I go ashore at Chipoka, at 05.00. After some breakfast, I walk to the main road and luckily catch the Leopard bus going to Lilongwe. It is an excruciatingly slow drive, six hours for 110 kilometers. The bus is full to the brim, people get in and out at every lamppost, and it takes five minutes to wind your way from the back to the front door through the throng. But we arrive at 15.30, no breakdown and no brakes down. For dinner, I get presumably the smallest fillet steak ever sighted by mankind. But the waiter notices my distress and gives me a second one, for free. I feel so good, although it is my last night in Africa, for this year.



Figure 467. Stop the pain fast? We are having fun!

I wake up early because of the trampling and shouting on the corridor, and spend the day doing nothing. Souvenirs (ebony boxes for my children), there is nothing really nice to purchase. In the afternoon, I take a taxi to the Kamuzu airport; most buses do not run anymore, being requisitioned to transport cheering crowds to the events for the national holiday in a few days. My driver is the chief of the fire department at the airport and drives very slowly, turning off the engine whenever he is going downhill, and then it is good-bye to Africa for now.





the new millenium which, counted properly, begins on 1 January 2001.

The climate is wonderful, sunny with 25 to 30°C during the day, cool at night. We are at 1800 meters of altitude. My colleagues at Wits are friendly and we work productively. But my sojourn on the campus is otherwise a nightmare. Surrounded by two meter high steel fences, it feels nice and safe inside, like being in a high-security prison. You can open doors only with your staff card. Everybody warns me about walking outside, especially at night. I only walk a few hundred meters to the *Devonshire Hotel* on Jorissen in the close vicinity of the Wits campus; all other restaurants here close at 17.30. And even then, being on those deserted streets does not feel good.



Figure 468. Heavily protected entrance to the Wits campus.

The people I get to know, all white, live in guarded compounds fenced in with barbed wire, with watchdogs and vigilance services *armed response*. Terrible for children to grow up in such an environment. Real estate prices have dropped substantially. People like Arnold can practically not move away because they would get so much less for their houses than they paid originally. Arnold's famous father, the mathematician John Knopfmacher, moved to Australia and died of a heart attack a few years later. The *Number Theory Day 2000*, for which I am here, is dedicated to his memory.

My friends once take me out for dinner. Such an outing requires some organization. They get together a convoy of three or four cars, drive together through the night to the restaurant located in a shopping mall, and park in the mall, which also has high fences and is heavily guarded. Such a loss of quality of life, and this in a beautiful country with a wonderful climate!

This sorry state of affairs goes back to the apartheid government. When they were finally overthrown and Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) established in 1991 a democratic government, everything went well at first. He and his ANC (African National Congress) companions did not persecute those that had persecuted him and put him into prison for 27 years. They call him the *madiba*, father of the nation. But the black citizens have seen how the whites all had large villas and shining BMWs, and now that they are in power, expect the same goodies for themselves. It does not work that way, and the huge economic differences between the various social strata have led to high criminality and pervasive violence, rendering impossible a normal life with the security we are accustomed to in (parts of) the Western world. Under Mandela's successor, Jacob Zuma, things have turned even worse.

In the plane to South Africa, a question occurs to me: the average element order in cyclic groups. Arnold suggests successfully to use zeta functions for our analysis, we advance quickly, and when I leave South Africa, we have a nice paper together, which later appears in the *Bordeaux Journal of Number Theory*. During my visit, we acquire three co-authors: Florian Luca, Lutz Lucht, and Igor Shparlinski, all making their own contributions. This is the essence of scientific meetings: getting people together to do research.

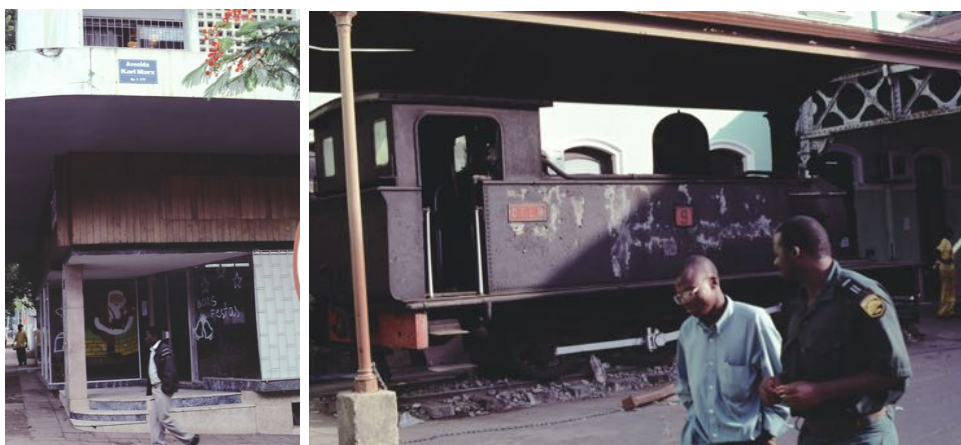


Figure 469. Maputo: Karl Marx street and the train station.

For one weekend, I fly to Moçambique, where I had tried to go in 1987 but failed for lack of a visa, see page 355. After landing in Maputo, the capital, instead of going into



town, I take a taxi for the quay with boats to the island of Inhaca. Wrong place, and no boats today! I walk with all my luggage to the city and get a place in a backpacker's hostel. Quite nice.



Figure 470. Maputo: the untidy fort and more heroes of yesteryear.

Then I stroll through town, relaxed. The street names recall the heroes of yesteryear: Marx, Engels, Mao, Ho, Lumumba. Who still believes in their preachings? The Portuguese fort is interesting but not well taken care of.

The next day, various local friends tell me that a boat for Inhaca leaves today. So I go at 06.00 to the port, in front of the old *fortaleza* (castle). For some unfathomable reason, the boat's captain does not want to say that he will take me, nor does he say that he will not. Strange. Well, at 10.00 we sail, with me on board the small ship with an outboarder. There is no railing or cabin, the water washes into the boat all the time.

And then it starts raining, a bit at first, then a tropical downpour. We sit outside and get soaking wet, water sloshes in my shoes. Our arrival at 13.00 is a wet landing, we wade through breast-high water. At least we cannot get wetter after the rain. On board, my question whether there is a taxi where we go ashore met with roaring laughter. Now

I see why—there is not even a trail, let alone a road, to where we land. The only way to go is along the beach, feet in the water, 4 kilometers of wet hiking.



Figure 471. Leaving for and arriving at Inhaca, memories of a boat, and the main street on Inhaca.



Figure 472. My plane taxiing on the airstrip at Inhaca and a perfect meander of a river.

The next day, I borrow mask and snorkel, but because of the rain the visibility is minimal. Not a single fish bids hello.

Although several are announced, no boat seems to leave the following day. I go to the Inhaca airport, which mainly consists of a concrete hut. And I get a flight to Maputo on some rickety Russian propeller plane. After a relaxed stroll through town, I catch my flight to Johannesburg.

I continue teaching my course on factoring polynomials. In the evenings, I work on our new joint paper on average orders. On Thursday, the Number Theory Day brings a lot of top experts together: Wolfgang Schwarz from Frankfurt, Richard Warlimont, formerly Augsburg, now Port Elizabeth, Gert Almquist from Sweden, Peter Grabner from Graz, Daniel Panario, my former PhD student, from Toronto, Jean-Paul Allouche from Paris, Pelegri Viader from Barcelona, and Neville Robbins from San Francisco CA.

After flying from Johannesburg to Cape Town, I pick up my rental VW Polo 1.6. At the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Belleville, a suburb of Cape Town, I check into the Chris Hani Residence, named after the leader of the armed wing of the ANC. The whole area is rather unsafe, and the campus is hermetically cordoned off, with checkpoints “can I look into your boot?”. I would not want to live under such circumstances. The 5th Pan African Congress of Mathematicians takes place here, and I am invited to speak.

Everybody is discouraged from walking around. And driving around at night in my rental car through empty streets does not give me any feeling of security. In the center of Cape Town, the security situation is better than in Johannesburg, and one can walk around without this eerie feeling. The service in the university cafeteria is rather sullen, reminding me of the eager staff in the former Soviet Union. Likewise the conference organization. Nobody except Daniel has received a confirmation of reservation or room, the program was composed last night, with all those inevitable mistakes of not listing or listing twice some of them. Most people seem resigned to this state of affairs.

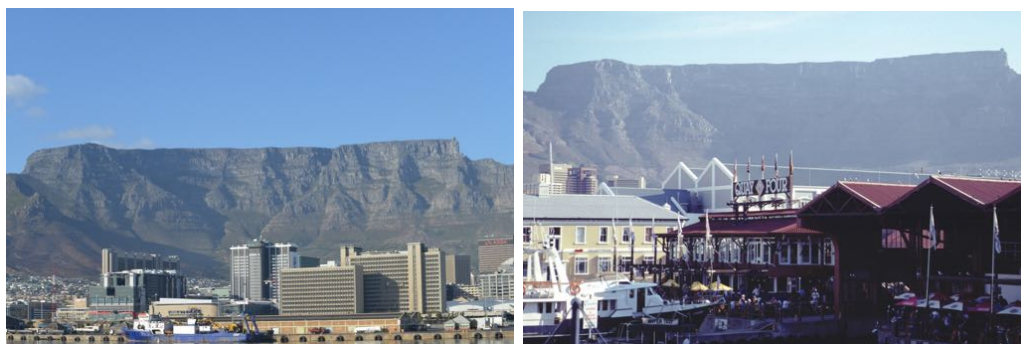


Figure 473. Cape Town from its harbor, and the Victoria & Albert Waterfront.





Figure 474. “Secure” door lock at the university, with numerous signs of break-ins. Gang of conference participants in Stellenbosch.

On the right, front to back, Daniel Panario, Jean-Paul Allouche, Peter Grabner, Helmut Proding. On the left, Neville Robins at right.



Figure 475. Cape Town and some abnormal traffic.

For dinner, I drive to the Victoria & Albert Waterfront, Cape Town’s restaurant and bar center right on the water. Beautiful views, especially of the thick clouds that pour down from the Table Mountain only to dissolve on their way down.

With Peter Grabner, I go to the Kirstenbosch Garden and then up the Jan Smuts trail to the Table Mountain, 1070 meters high. Huffing and puffing, I make it up the steep trail, Peter is much faster than myself. The first two hours take us through a shady forest, then it is open country. Some of the steeper sections have ladders. I broke my sunglasses the day before, repaired them with Scotch tape, but they keep falling off, also on one of the ladders. Then the broken side piece is hard to find, it resembles a twig. After lunch at the top with its incredible views over the town and the ocean, we take the

cable car down. Enough hiking for today. In the evening, we meet the whole gang from the congress at the Waterfront.



Figure 476. The Table Mountain from below, Peter Grabner and myself at the top, and flowers on our way up.

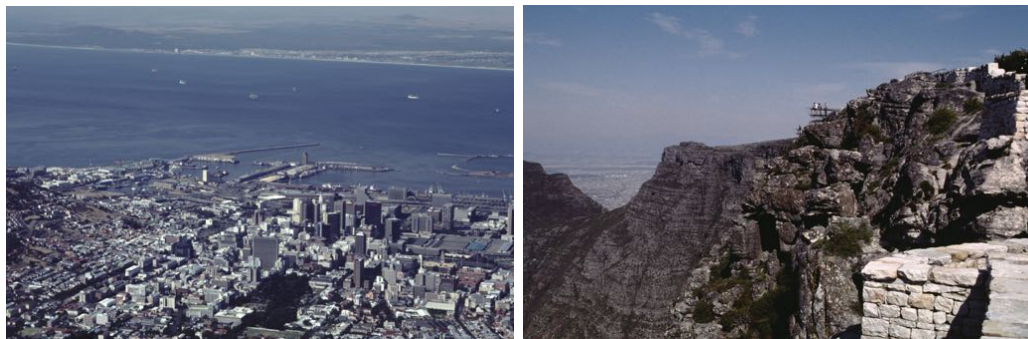


Figure 477. Cape Town from the mountain, the Victoria & Albert Waterfront at the left edge.



Figure 478. Fog rolling into the end of the world.



Figure 479. At the Cape of Good Hope: the end of the world.

I take a leisurely drive to the Cape of Good Hope, via Simon's Town, to the end of the world in these parts. I hike to the cliffs at Cape Point. Penguins and albatrosses keep their distance from me, but they look at me with interest. Chacma baboons clamber



about the cliffs. At the actual Cape, a well-defined boulder, I cannot resist the temptation to go into the water and promptly get washed over by a wave to my sleeves.



Figure 480. At the Cape of Good Hope.

One morning, I buy a boat ticket to the prison of Robben Island, with return ticket (fortunately!). The prison in which Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders suffered for many years is impressive. The fences are 2.5 meters high, with evil-looking barbed wire on top.



Figure 481. Monument of apartheid: Robben Island prison.  
Note the perverse “welcome”.

Nelson Mandela was incarcerated here for 18 of his 27 years in prison. The low buildings with row after row of cells are depressing. The cells are huge dormitories with

bunk beds for about 100 people, the showers are still dripping. Pigeon dirt is everywhere, also in the sports grounds and the open yards where the prisoners could walk. They were allowed to send and receive a letter every two months, and the censor's office cut out critical pieces.



Figure 482. Barbed wire, fences, rusty steel doors.



Figure 483. Robben Island prison, and one voluntary inhabitant.

The guardians were known for their brutality, and you see this in their faces on the few photos shown. It is hard to imagine how a strong man like Mandela survived all these abasements and denigrations (how appropriate a word!) for so long, and afterwards had the power to negotiate with his enemies, and in the end not to take revenge. But Mandela was a great man and an exception. South Africa is the only country in Africa where people will not easily speak with me. Even if I just ask for directions, I will sometimes get no answer or hateful looks. I can understand the hatred of the blacks towards the white race that has treated them so shabbily for many years, but that was also the case in other African colonies, where fewer of these hard feelings survive and I usually get along well with most locals.

A rabbit creates some comic relief in this depressing environment. Quite unintentionally, I disturb it in one of the yards, it runs away in fear—and crashes into the fence. One more round in despair, and it elopes through an open gate. It does not seem familiar with its surroundings. For more relief, I walk out on a boardwalk to the colony of about a hundred penguins. They waddle around, jump into the water and out again. Bird or fish? Clearly they cannot take off into the air, as decent birds can.

My presentation at UWC is scheduled for 16.30. At 13.30, I check out where the room is and hear Pelegri's voice announcing the talk before mine. I go inside, and lo and behold! my talk starts ten minutes later. Nobody had advised me of the change in schedule. I speak about Gauß periods, old tool, new results. It goes over well, the room is almost full.

In the evening, the whole gang of participants goes to Stellenbosch for dinner. We have, as usual with this group, a highly entertaining and raucous evening. Driving back with three passengers, I get rather lost, not a pleasant thing to do in this area. But eventually I find UWC.

When the conference is over, I fly to Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. The flight goes over a desert landscape, all red earth and rocks. A godforsaken area. After checking into a pleasant B & B, my first job is the Angolan visa. I had sent my application to their embassy in Bonn right after my return from Singapore a month before. But after many failed attempts to phone them, I learn that they are closed until two days after my departure. In Johannesburg and Cape Town they only issue visas to residents. Same thing here. I have to give up my idea of visiting Angola. Then comes a redeeming idea: I apply for a transit visa. They accept this, although transit sounds funny to me for Windhoek–Luanda–Johannesburg. I am happy, although an inner voice tells me that my stay here in Namibia is nicer than in Luanda. True, it turns out. But at least I finally obtain, on my fourth attempt, my visa for Angola.

I stroll around the pleasant town of Windhoek, still showing much of its German colonial past. The brutal German mass killings of Hereros and Namaquas (Namas) in 1904 to 1907 seem forgotten; this is sometimes called the first genocide, a crime at which Germans also excelled about thirty years later. Quite surprisingly, the Namibians I talk to all have a positive view of Germany. Street and shop names are in German, and in



the shops, I hear even locals speak German to each other. On the balcony of the pleasant steak restaurant *Big Spur Grand Canyon*, I ask for a large beer and my waiter Nooni says, with a twinkle in his eyes: “Sorry, we are just out of 2-liter mugs”. My printed lunch bill says *Vielen Dank!*, in a restaurant at the old German fort *Tintenpalast* (Ink Palace), presumably named after the 2-liter containers of bureaucratic ink consumed here. The equestrian statue in front of the unimpressive Lutheran Church of Christ has a dreadful inscription in memory of the Germans who died in the butchery of the Hereros and Namas.



Figure 484. Reminders of the German occupation:  
an almost name-sake restaurant and the ink palace.

With a rental car, I drive to the Jaan Viljoen Nature Reserve. On my way there, a baboon strolls along the road, and a warthog runs just in front of my car, narrowly avoid a collision. Two giraffes idle by the water. My two-hour hike along the Rooibos Trail is pleasant, I see an eland and many birds. But all this pales in comparison to other parts of Africa. Many years later, I will see more impressive wildlife in Namibia, see pages 426 ff. Back in town, I have coffee at the restaurant *Gathemann*, if only for its name. The young black waitress speaks German to me.



Figure 485. Windhoek train station.

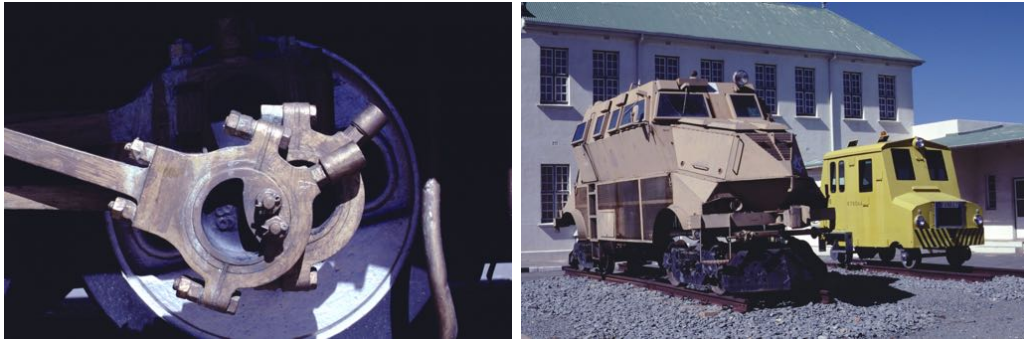


Figure 486. A martial juggernaut from the war of independence at the Windhoek train station.

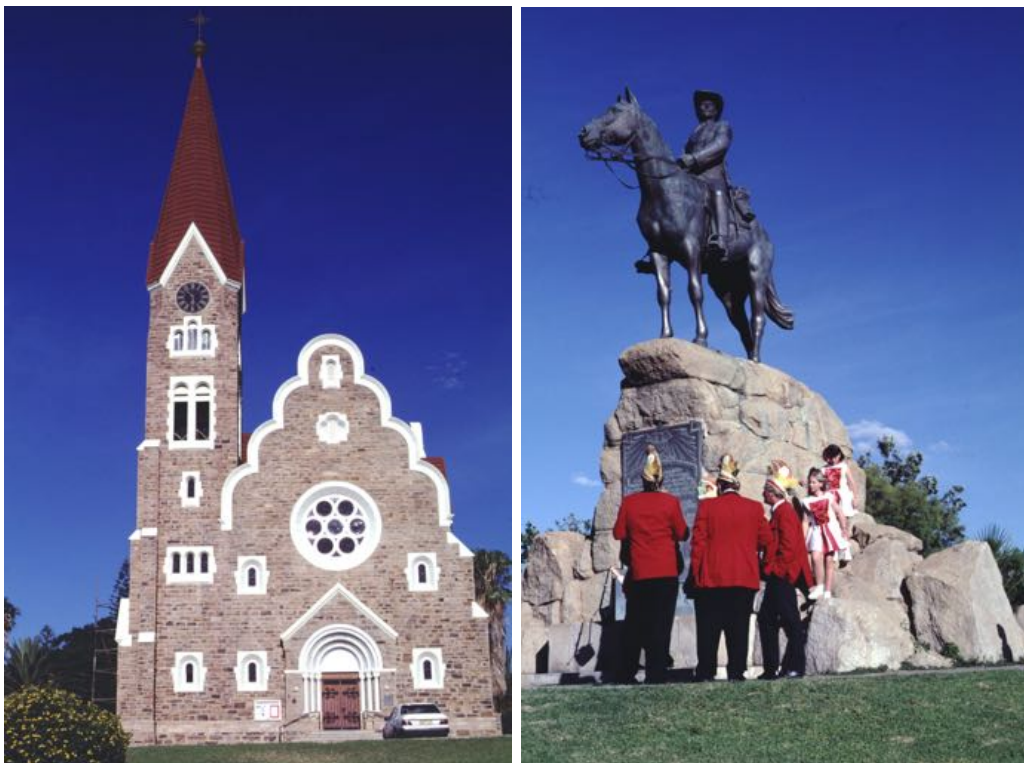


Figure 487. Lutheran Church of Christ and equestrian statue from German colonial times with admirers, possibly wishing back the bad old times of apartheid.



Figure 488. Private defenses and a movable living room.



Figure 489. Jaan Viljoen Nature Reserve: weaver bird nest and two acacias, one alive, one dead.

I enjoy my hot clean shower in the B & B, with a premonition that tonight things will not be as pleasant. Right I was! My plane from Windhoek to Luanda in Angola is filled with all the happy members, coaches, and companions of an Angolan soccer team, who won 3:1 against Namibia.

The only hassle at the Luanda airport is that they ask for the yellow vaccination certificate. I left mine at home. A young Russian in front of me immediately understands my request for help, gets a second form for herself, and passes it on to me. Her mother was slow in figuring this out. My “cheap” hotel is quite expensive at US\$ 27, compared to elsewhere. And even more so compared to the comfort it provides: an iron bedstead, iron cupboard, and a chair. That’s it. The paint is flaking off, the bathroom on the corridor.

I take a stroll on the *marginal* along the beach front. Quite nice, but people are rather unfriendly. Police check my papers. Mountains of garbage everywhere, green and brown puddles of undefinable liquids on the streets, gaping holes in the pavement, people who sleep on the sidewalk. This is not surprising after thirty years of civil war, which



apparently has also shot people's civility. The leader of the Unita, Jonas Savimbi, signed all agreements only to break them immediately. Soldiers, presumably from the Angolan army, have now attacked people in the Caprivi strip across the Namibian border, killing three children of French tourists. Travel there is too dangerous.



Figure 490. Downtown Luanda. A littered beach just outside the city, and my hotel room.

I arrived yesterday with only US\$ 80 for four days, the only currency accepted here. After much running around, I finally get my South African Rand changed, at a bad rate. Better than nothing. In the afternoon, I walk to the *Fortaleza de Luanda*, the old fort, now the *museo das forças armadas* (Museum of the Armed Forces). Many old and new cannons, tanks, and two airplanes. The view over the city is gorgeous, but even more impressive are the Portuguese *azulejos*, large blue fayence tiles that depict scenes from Angola's colonial history. All is in rapid decay due to the tropical climate.

The next day, I hike about ten kilometers down the peninsula *Ilha do Cabo*. Mostly along the road, with short excursions into the Atlantic Ocean. The stench of garbage is pervasive, beggars all around, and an oil film on the water. Not really relaxing. But it is quieter here than in town. I read the diploma thesis of Christopher Creutzig talented, but he does not have much to present. Michael Nöcker is faring better, but he makes too many mistakes or is not precise enough. I have to go to an expensive restaurant for dinner, because only they accept my credit card and I am practically out of cash.



Figure 491. Fortaleza Luanda.

Home run. No problem at the check-in at the airport. For some unfathomable reason, they put me in business class. No objection, your honor. At one checkpoint, a soldier asks for a present—no, thank you! At the currency control, you have to first declare all Kwanzas and US\$ that you carry, and then hand them over to the corrupt official. But I have only 6 US\$ left and they are well hidden. No luck for them with me. But it is a bit dicey to travel from Luanda to Germany with so little cash.

Unfortunately, they do not check my luggage through, and in Johannesburg it takes a good while to arrive on the conveyor belt. I run to the check-in counter, where I am briefly told: “you are lucky”, and then immediately: “we are closing this flight”. Wow! 30 seconds later, and I would have missed my plane. A narrow escape.

## Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe 2013

*In the (northern) fall of 2013, Dorothea and I go on a fascinating safari trip to Namibia and Botswana. After an excursion to the roaring Victoria Falls, we meet Rafaela and Martin at the end for a week.*



We take a train from Bonn to Frankfurt airport. The German rail system *Deutsche Bahn* has an interesting way of bringing excitement even to boring trips. Some of our trains are cancelled or delayed, the public announcements incorrect. They enjoy a credibility close to that of the North Korean government. This can be annoying if you have to catch a flight. On the other hand, they run an excellent web site for trains all over Europe, and the Swiss rail system is the only one in the world whose trains are more reliable, according to my experience.



Our airbus A380 is an impressive monster. You go up the stairs inside, and have a whole airplane below you. Our daughter Rafaela works for the airline and has organized inexpensive business class tickets for us.

At the Johannesburg airport, we relax a bit in the pleasant restaurant *Quills* of the *Intercontinental Hotel*, just across from the arrivals hall. After our continuing flight to Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, we stay in a pleasant small lodge. We rest for a moment, then go to the city center. On Independence Avenue, we find the restaurant which I remember fondly from my previous visit: the *Grand Canyon*, see page 402. We sit on the veranda, enjoy the street view, delicious draught beer and a succulent steak. Later we go to the Ink Palace, its equestrian statue, and the Church of Christ. Dinner is at the *Gathemann*. See also Figures 484 and 487.



Figure 492. Old engines at the ink palace, and the *Gathemann*.

The next morning, our Namibian adventure starts by picking up our rental Nissan 2.4 liter Diesel, double cabin with two roof tents. The KEA rental company tells us it consumes 12l/100 km. It consumes much more, the tent does not work, and we have considerable trouble with it.

The friendly Claudius, a native who has lived for some years in our suburb of Bad Godesberg in Bonn, explains the vehicle to us in a pedantic way. I point out that my car insurance back home covers me here as well, but they insist on their own insurance, which I had not ordered and for which they charge 600 Euros. One tire is almost worn to the threads, and they exchange it with the spare tire. So now we drive with an unreliable spare. All this is rather annoying, but worse was to come. In total, the vehicle is at the end of its lifespan.

We give a lift to a KEA employee to downtown. He says to Dorothea: “You are very uptight. Not necessary. Your husband is an excellent driver.” Dorothea to me: “Wrong on both counts.” Yeah.

Our first camp is at the Kalahari Anib Lodge south of Windhoek. It is advertised as giving an impression of the wonderful life on a guest farm. Nonsense. All the guests here

are foreign tourists, mainly Germans. Just what we do not want. Two Italians at the table besides ours are mobile phone addicts. When Claudius handed over our rental car, he explained to us some tent poles, then rested them against a pillar, and forgot to give them back to us. Without them, our tents are pretty wobbly. We call KEA. “We will call you back tomorrow.” Wonderful. What about tonight?



Figure 493. Our first and only night in our tents, which turned out to be unusable. Richly rewarded by the sight of a cheetah. Quiver tree forest.

Next morning, the receptionist tells us that they called and that the tent poles are in the back of the car. But they are not. I call them back and someone actually called Mona Lisa dares telling me: “You signed for the tent poles and so they are your responsibility.” Adding insult to injury. I talk to Claudius, without result, then ask to speak to the manager Theo, but he is unavailable. There are other annoyances, from some lights that do not work to the gas bottle and missing compression straps. We cannot pack the tents, because the zippers are full of sand. In the end, we hire three strong guys from the lodge who climb like monkeys around on the vehicle and, using all their force, succeed in closing the zipper. Too much for us. They also give us a wrench for the gas bottle, which KEA had “forgotten”. Our rental agreement is for hand-over with a full tank, but soon we learn the hard way that they had filled the tank only to half of its capacity. Probably they cheat this way systematically. With a cheapie rental company, one might expect this, but not from high-price KEA.

Our next stop is the Kokerboom (quiver tree) Lodge. These trees right next to the lodge have fantastic shapes, a straight trunk and then a crown of leaves at the top. The setting sun makes for nice pictures.



Figure 494. A couple of tourists, fantastic rock formations, here a “tank”, a train station in the middle of nowhere. And fantastic vintage cars at the *Cañon Road House*.

We drive on an excellent road further south, to the Fish River, following an arrow-straight railroad track. It looks like designed for an ICE or TGV train, but the only train we see is a Diesel locomotive pulling a single passenger car and puffing along slowly,



honking all the time in this deserted area. The *Cañon Road House* has a fancy decoration of two dozen vintage cars. For dinner, we sit besides an old Mercedes ambulance. In one car, they have set up a big fireplace. The Fish River canyon is up to 500 meters deep, only puddles remain of the river in this season. The views from the lookouts are impressive.



Figure 495. The Fish River Canyon, a Grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) and a cactus at a rest house.

We try to put up our tent. The effects of bad material and wind produce an instable construction, which flutters loudly throughout the night. We can hardly sleep and curse KEA.

It is a long ride across the Namib desert to the coastal town of Lüderitz. The road is often covered by blowing sands, but fortunately no dunes impede our progress. The town

was founded by German colonizers, and there are still many Germans here. We stay at the guest house of Herr Hälbich from Hamburg.



Figure 496. The road to Lüderitz and a windy outing on a sailboat.

Next morning, we make an outing on the sailboat *Sedina*. The captain René is of German extraction from Windhoek, about 40 years of age, and has many interesting stories to tell from his illegal work in the diamond mines of Liberia, where the *de Beers* company tried to establish a monopoly. The sails of the *Sedina* are not used today, because a block is broken, and René uses the engine. We see a few penguins and British ruins on the guano island *Halifax*, catch a fleeting glimpse of some dolphins, but that was it.

Back in town, we drive to the old diamond city of Kolmannskuppe (Coleman's Hill), operated by Germans early in the 20th century. Unstoppable sand dunes have overwhelmed the buildings in this large compound, abandoned almost a century ago. The large rooms are now filled with sand, sometimes a meter or two deep, creeping up the wallpapered sides of rooms. The shingles on the roofs have vanished, and the remaining battens of wooden slats cast fascinating geometric patterns of sun and shade on the inside dunes. Lovely geometric pictures.



Figure 497. Kolmannskuppe, the main building in the center.  
At right: please vacuum my room!



Figure 498. The power of nature.



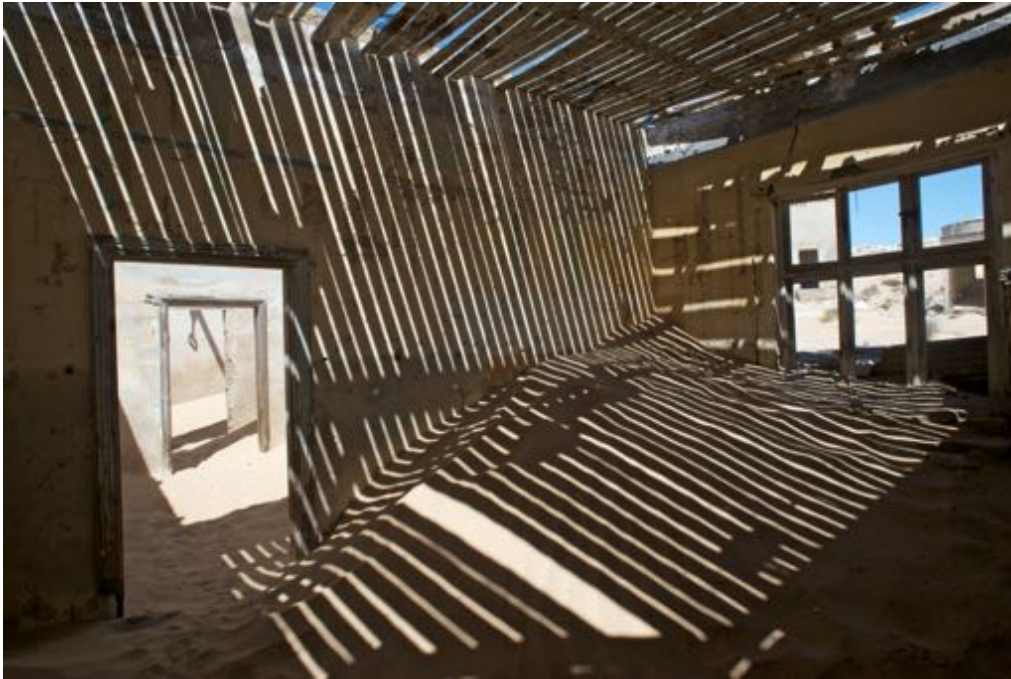


Figure 499. Diamond geometry.

The Dias Point is a promontory on the coast, named after Bartolomeo Diaz from Lisbon. The forceful wind almost blows Dorothea over, and against the wind, she does not make the last steps up to the lookout. We compensate our exertion with some hot chocolate in a café nearby, in completely calm air.



Figure 500. A marine avalanche at Dias Point, and a Mexican-looking bell at an upcountry resthouse.



Figure 501. Final anchorage, and a flamingo nearby.

The next day is Dorothea's birthday. Unfortunately, she does not feel well. Although we have eaten the same food, I do not have a grumbling stomach. We drive on a good road to a village with the unlikely name of Helmeringhausen. Such a German name in the middle of Africa! Well, in the south . . . Continuing on a dirt road, we have the rough black Tiras mountains to our right, the Naukluft-Namib desert to our left. Many stretches of corrugated road, some sand holes, but all manageable. We see no other traffic except a minibus with seven Belgians who have the same destination as ours: the *Kanaan Farm*.

Herni Strauss, its owner, welcomes us. He grew up here, his mother was a member of the DTA (Democratic Turnhallen Alliance), fighting against the apartheid under South African rule. When the Belgians arrive, we all go on a dune tour in an open pickup truck. I sit in the back, good view, it gets cold in the evening. Herni first drives in hunt mode, chasing animals like oryx, springbok, jackal, and ostrich. I do not like the way he scares those creatures, driving fast across the savannah, cutting off their flight paths. We make long stops for drinks and biltong, air-dried meat. For our main goal, the fantastic dunes, little time remains. The sun sets beautifully, and even more impressive is the rise of the moon.



Figure 502. Dunes near Lüderitz, Helmeringhausen, and the road.

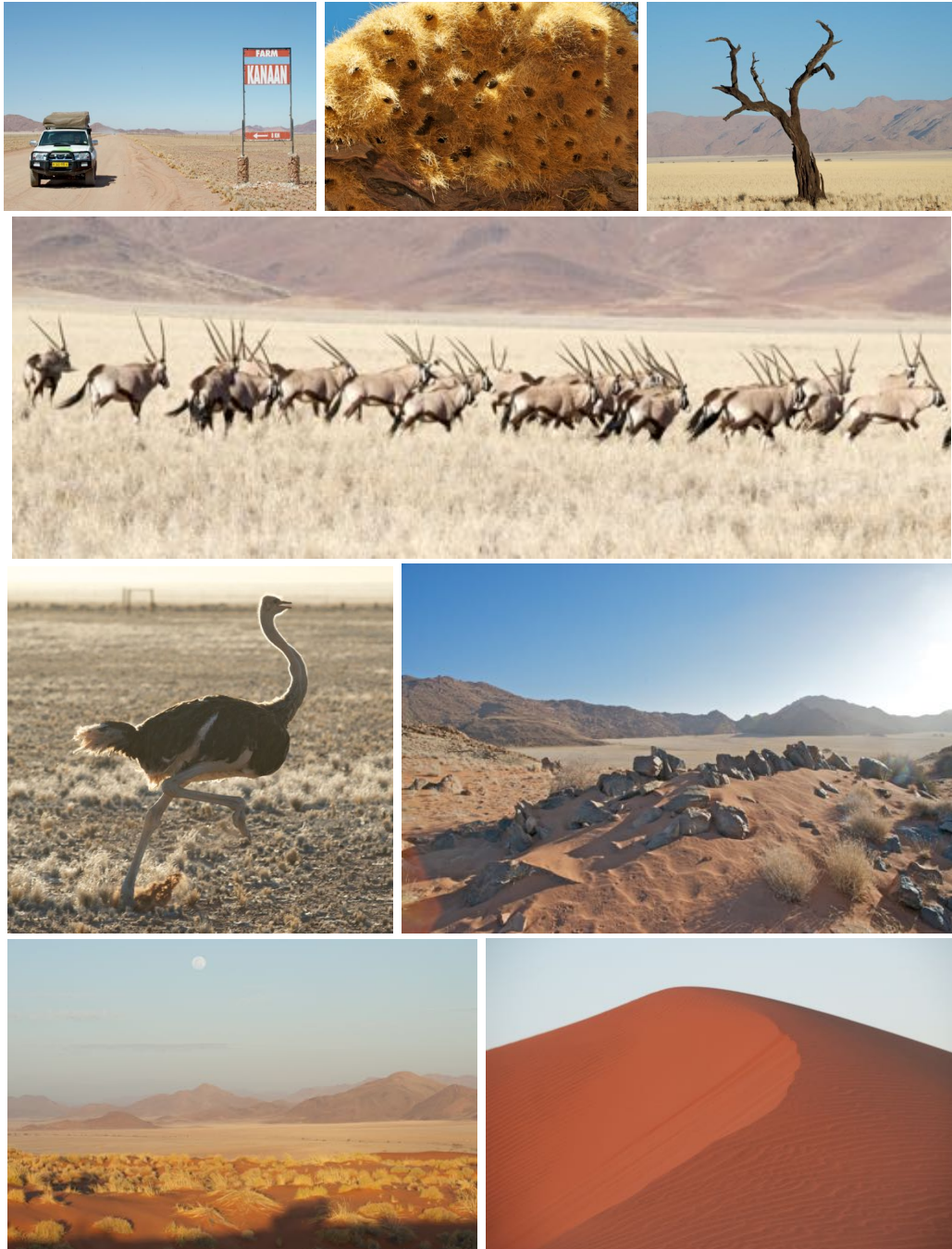


Figure 503. Kanaan: weaver bird nests and a lonely tree.  
Herni's hunt: oryx and ostrich, moonscape. Sunset.



The next day, we drive to the Sossuvlei, a desert area with impressive dunes and picturesque dead trees between them. Finally. We are on a sand track labeled “for  $4 \times 4$ s only”, and I take off enthusiastically. But after a few kilometers, I get stuck in deep sand. Two girls from Bavaria, traveling on their own, help push our car out of the hole. Shortly after this, the same things happens. Again people help us, but I give up. We have to return, because otherwise it will be too late.



Figure 504. Sossuvlei and the road.



Figure 505. The Sossuvlei.

Our campsite is windy and freezing cold. As usual, our tent does not really work, and we shiver through the night and the morning. We leave for Swakopmund. The road is bad, corrugated, and around 16.00, the sound of pfffft does not surprise us. Flat tire. I start changing it. John, a friendly South African from Bloemfontein taking his wife and two children to a beach holiday, stops for us. He has real tools instead of the toys that come with our KEA car. Our tire comes off and the new one on, in a jiffy.



Figure 506. A flat tire is no surprise on such roads.

Around 17.00, we stop for two young Germans with a broken KEA car by the roadside. Its clutch gave up in the morning, possibly because the previous driver did not know how to drive with a manual shift. We cannot do anything. They called KEA in the morning and will probably have to spend a dreary night in this inhospitable environment. Together we rant about our lousy rental company.



Figure 507. Music of the Old Germans and of the young Namibians.  
(Jagdhornbläser der Jägerschaft = hunting horn blowers  
of the hunters' association)



Shortly after sunset, we arrive in Walvis Bay. On the remaining stretch to Swakopmund, we see more cars than in the three past days. In the hotel, we enjoy the first night in a warm bed with enough space, a relief after the miserable tent we had the last days.

Leonard from KEA brings the replacement car that they promised after many insistent requests. You would think that they take care to deliver a car in good shape. But no, two tires have deep cuts, a large piece of rubber is flaking off from one of them. Not unexpectedly, their advice is to swap them with the two spare tires. Yeah, driving on the difficult dirt roads here with non-functional spares. Great idea, great service. I spend a lot of time and money on calling KEA in Windhoek and am really mad at them. We have had car and tire trouble on several trips, but that was in our own car and I could deal with it. But here I paid a lot of money and got only annoyances in return. Never again KEA!

Leonard told me on delivery that the car's tank is almost full. Just for safety, I fill up the next day. How much? A whopping 96 liters! They would have sent us into the desert with an almost empty tank! On both cars, the fuel gauges do not work, never dipping below 3/4 full. They have possibly been fudged by KEA, for systematically defrauding customers on fuel.



Figure 508. A capricorn with two horns, and excellent “warm beer, lousy food, bad service” in Swakopmund.

Driving north along the *Skeleton Coast*, Dorothea sees a ship wreck just before Henties Bay. Not a rarity here, since the cold Antarctic waters often create storms and dense fog which have doomed numerous ships. The poor crew then may have been glad to reach firm ground, but then many of them perished on long marches through the waterless desert; hence the skeleton name. And here, just off the *Zeila's* wreck, some humorous locals have assembled a human-looking skeleton from animal bones. The perfect illustration of this sinister place.

We continue north on a sand track, reinforced with salt. As smooth as asphalt. Only when it gets wet, the surface becomes as slippery as ice. We stay in the comfortable *Cape Cross Lodge* and have a nice dinner. Loud disco music in the background is rather annoying, but we are the only guests and they turn it off at Dorothea's request.



Figure 509. Skeleton Coast.



Figure 510. The *Zeila* and the pseudo-skeleton.



Figure 511. Salt road and sunset at Cape Cross.

In the *Cape Cross Seal Reserve*, hundreds of Brown Cape Fur Seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus*) laze on the beach, loudly belching and generating a heavy scent of digestion. Some adults are out at sea, acquiring lunch on the fish market. The pups with their mommies are absolutely charming.



Figure 512. A colony of seals.





Figure 513. Cute seals.

On this desolate stretch of coast, the Portuguese seafarer Diogo Cão erected in 1485 a cross in the name of his King João II, with the Portuguese coat-of-arms. The Catholic church had more precise information about the age of the universe (or the world) than today's astrophysicists: *A mundi creatione fluxerunt anni 6685 et a Christi nati ...*<sup>20</sup> My photo shows a 1913 replica in the original location, but the original was taken to Germany in 1893, when Namibia was the German colony *Deutsch-Südwestafrika*. It now stands tall at 3.54 meters in the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* in Berlin, a showpiece in their permanent exhibition. In 2017, after previous attempts, the government of Namibia officially requested the restitution of the original. This is just one case of a huge can of worms that museums in the Western world try to keep the lid on: where do the artifacts taken under colonial occupation belong? This issue will keep museums, art historians, and governments busy for decades, with arguments pro and con.

<sup>20</sup>Since the world's creation 6685 years have passed, and since the birth of Christ ...



Figure 514. Diogo Cão's cross at Cape Cross.

We drive on to the *Khoraxis Lodge*. On the way, we stop at some huts. Skimpily clad Himba ladies cover their body and hair with otjize paste, made from butterfat and ochre pigment. This protects them from the heat and insects, their braids look like solid matter. They try to sell us some handicraft items to decorate our own hut, without success. Everything is overpriced, the ladies are rather arrogant.

Not far from the lodge, we visit a petrified forest. Large trees fell over millions of years ago and crystals formed in their cells, showing the original tree structure, but now as a rock. Our guide Hennie explains very well what he has learned, but is lost when I ask questions about related matters. The *Welwitschia* tree is famous and ugly. Its reproduction is unusual: there are male and female trees, and the pollination is done by crawling insects that transport the pollen. Hennie shows us a plant with a white milky

poison that the bushmen smeared on their arrows. And a grisly story of how seven tourists barbecued their steaks on dry wood of this plant and all died.



Figure 515. Himba child and women.





Figure 516. Petrified wood.

Eventually we arrive at one of the main goals of our trip, the *Etosha salt pan*, famous for its rich wildlife congregating at waterholes. Our campsite is less than thrilling, too many people. But the wild animals make up for this in terms of thrill. The tent of our replacement car is easier to handle than the previous one, but still putting it together in the morning is a real killer. One has to balance precariously on the side of the vehicle, pull two fastening rings out of the extendable ladder with two hands, and with a third hand—if present—has to push the ladder together. Even worse are the zippers. For the center ones, one has to hold on to the side of the vehicle with one hand, push in the tent fabric with a second hand, and pull the worn and resisting zipper shut with a third hand. I am not Shiva and have only two hands at my disposal, and am bathed in sweat after this exercise, my arms are trembling with the exertion. Impossible, and we decide to not use the tent anymore. Too bad, we should have saved the expense and taken one of our own reliable tents. All this does not improve the mood in our party of two.

In the evening, we sit for a long time above a waterhole. Herds of elephants congregate. A rhinoceros tries to sneak in, the big males chase it away, it runs around the whole herd and sneaks in at the other end. A fascinating game.



Figure 517. No, the elephant at the top was not killed but just enjoys a mud bath. However, the elephant destruction in the next photo is for real.  
And a young one dominates the road.

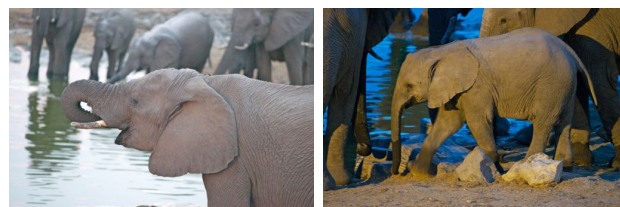


Figure 518. Young elephants at a pool.



Figure 519. At a pool: an elephant troop marching in arrogantly, and the rhino.

Once we are on the road, the pain is quickly forgotten. Towards Wolfsnes, Okondeka, and Adamax in the west, we see antilopes, springboks, zebras, and giraffes, some wildebeest in the distance. After lunch in Okaukuejo, we take a sidetrack towards Halali, used



by few other vehicles. “Halali” is the German hunters’ tune, often played on a hunter’s horn.

Some impala gazelles (*Aepyceros melampus*) stare at us from right beside the car. In the evening, I sort some of my photos and discover a fantastic one of an impala, whose eyes reflect our car and myself.



Figure 520. Impalas; zooming in to the top photo, you can see our car reflected in its eye.

An elephant on the track offers us his rear view, I get a little closer, he turns sideways into the bush, but then comes back at us in a menacing way. Dorothea gets scared and I drive away quickly.



Figure 521. Angry elephant.



Figure 522. Okaukuejo, Halali, and Namutomi fort.

An exciting moment begins when we see some cars stopped. A leopard, an animal rarely seen, hides behind a bush. About fifty meters away, several zebras form a defensive phalanx, facing the cat. Eventually, the leopard gives up his plans for lunch. Nothing happens in the end, but just this spectacle of how rather weak animals defend themselves by numbers and strategy against a strong predator is fascinating. Better than any murder flick.

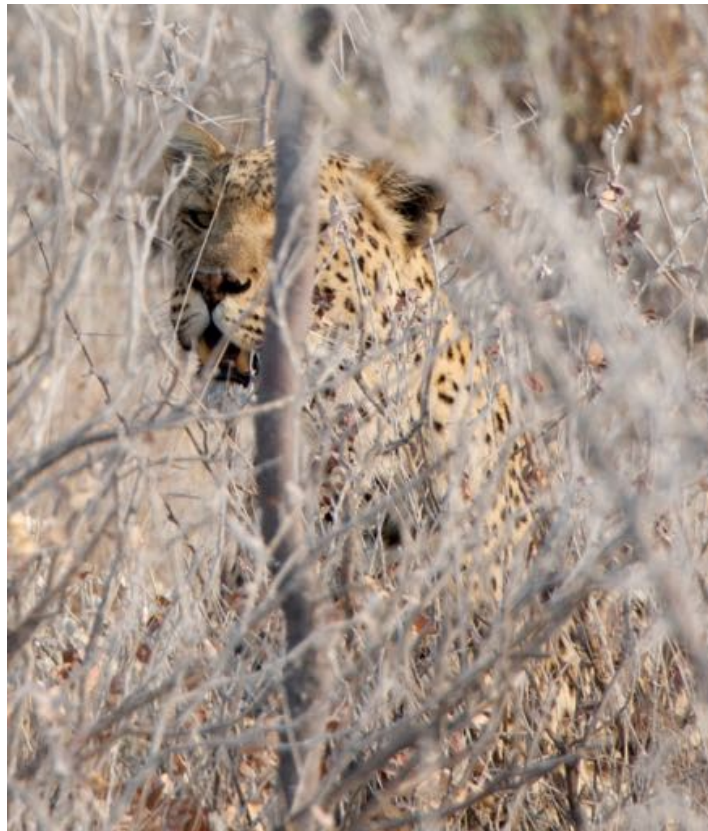


Figure 523. Predator attack ...

At our next campsite Halali we watch a great show at the waterhole. Two rhinoceroses, one black and one white, linger in the bush and finally come to the water. Then an arrogant and gruff troop of elephants marches in, the rhinoceroses run away. Big splashing, cajoling and some skirmishes of adolescents. Two adolescent elephants intertwine their trunks. It looks almost like two teenagers kissing—and perhaps it is just that. Really cute. A baby hides under its mother, falls over time and again, and picks itself up.





Figure 524. ...but the defenses hold!



Figure 525. Kissing adolescent elephants.

But then another troop of elephants arrives, even more raucous than the previous one. They push the others away. An adolescent does not want to obey until an older male pushes him away with loud trumpeting. The young one tries to sneak back, but is resolutely pushed away every time. All this is a gorgeous spectacle.



Figure 526. Impala, Topi (*Damaliscus korrigum*), lonely rhino, and curious zebra.

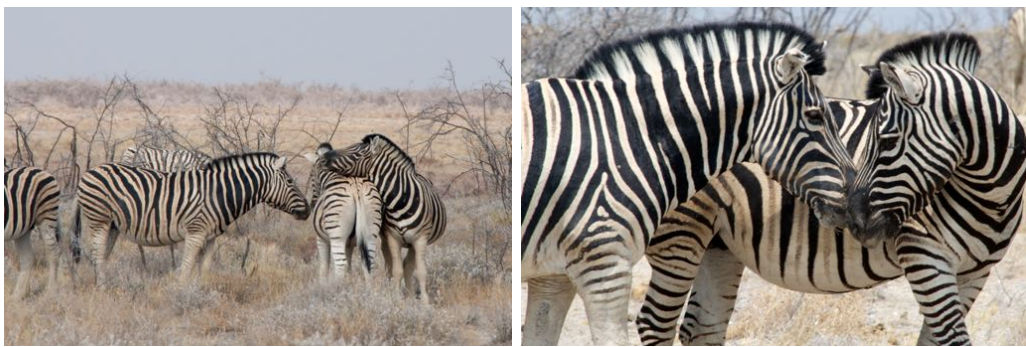


Figure 527. Zebras cuddling and kissing.





Figure 528. Zebras proudly patrolling the savannah.

The next day at the Etosha Salt Pan lookout, we march onto the salt plain. Sand underneath, above it a layer of salt crystals, with many animal tracks. Rafaela and Martin took their engagement photo here, just black and white, showing a rear view of the couple marching onto the plain which extends to the horizon. To the end of the world. Into infinity. I like that picture very much, so imaginatively different from the usual ones with the flower-decorated bride and the smiling bridegroom under a tree. As an homage to this happy couple, we take similar pictures.

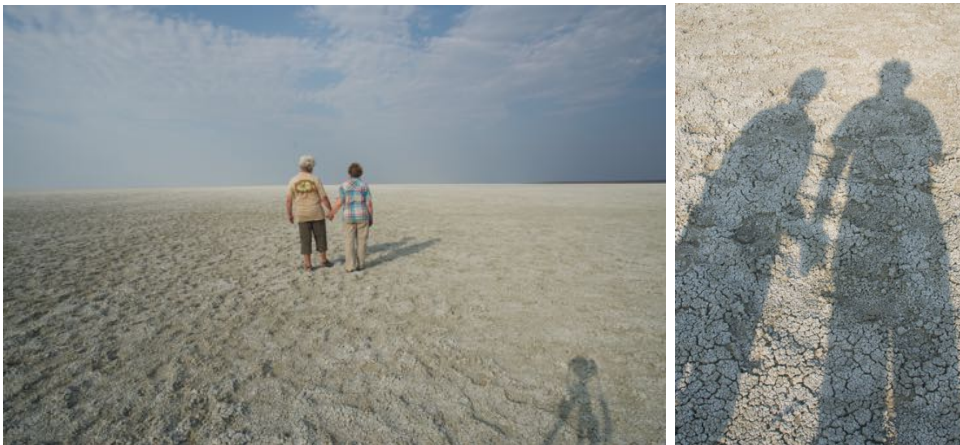


Figure 529. Walking into the Etosha salt pan.

In Western countries, there is a lot of clamor about the ivory trade and the culling of elephants, these gentle giants. In Namibia we see a different aspect of this business. Elephants routinely overthrow whole trees, nibble a few leaves and some bark, and the



rest of the tree is left to rot; see Figure 517. These dead trees serve other animals, for example, the dozen or so small birds in the same picture, not to mention insects and worms. But overall, it is not clear to us how much damage the elephants do to their own environment, especially their large troops.



Figure 530. Giraffes, the gentle giants.

In the evening, elephants again perform an entertaining show for us at the waterhole. Two adolescents cuddle each other, a small one tries to push in but they shove it gently

away. A white rhinoceros drinks peacefully at first, then a funny scene develops. The elephant bulls chase the rhino to and fro, which eventually leaves the pool but walks around it at a safe distance to sneak back into it at the other end. It is chased again and gives up after some time. This massive animal looks like a dwarf among the giant elephants.



Figure 531. Mom with baby.

We have lunch at the old German Namutomi fort at Halali. It is impressive and well restored. In 1904, seven German soldiers were attacked by 500 Ovambos and shot them down with guns and machine guns against bows and arrows. A contemporary plaque recounts this “heroic event”, not to our liking. It was one of many German atrocities in the Herero and Namaqua genocide. Given this history, it is amazing how respectfully Germans are seen today in Namibia.



Figure 532. Ostrich with high and low neck.



Figure 533. Yellow-billed hornbill (*Tockus flavirostris*).

We rest at the *Sachsenheim Farm* and I have a long conversation with Gerd, its owner, of German extraction. He praises Namibia for having much less corruption than is usual in Africa. The government charges a farm tax to farms in white ownership, but not to those owned by blacks. They have plans to quadruple this tax, which for Gerd's farm, valued at about 4 million Euros, would mean an annual payment of 30 000 Euros. As we leave the next day, Gerd's credit card machine has no internet connection and he asks me to transfer the money to him later, which I do from Katima Mulilo some days later. It is wonderful to be in a country where people extend this kind of trust.

It is long drive via Tsumeb and Grootfontein to Rundu and its *Ngandu Safari Lodge*. I am so exhausted that I fall asleep in the car as Dorothea checks us in. Subconsciously, I hear party noise and a female choir ululating: a wedding ceremony. I wake up too late and presumably miss some nice pictures. Late in the evening, we sit in the bar and Boy-DJ puts on loud African disco music. Frenetic dancing, but not with us tired travelers.

The *Caprivi strip* is a long rectangular area of Namibia squeezed between Botswana and Angola, about 200 kilometers long and mostly 10 km wide. The German Chancellor Leo Graf (Count) von Caprivi acquired it from the British in 1890, together with



Heligoland and in exchange for the island of Zanzibar. The next day, we drive 200 kilometers of good asphalt to Divundu in the Caprivi strip, then a side track to the *Mahangu Safari Lodge*. We decide to stay in our spacious and comfortable tent for a few days.



Figure 534. What are you thinking about?



Figure 535. Wedding party revellers at the *Ngandu Lodge*, and the *Mahangu Lodge*.



Figure 536. By the Kavangu river: crocodile, darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*), giant kingfisher (*Ceryle maxima*), Egyptian goose (*Alopochen aegyptiacus*).



Figure 537. By the Kavangu river: white-fronted Bee-eater (*Merops bullockoides*) and their nest holes, yellow-billed hornbill.



Figure 538. Curious kudu by a waterhole, with red-billed oxpeckers cleaning its fur.



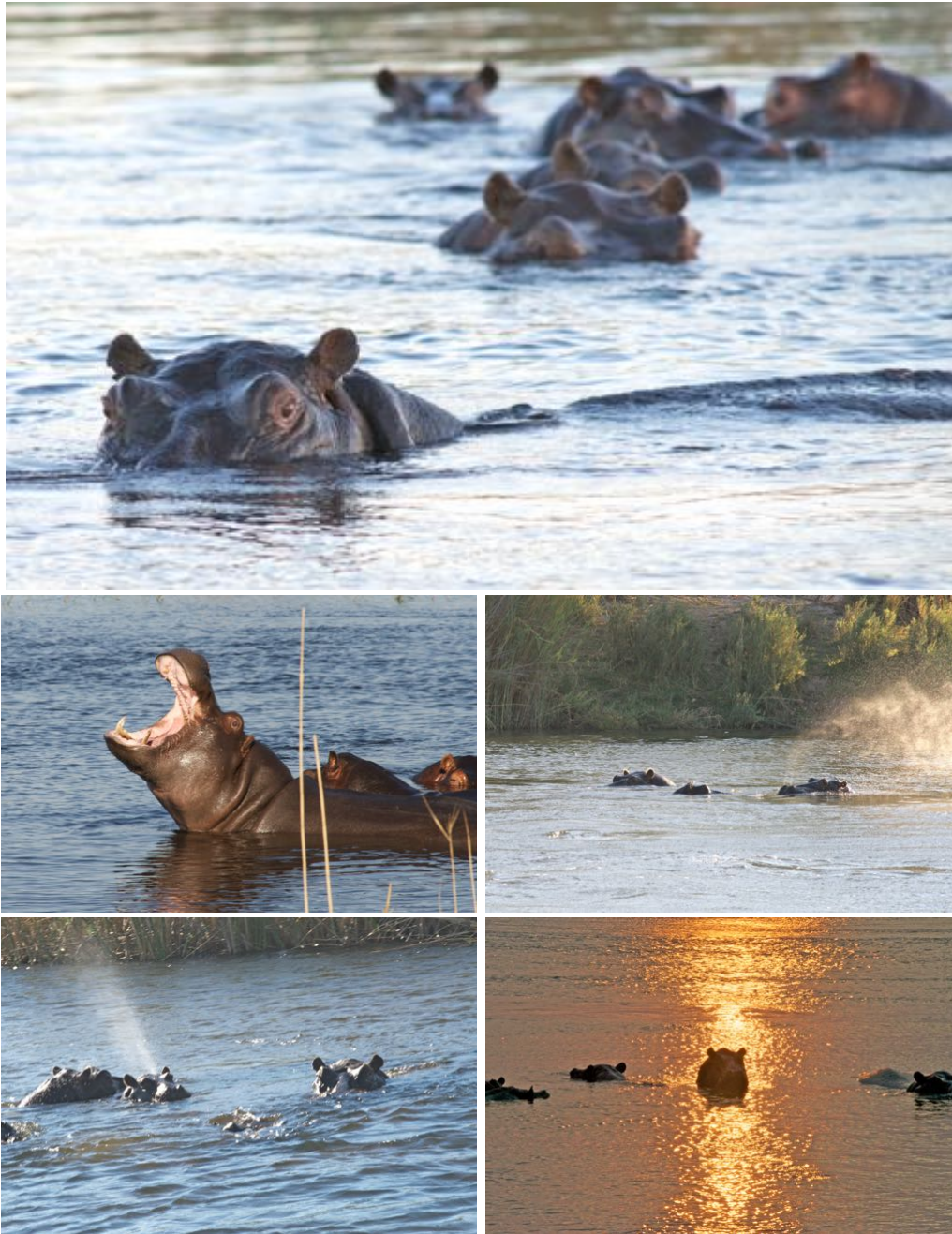


Figure 539. Hippos in the Kavangu river.

On our boat trip on the Kavangu, we see hippopotamuses, a female crocodile on the river bank, cormorants, king fisher, partly in the setting sun reflected on the water. Just

beautiful. At night, we hear the hippos grunting in front of our tent.



Figure 540. Posing for the dentist.



Figure 541. Monkey in the trees and little human monkeys clambering for biscuits.

A few days later, we drive back to Divundu and via Kongola on to the *Mazambala Island Lodge*. In contrast to southern Namibia, this area is densely populated. In one



village, Dorothea gives a few biscuits to children, and pretty soon we have a wild horde at our car doors begging for more, more, more. The stronger ones take it all. Not so nice for us.



Figure 542. Impressionistic painting on the Kavangu river.

We leave our car in a parking lot and take the two-kilometer ride on a boat to the lodge. On a boat tour one afternoon, our guide knows the animals very well, but the English couple riding with us know them even better. Excellent amateur ornithologists on a 10-week honeymoon. Egrets, king fisher, fish eagles, many hippos really close up. Their ears pierce the water surface in the setting sun.



Figure 543. Boys' toys in a village.





Figure 544. Village life along the road: a carver and roof making.

Our next stop is Katima Mulilo. On our way there, we find many pleasant picnic spots by the road, as in France but not in Germany, where you pay 50 cents even to go to the washroom on the autobahn. In Katima, I have to stock up on Namibian cash at a misbehaving ATM. A friendly Namibian shows me: “No, you have to slide in your card gently, like this . . .”. It takes some elbowing and tight clutching of my card to make him go away when he realizes that I am not going to be an easy victim of his theft attempt. I transfer the money I owe to Gerd, with lots of paper pushing by bank staff exhibiting a very relaxed work attitude.



Figure 545. We usually stick to the speed limit for elephants.

We cross the border from Namibia to Botswana, no problem. At the veterinary checkpoint, I can salvage some wooden elephants that Dorothea bought, but we lose a few fruit. In Kasane, I return our obnoxious rental car to KEA and we observe the warthogs in the garden in front of our hut. We leave most of our luggage in this lodge, since tomorrow we start on the real African part of our trip.



Figure 546. *Doro* is one of Dorothea's nicknames; the *!Nawas* starts with a clicking sound, a phonetic challenge for Europeans.

Beginning two wonderful days experiencing the Victoria Falls from all sides, we take a taxi to Kazungula on the banks of the Zambezi river and cross the border from Botswana to Zambia in my favorite manner: on foot. The border formalities are easy except that the Zambian visa is expensive, the ferry ride takes just a few minutes. Many taxis go to Livingstone. A woman with two small children travels with us. The older one, about five years old, has a monster truck which he calls a Wiu Wiu, exactly how our eldest grandson does. Dorothea entertains the two little boys fabulously. We travel parallel to the Zambezi river, but sufficiently far away so that we do not see it.



Figure 547. Kazungula and its ferry.

We stay at the *Waterfront Lodge*, beautifully situated right on the banks of the Zambezi. Unfortunately, it is almost completely booked out and we get a room only with some persuasion. The other guests are a mixed bunch of mainly young tourists in large groups, also couples and locals that spend a weekend here, and plenty of Chacma baboons (*Papio ursinus*).





Figure 548. Heavily loaded travelers and taxi.

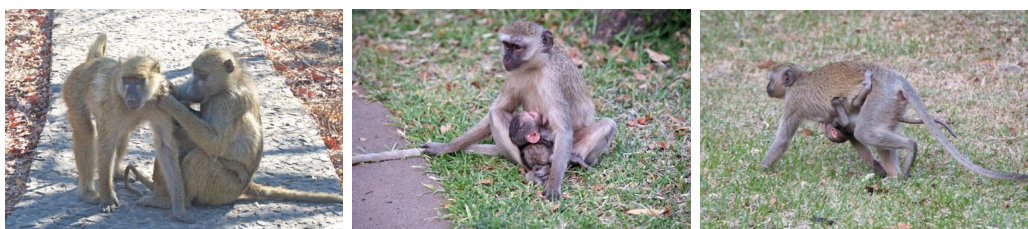


Figure 549. Baboons at the *Waterfront Lodge*.



Figure 550. At the *Waterfront Lodge*: young guest and old tree.

We spend the day at the Victoria Falls or Mosi-oa-Tunya, see page 378. This is the season with low water, only small rivulets on the Zambian side. You can even walk along the upper edge of the falls to Livingstone island and bathe in a small pool right above the thundering water; see Figure 553, bottom right. Not for us. Views from the Boiling Point and the Knife Edge Bridge, the last rock in the Zambian part. The rock Danger Point just across already belongs to Zimbabwe. Beautiful rainbows, we hardly get wet.



Figure 551. How many rainbows do you see?



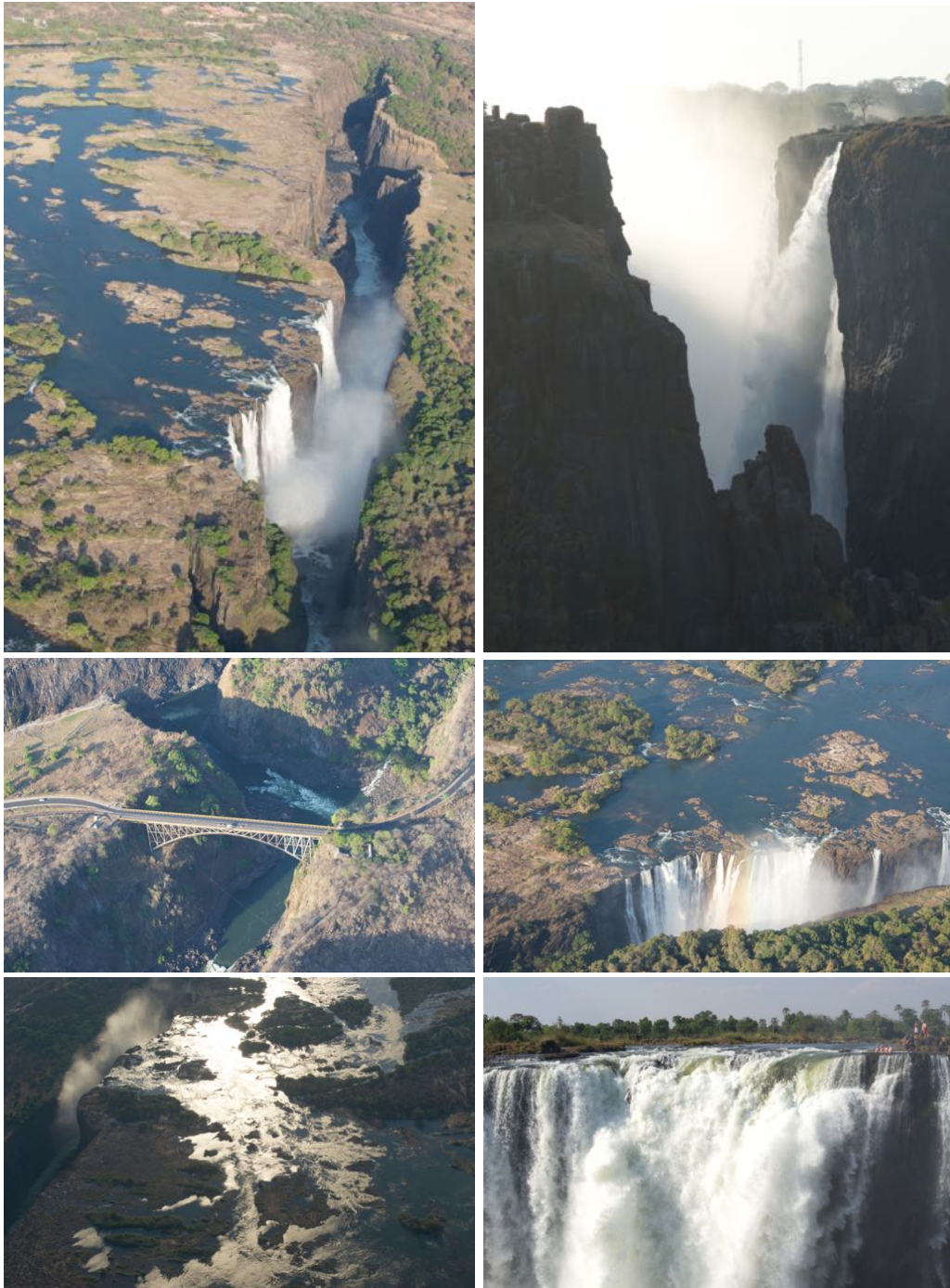


Figure 552. The daring go bathing in the Livingstone pool, last three pictures.



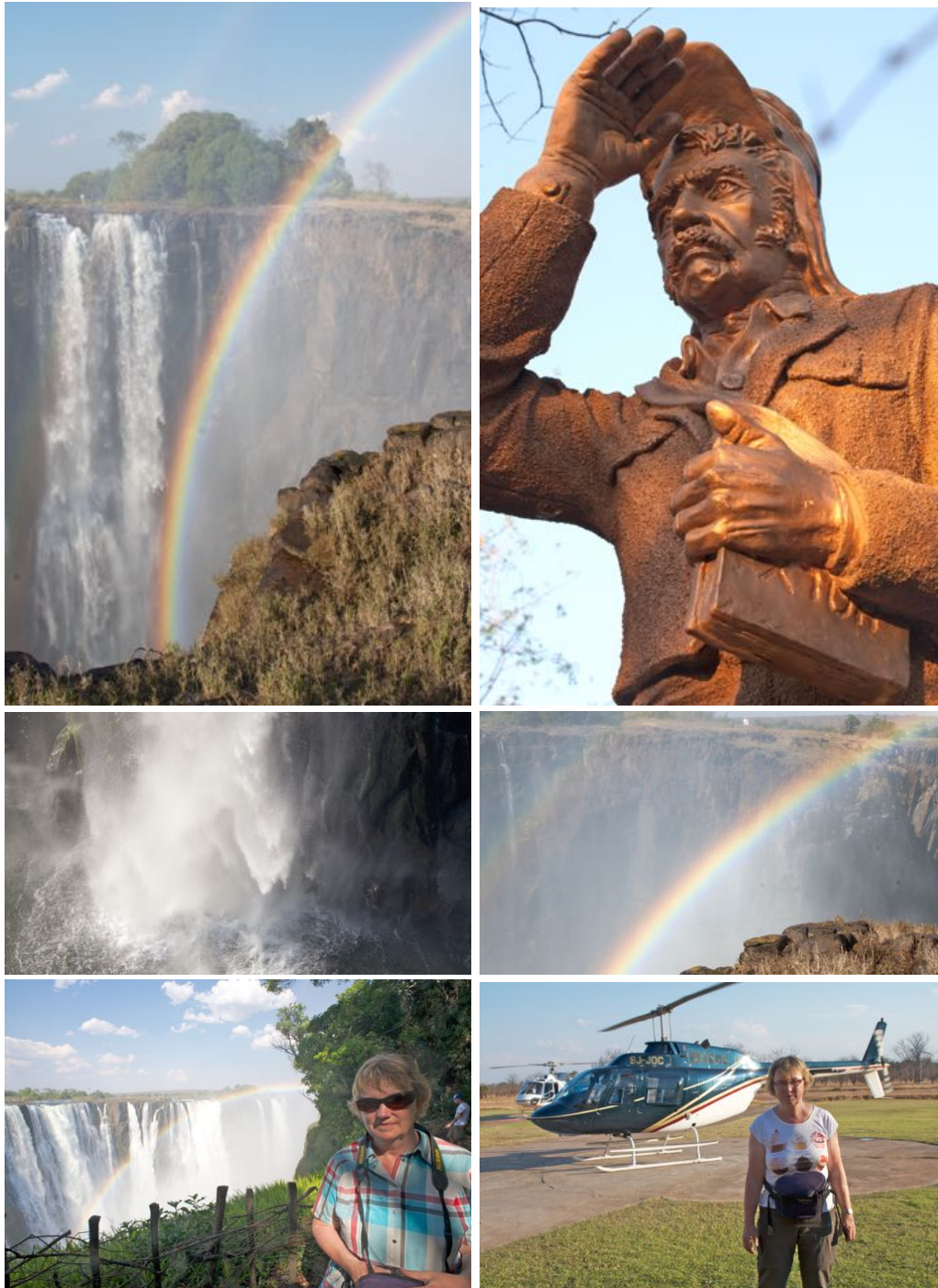


Figure 553. Vic Falls and Flight of Angels.

After decades of civil war, the former British colony of Rhodesia cast off its white regime under Ian Smith in 1980. With Robert Gabriel Mugabe, the leader in the war of independence, as its president the country prospered at first, the white settlers were allowed to remain and contributed much to the economy. However, by the year 2000 Mugabe's soul was eaten up by his power and he turned into a corrupt dictator worse than the previous racist government. Often led by his party, the Zanu-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front), black people stormed the farms run by whites, sometimes killing the white families, and took over the farms. Since then, the farms do not produce much anymore and the country's economy has fallen into an abyss, troubled—among many things—by a momentous inflation. It reached a whopping 11,200,000% in August 2008, and the central bank introduced a bank note of 100 billion Zimbabwean dollars. This makes imports of spare parts for agricultural machinery or of seeds almost impossible. It is disappointing to see how people who had fought hard to combat white racism now endorse black racism. Mugabe was forced into a luxurious retirement in 2017.

The Victoria Falls bridge is a steel construction built in 1905, 111 meters tall and obviously very solid work; see Figure 553, fourth row. As it was finished, the two sides overlapped by  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inches, and then shrank at night by exactly the same amount. This sounds like a perfect fit, but I wonder what happens when it extends again in the heat of the next day. We walk across the bridge, border formalities are easy. Vendors offer wooden figurines and worthless bills of Zimbabwean currency. One bill is for a trillion dollars, possibly a fake.

The views are even more impressive than on the other side, the rainbows are wonderful. Some droplets of water in the air, but no solid shower like in August 1987. At the *Vic Falls Hotel*, we have some drinks, a rainbow-colored Livingstone cocktail and a caipirinha, the latter because the situation reminds us of the *Hotel das cataratas* in Iguazú; see page 753.

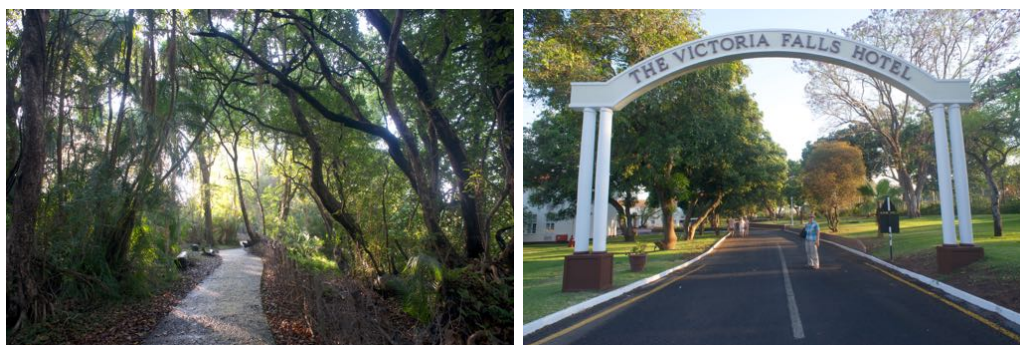


Figure 554. Marvellous small hikes, and the pompous entrance to the *Vic Falls Hotel*.

After a long day of walking, we take a helicopter flight the next day. Long loops



over the falls, some rainbows, nice view of the bridge and up the Zambezi river, where elephants cross the waters.

At the end of our Victorian stay, we take a taxi to Bingongo on Nakatindi Road, then one to Kazungula. All shared vehicles, dirt cheap. The ferry crosses the river too quickly for us. And then we are back in Kasane. Dorothea wants to buy some African fabric, but here dealers' wares look more like Ikea than like Botswana.

This year's week-long Okavango adventure starts. At the chaotic Kasane airport, a friendly helper vanishes with our luggage and brings back our boarding passes. Very efficient. We sit in the first row of our 10-seater Avro airplane. We fly over dry land, then comes the Chobe river and after it, all is wet and green. A sharp border line separates dry from wet, like at the Nile river. On arrival at the Kwara Lodge, we have a happy reunion with Rafaela and Martin, her fiancé, now husband, starting our swamp visit together. Many hugs and kisses.



Figure 555. Flights to and from the Kwara Lodge:  
intricate network of trails around a waterhole, the fire department,  
and a relaxed pilot cooling his arm in the airstream.

The first of our many game drives starts in the afternoon. We see the usual big animals like elephants, giraffes, wildebeest, impalas, and gazelles. After a month of driving through the wilderness of Namibia and Botswana, we have a certain safari overload and are less fascinated by these animals than at the beginning of our trip.



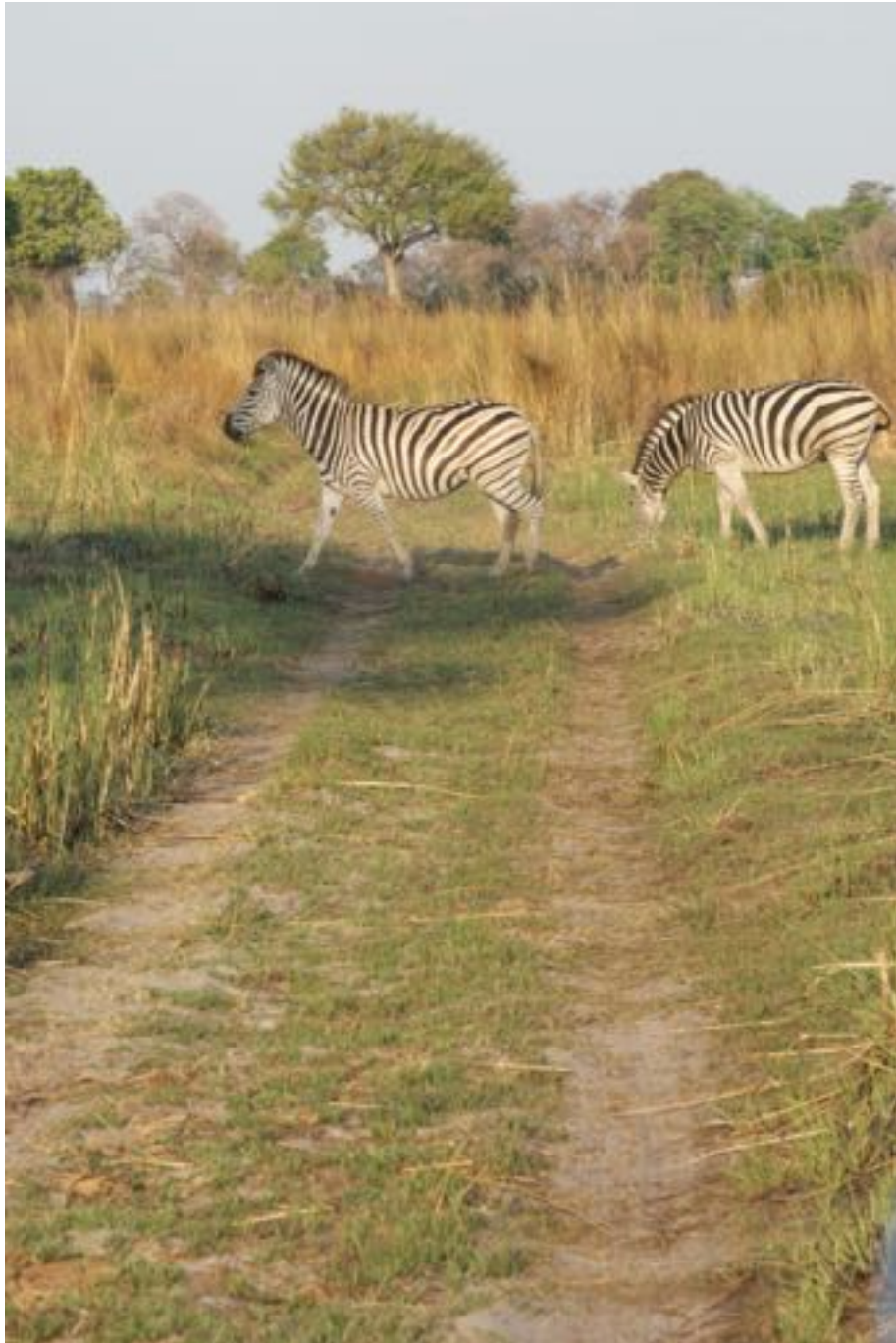


Figure 556. Zebra crossing.



Figure 557. Wildebeest in action, reminiscent of prehistoric paintings in the Altamira caves.



Figure 558. Zebras.

The most interesting one is a lonely lion resting in the shade. He finally gets up in a very decorative way. Dorothea has a Gin Tonic for sundowner. This becomes her standard drink on this trip, she might be called “Gina Dorobrigida”. Dinner is at a long table with boring food and boring people. Group travel is definitely not for me.





Figure 559. Three giraffic graces, ungraceful buffaloes, hippos, and an evil croc.

The next day, we have to get up at 05.30 for a game drive, after being served our early morning tea. This is another bother of organized tours. I would rather get some rest and drive around later in the day, maybe seeing some fewer animals—especially since in our experience, there is not less wildlife around during the day than at 06.00. But here it is all or nothing.



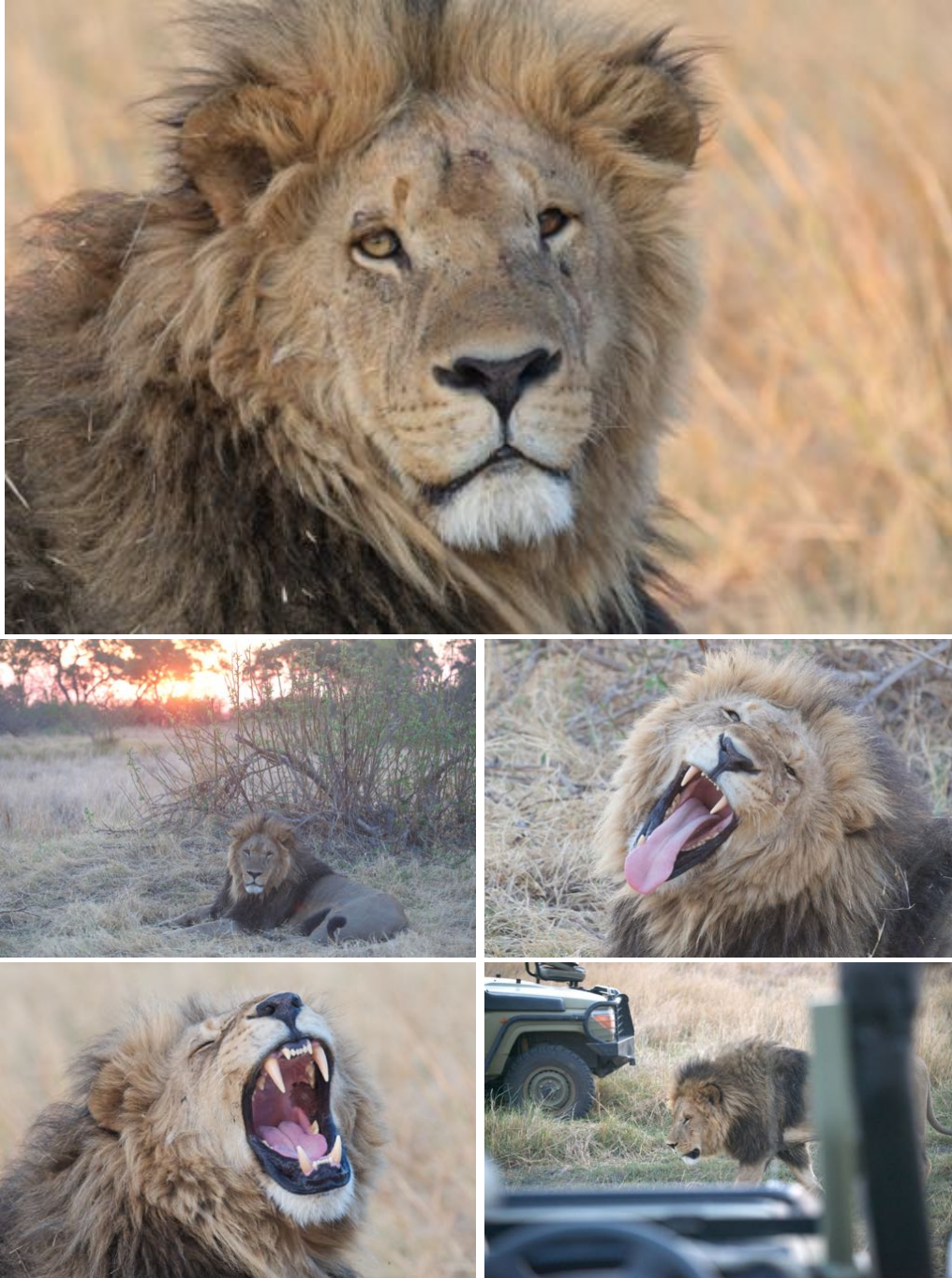


Figure 560. The king of the savannah.



Figure 561. Where is my dinner?



Figure 562. Kwara does not only have the big animals, it is also an ornithologist's paradise. Here a glossy starling.





Figure 563. Kwara birds: white-fronted bee-eater at top left, Egyptian goose, in penultimate row helmeted guineafowl at left, pied kingfisher at right, last image spurwinged goose.



The most impressive animals here, as in other game reserves, are the big animals like lions at the top of the food chain. But we see also many colorful birds, from glossy starling (*Lamprotornis nitens*), helmeted guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*) and pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*) to spurwinged geese (*Plectropterus gambensis*) and the southern ground hornbill (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*).

The next day is even more boring. We take a boat tour in a fiberglass *mokoro*, rather terrible. See page 369 for the real thing. The story is that the government prohibits the felling of sausage trees for dugout mokoros, and a whole traditional art is vanishing. I have my doubts about this. Wooden mokoros last about two years, plastic ones five years. Building decent boat ramps with winches might prolong the wood's life to just as much. As an outing, it is pure contemplation, more zen than wildlife. We are paddled along the banks of a lagoon, see water lilies, reeds, and some tiny colorful frogs, about 2 centimeters long. They do not belong to the “big five”. As exciting as a game of chess, but without the thinking.



Figure 564. Elephant diving for a mud bath, elephant destruction, impala in a hurry, and a sunset over the savannah.



Figure 565. Mokoro outing.

Our next destination is the *Pom Pom Lodge*, again with a small plane. From the air, we can see clearly the structure of the flooding areas, now dry, and islands in between.



Figure 566. Marabou stork.





Figure 567. Pom Pom birds: Marabou storks, blue waxbill  
(*Uraeginthus angolensis*) in second row at right.

On our afternoon game drive, we find Alec and John, two lion brothers of medium age. They belong to a pack of lions, but mostly live by themselves. They just laze around, scratch themselves from time to time, and show an impertinent indifference towards us. We leave them alone after a while and come back two hours later. They are still in the same spot, now bathed in the warm light of the setting sun. Eventually, they get up lazily, walk between our car and another one, about two meters away from us, and continue into the darkness of the savannah; as in Figure 560, third row. These large cats are impressive sights, at the top of the food pyramid—and they know it. We are in our open jeep and

they would just have to reach inside to get a succulent dinner, but in their eyes (and noses), cars are just metal containers reeking of diesel fuel and not holding any food. Good for us!



Figure 568. White-fronted bee-eater and southern ground hornbill.



Figure 569. Cool cat on the prowl.



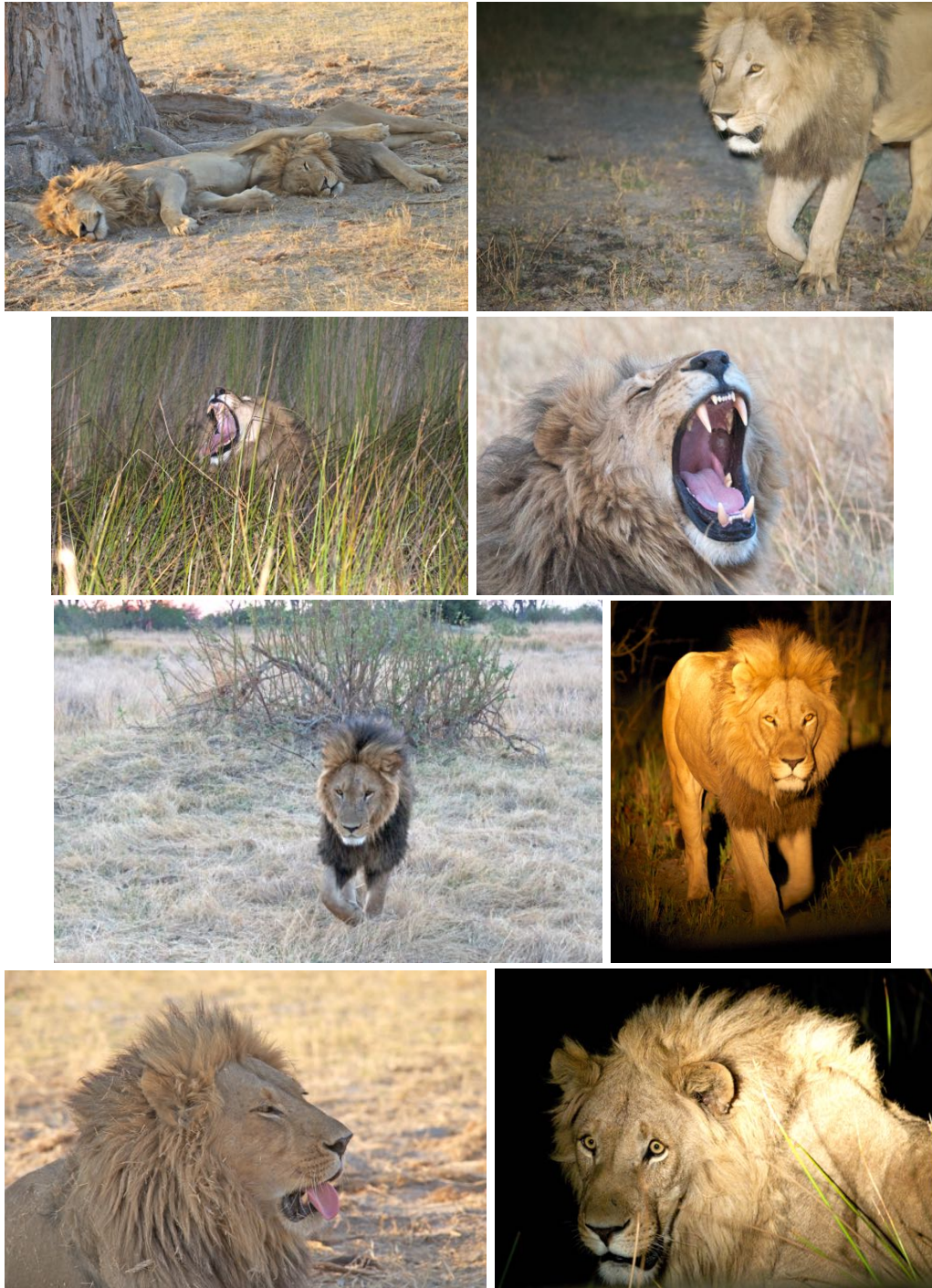


Figure 570. Alec and John and colleagues.





Figure 571. Passing our open car within one meter.



Figure 572. Rafaela totally relaxed in her mokoro.

For dinner tonight, we sit at a small table with just a group of four Poles from New York City and Vienna. The first interesting and bright people here, we have an intelligent conversation for once. Finally no wealthy tourists, from beauty surgeons and real estate tycoons to lawyers, each with the corresponding type of lady. I try to explain calmly my concerns about the discrepancy of service to price at the Lodge to the manager Tessa.

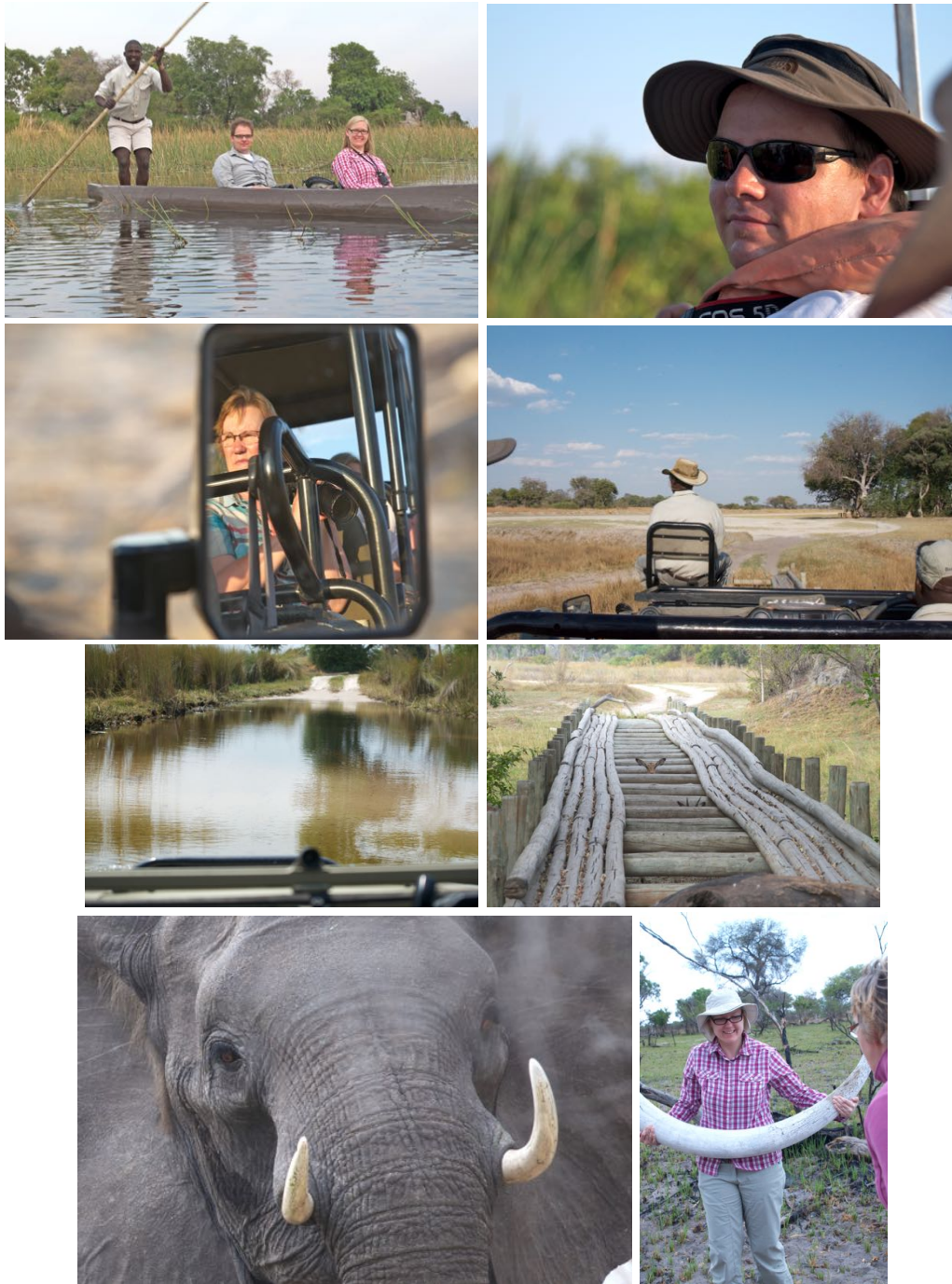


Figure 573. Rafaela and Martin in a mokoro, views on a game drive, a curious duiker, a live elephant, Rafaela with the tusk of one who died a natural death.



Figure 574. Buffalo and sunset.

She refuses brusquely to discuss this, telling me aggressively to contact my travel agent. I ask her to give me a note to that effect, which she refuses adamantly. The next day, I ask her partner Baloo for such a note, again denied in an abrasive way. Their behavior is simply not professional. We will not come back here!

The next day, we take a low-level flight in a Cessna 233 to Maun. Nice views. On arrival, two young women from our travel agency Iwanowski expect us. At least I can now communicate my complaints about KEA and Pom Pom. In hindsight, it was a big mistake to have other people organize our voyage. Doing this by myself might have caused some problems with finding a rental car and lodging, but we would have had control over what they do with us, and presumably spent less money.

Right across from the small terminal in Maun, we can relax in the friendly atmosphere of the *Bon [!/] Arrivée* café. We buy large quantities of Peri Peri, Namibian hot sauce, from hot to extra hot and XX hot. A marvellous souvenir. Our *Thamakale Lodge* is pleasant, like most of the lodges we found ourselves. On our last evening here, thick clouds of insects perform a farewell dance in the beam of a flickering spotlight.

We have internet access after a long abstinence. And receive shocking news from Désirée: Dorothea's mother Marga Rood passed away yesterday morning at age 94, peacefully in her sleep. She has lived a full life, happy with her husband Paul and daughter Dorothea. But in the end she got fed up with everything, refused communication, not using her hearing aid, not reading Dorothea's little handwritten notes. We are all very sad to lose this beloved person. Fortunately, Dorothea is flying home tomorrow, as are Rafaela and Martin. I still spend a few days in Juba, South Sudan; see page 280.





Figure 575. Moth trails like barbed wire.  
A picturesque finish to a picturesque voyage.

## Seychelles, Mauritius, La Réunion, Comores, Madagascar 1996

*After visits to the beautiful islands of the Seychelles and La Réunion in the Indian Ocean, the Comores exhibit a strong Muslim influence. On the small island of Mohéli, a violent attack of pain instills fears of some terrible disease and then turns out to be a kidney stone.*



My plane arrives in Victoria, the capital of the Seychelles. These charming islands were a playground of the rich and beautiful in the 1970s, but now it is just me who arrives.

The beach just across the road from my guesthouse in Beau Vallon is wonderful: about five kilometers of sparkling white sand, shade below deciduous trees. It is almost empty,

except that people congregate in front of the three hotels along the beach. I hike the five kilometers to Anse Major [!], following the coastline fairly high up in the cliff and under a lot of shade.



Figure 576. Beach and bay in Beau Vallon.



Figure 577. Hiking to Anse Major.

From downtown Victoria, I take a ferry to the island *La Digue*. It rains most of the time, also during our crossing which takes four hours instead of the usual three. Several passengers feed the fish with their stomach's contents, never a pleasant sight. The rain continues the whole day, so I have plenty of time for reading.

The next day, the rain stops at noon and I hike to Grande Anse, Petite Anse and Anse Cocos. Nice bays, some climbing over rocks, a walk through a swamp which unexpectedly swallows me up to my hips. At Anse Cocos, I am all on my own. The water is fairly wild, not good for swimming.





Figure 578. Boat to La Digue.



Figure 579. La Digue.

I take an early morning taxi to the boat pier. I could not pack the evening before, because packed things get mouldy very quickly. In fact, my pair of leather shoes is full of those white spots, and my clothes are rather smelly because nothing dries fast in this humidity. On the boat ride back to Victoria, the sun shines and now protection is needed against him, not the rain.

I hike to the top of the *Trois Frères*, about 700 meters. It is a steep climb, much of it on all four, holding on to roots and branches. In the rain, this would be a real challenge. The top affords beautiful views of the capital Victoria.

The Seychelles produce cinnamon and vanilla, and are the only islands where the cocoanut called *Coco de Mer* (*Lodoicea maldivica*) grows.

The incorrect geography indicated in its scientific name comes from its first sighting by Europeans on the Maldive Islands, where the shells had been driven by ocean currents. This endemic tree can measure up to 50 meters in height. Its fruit reminds the islanders of human female buttocks and they were highly prized in the European courts of the 18th century; the first part of their scientific name derives from King Louis XV of France. They carry the heaviest seed pods in the world, weighing up to 17 kilograms, and are used in various ways in Indian and Chinese alternative medicines.



Figure 580. Coco de mer.

On my next flight, a two-hour stop in Mauritius is rather boring. The airport is in the middle of nothing and has little infrastructure. Then to Réunion. My friends Christophe and Alexandra from La Digue are not picked up by their contact here. I offer them a ride in my rental car. Rather annoying: I have to take additional insurance which I refused when I made the reservation, because my insurance back home covers this.

The three of us drive through the night to the other end of the island, to St. Pierre. Christophe and Alexandra are both forest engineers. As voluntary service instead of military service, he works here on forest projects, being rather well-paid. She is in the same business, but they do not sound enthusiastic about it.

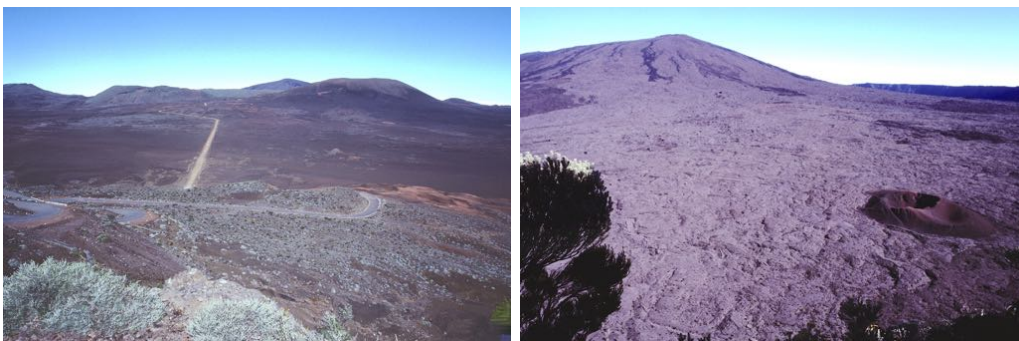


Figure 581. At the *Volcan de la Fournaise*.

And when we arrive at their house, it turns out that their friends left for a few days and they do not have a key. Tough luck. So I end up in an unpleasant guesthouse, the only window is to the family TV room.

In beautiful weather, I drive up to the *Volcan de la Fournaise* without any hurry, through sugar cane fields and with many views of St. Pierre. At 16.00, I am at the top of the road, the *Passe de la Bellecombe*. I stroll around in the brilliant sunshine. This is quite unusual, often everything is in the clouds by 10.00. I get the last spot in the *gîte du volcan*, in my sleeping bag on the floor. At night, it gets freezing cold, I shiver even in my bag.

It was a big mistake not to hurry to the top of the *Piton de la Fournaise*, at 2632 meters, yesterday. During the night, there was an *orange alert* for a tropical rainstorm. Then no longer hikes may be started. The guardian sends everyone home. In 1980, a storm poured over six meters of rain within a fortnight over this volcano. Three Frenchmen are looking for a ride and I offer to take them to St. Louis. “No, please drive to St. Pierre, that is better for us.” I do not believe my ears and wish them good luck.

I spend a rather miserable day driving around in my car, in incessant rain, mighty mountains besides the road but invisible through the veil. The heavy rains were at the edge of the tropical depression *Edwige*, which largely bypassed La Réunion, but it did ruin my day. When I get to my accommodation in a simple pension, the gloomy atmosphere adds to my own tropical depression: stuffy room, stifling hot, the only window is to the shared bathroom.

The next morning, at the airport check-in counter, a fellow traveler from the Comores, in a bright green suit, asks me to check in a mattress for him and to take a radio in my hand luggage. In return, I can drive with his friends into town after landing. Thank you, a very kind offer and I can imagine quite well that I would get a free ride into town. And maybe even some years of free accommodation.



Figure 582. Moroni from the sea, and a fishing boat.





The flight is ok and on time, lunch is my first meal of the day. The arrival in Moroni, the capital of the Comores, is chaotic. My green friend offers me a ride, but only in two hours' time. Anything serious would have surprised me. I stay in a small hotel, the only guest at this time. Souad and Ahmed are friendly and helpful. It is now too late for immigration, and I stroll a bit through town. A labyrinth of small lanes, very interesting. Twenty years later, the lanes of Stone Town on Zanzibar remind me of Moroni, see page 517.



Figure 583. Moroni streets.

The Comores comprise a number of islands in the ocean channel between Madagascar and Moçambique on the African continent. Its capital Moroni is located on Grande Comore (Ngazidja). I still do not know where I will be able to travel: the French département of Mayotte, the Comores islands of Mohéli (Mwali) and Anjouan (Nzwani), or Majunga in Madagascar? Boat or plane? My first stop is the local shipping line with the very French name Socopotram, which is of no help. My friend Mohamed Mou'arab drives me to the office of the new airline Amicales Comores Air, a hole in the wall impossible to find on your own. They may fly on Mondays to Anjouan and Majunga, or maybe not. The friendly lady honestly does not know, nor does she have their address or phone number in Majunga. I simply love these African airlines, where sometimes things work and sometimes they do not, and only those who persevere get rewarded.



Figure 584. Fishing boats and a huge baobab tree.

Presidential elections are planned for a week from today. According to my experience, travel might be difficult then. Rumors abound, such as the one that the French government is sending mercenaries here.

Mohamed helps me obtain a ticket on the small motor vessel *Choungi* to Moutsamoudou on Anjouan. He and his friend split a small extra amount that they charge me. Fine with me, without them I would not have gotten this far. It is stifling hot, I sit outside and eventually sleep on my bunk bed in the boat. For safety, the engineer has allowed me to put my backpack into his office.

I sleep rather well, we dock at Anjouan at 04.45. I take a look around and lie down again. What is there to do in Anjouan at 05.00? Nothing, and when I take another look at 07.00, not more than before. After breakfast, I inquire about boats to Mayotte or Majunga. Nothing. The place is sufficiently uninviting that I take the next boat back to Moroni, the same morning. An ultra-short visit. This ship is much nicer than the first one, open, higher, faster. The sea is smooth, flying fish pass by. A tranquil trip. We land at Moroni in the afternoon and I go to my good friends' hotel again. Pleasant.

Buying airplane tickets for Majunga in Madagascar is a game of its own. Two airlines fly: Air Madagascar and Amicales Comores Air, each about once a week. To suit my schedule, I take the first one to go and the second one for return. I pass by the Air Mad office and they will not sell me a ticket unless I can show a return ticket. I have a hard time finding the hidden Amicales office, which not even the taxi drivers know, but then buy my ticket there and the inbound flight at Air Mad. We'll see whether this works out.

I take a taxi to the Volovololo market, from where the bush taxis for Mitsamiouli and the airport leave. Check-in for Majunga, *free seating* which I usually do not like, but today I rush to get a good seat. Besides me sits a pretentious Indian with four gold-plated address labels on his polished suitcase.

My arrival in Majunga is slightly chaotic, the luggage to Tananarive is forwarded first, while ours waits outside. In the end, I simply pick up my bag. When I want to take a taxi into town, an ugly scene ensues: a fat bully offers me his car, a frail man his for less money. The bully beats up the other guy, runs after him waving a jack, in an extreme rage. I am happy when I can leave the scene in another taxi. People just stand around and look on. It is extremely hot, I buy several delicious juices (grenadelles, tamarind, guava). Of course, there is no Amicales Air Comores office at the address they gave me.

I walk around town a bit and book a trip at the *Roches Rouges* office, together with Holger and Andrea whom I meet there. It rains and rains the whole day. I upgrade my room to air conditioned (the first time on this trip) and spend the afternoon there, doing nothing.

Marcel Yvon Razafiarison, our driver and guide, shows up at 07.30. I sit in the front of his Renault R16, Holger and Andrea in the back. The driver is, like myself, a professor of mathematics at the local university. He studied techno math in Kaiserslautern with Neunzert. He does not want to talk about the details, and I do not know how successful his two-year stay, financed by the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), was. But he now unavoidably compares his position to that of a German professor and must feel like crying. He has to drive taxis to feed his five children, besides his teaching. It is a gray world, also physically outside with incessant rain.





Figure 585. Holger, Andrea, Marcel, and a park ranger,  
and a jungle walk on Madagascar.

We arrive at 10.00 at the Ampijoroa Forest Reserve, but the rain has drained us of energy. We doze in the car, tranquilized by the drum of the rain drops. Eventually we muster enough energy to get out. Our guide in an orange rain coat shows us a lemur (Coquerel's Sifaka), white with a brown coat. Then two small monkeys, soumoumon or

so, that live in hollow tree trunks. Some birds including guineafowl, spiders, lianas. The rain ceases at noon, finally, and it is a pleasant outing to hike for three hours on sandy forest trails. But it is far from comparison with bush walks in other parts of Africa.

The next day, I ask myself: will my vabanque game work out? After all, I did not find the office of my airline. I make some backup plans, a boat on Tuesday (possibly Wednesday, else Thursday, ...) and the Air Mad flight on Friday. But it works! The Yakovlev 40 of Amicales Comores Air comes in, Russian pilot and copilot, shirt open to their belly button. The plane is dirty. Only twelve passengers, easy take-off. Unscheduled stop in Anjouan, with unexpected guests: Mohamed Taki Abdoukarim, the future President of the Comores. A beefy guy with double ox neck and golden glasses; he does not look stupid. Elections are the day after tomorrow. I had the best seat from Majunga to Anjouan, but now he boards before me and sits in my seat. In view of the gorillas protecting him I renounce my inclination to make a fuss.

And actually, I have to be thankful. Because he orders another unplanned stop in Mohéli for his election campaign, and I take my chance to get off there. That saves me the pain of organizing a whole trip from Moroni—and I have no inkling of the impending disaster. At the Mohéli airstrip, a small band of saluting soldiers and cheerleaders in red dresses welcomes me. Quite nice, and the President also likes it. Annoyingly, my film is finished right then.

Transportation to the main village of Fomboni is not easy, because the election campaigns keep all bush taxis busy. My friend Salam from Amicales Comores Airlines gives me a ride to a nice place. Shock: it is empty but under requisition for the UN election watchers tomorrow. I talk a bit, here and there, and with Salam's help I finally get a room. Much overpriced. Ventilator, cold shower, mosquito coils: "Mohéli is the world center of malaria." I dress accordingly and feel well-protected against these beasts.

My first task is to get an arrival stamp from the police station. The fishing village of Fomboni is pretty dead, nothing moves. The beaches with dark sand are ok, I go swimming and snorkeling a bit, but the fish are as rare as people in the streets. It feels safe, and I even leave my things on the beach, in plain view. At my hotel, eight UN staff have arrived to supervise the elections tomorrow.

The next day's presidential elections are the first democratic ones in this country. In order to avoid multiple voting, all traffic is stopped. Only the UN people drive around in their jeeps. I spend a lazy day on my terrace, working on *factoring modular polynomials*, which I like, and on *counting curves*, which still needs a lot of work. I sweat much less than on the previous days and thus drink less than usual, maybe a liter and a half of water.

At a large mango tree, I find the next day a pickup truck to Niamachoua and its lovely beach. A pleasant draft cools my back, around the kidney area, as often on such trips. On arrival at 12.30, I first have to register at the police station. I did not bring my passport, but Ali Mehangama, Chief of Police, accepts this after I agree to rent their boat for an excursion.



Figure 586. Niamachoua: the main street and the beach.

And then disaster strikes, the worst days on this trip and in many years begin with a slight feeling of stomach ache, maybe diarrhea. On the toilet, nothing happens, but then within minutes the pain gets unbearable. I cannot stand for all this pain, sit down, walk, lie down, but it only gets worse. The kind Ali offers me to lie down on a bed in his hut, brings me water and some sweet milk. I drink quite a bit, but after a minute I vomit all of it. I can neither stand nor sit nor lie, but have to move spastically to bear the incredible pain somehow. It feels as if someone had torn my body into two parts. I have nightmares: did my intestines or some other organ break apart? Is my whole belly afloat in blood and pus? I cannot remember such pain ever in my life.

The friendly people around me realize that this is a serious crisis. After two eternal hours, they take me to the local *hospital*, a miserable hut. The helpless paramedic measures my blood pressure. Maybe he does this with every patient and it is the only thing he knows to do. If I were not this miserable, I would laugh at such nonsense. But I do not feel like laughing.



Figure 587. Niamachoua kids.





Figure 588. Happy guy.

Finally they drive me in a small Suzuki Jeep to Fomboni. I pay in advance—who knows

whether I will be able to pay later. The ride is a nightmare. The shaking and rattling on the miserable road—no fault of the driver’s—hurts terribly. I squat in the vehicle with spastic cramps, move wildly. The paramedic thinks it is either my gall bladder or my pancreas. The paramedic in the Fomboni hospital is as helpless as the first one. There is no medical doctor on the island.

Finally they have a good idea and drive me to the *French consulate*. Stéphane Mollet and his wife, both about 24 years old, are forest engineers who work here and as a sideline represent France. On arrival, atrocious spasms hit me again and I jerk and twist like crazy, almost cannot stand it. It must look like St. Vitus’s dance. They are very friendly, but of course overwhelmed by this situation. We go to the hospital again, where two other “doctors” try to measure my blood pressure. No thanks. They do not know much about medicine, but then suggest: a renal colic caused by a kidney stone. I had not thought of this, but it jived with my experience: the cooling of my kidneys in the cold breeze on the pick-up, possibly too little to drink (all shops were closed that Sunday and I could not buy enough water), the extreme pain, “like giving birth” in their words, although I have no pertinent experience. Having an idea of what might be the reason is a small relief, even if it does not reduce my physical pain. They give me strong painkillers which help a bit.

Mollet drives me to my hotel and I try to rest on my bed, in vain. Agony. At 18.30, Mollet comes again and brings yet another paramedic, Dr. Duong Quang “doctor” at the French embassy. He gives me an intramuscular injection of Spasfon. Finally, this works a bit, the peaks of my pain subside slightly.

I think with horror of how I will survive this until four days from now, when I will be back home. Then into the lithotripter. In Moroni, there is a French medical doctor. The kind Stéphane Mollet has called the French military base in Moroni to ask for an evacuation by helicopter, but they claim that they have no airplane at their disposal. My “doctor” Quang gives me three injections of the analgesic Spasfon per day. The night is terrible, I cannot sleep at all.

Dr. Mohamed Lihady, Médecin Chef, CMU Fomboni, gives me a letter: “M. Vonzurgathen s’est présenté à la CMU de Fomboni avec des douleurs abdominales aigues se soulageant un peu en position debout. La palpation montre un douleur vive dans la région reinale droite. Diagnose probable: Colite néphrétique. Nous nous sommes limité à un traitement de Viscéralgine en comprimé jusqu’à son évacuation vers Moroni.”<sup>21</sup>

At night, I get no sleep. I stay in bed all day and drink a lot of water and tea. My consolation is the pretty palm tree in front of my window. The pain is not as sharp as yesterday, probably due to the injections I get. The Mollets visit me, and Wolfram, a student of African languages from Mainz. He does comparative studies on the Comorian

<sup>21</sup>Mr. von zur Gathen presented himself at the Centre Médical Universel in Fomboni with sharp abdominal pain, which slightly lessens when he stands up. The palpation shows an acute pain in the right renal area. Probable diagnosis: nephretic colic. We have limited ourselves to a treatment with Viscéralgine tablets until his evacuation to Moroni.

languages on the different islands. I am surprised that he does not speak Comorian nor intends to learn it in the year that he will stay here. This night, I can sleep.

What a feeling, I slept really well! My pain has lessened. Mollet buys a ticket for me and takes me to the airport. He was a huge help, with his empathy and finding the paramedic with the Spasfon injections. On all flights here, I have helped other passengers by checking in some of their luggage. Now I take a box of vegetables for the vice-president of the National Assembly. In return, he invites me to share his taxi—he does not have a car of his own.

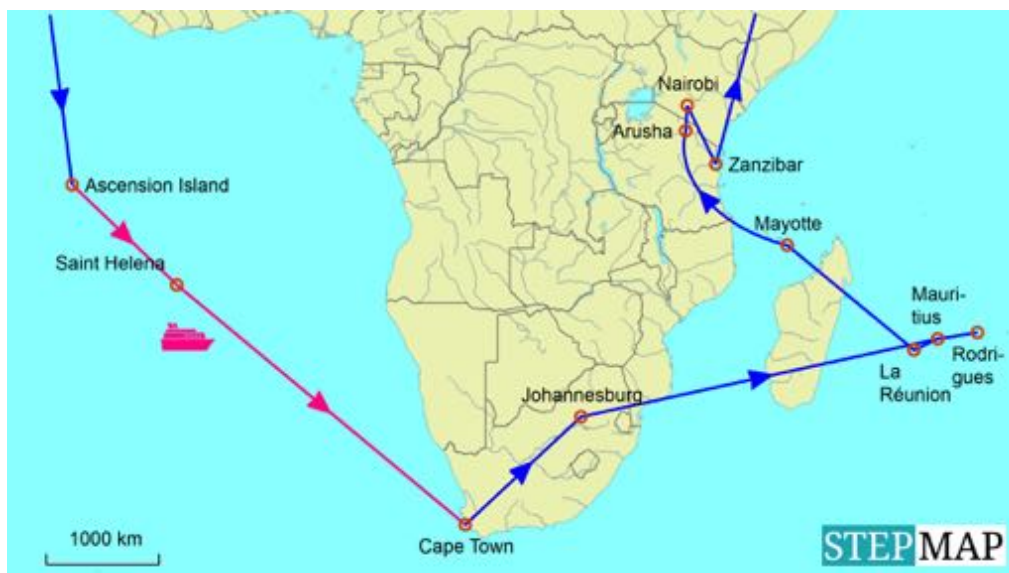
I lie down a bit in my Moroni hotel, my agony has faded. I am so relieved the traumatic situation did not continue for four days, as I feared two days ago. I have my first hot shower in many days, eat my first meal since three days ago and, against expectations, keep it in my stomach.

After a relaxed morning, I go to the airport. My flight to Paris is ok. We arrive with a delay and my continuing flight to Paderborn is cancelled. The Air France ground staff are extremely unhelpful. In the end, I fly to Hannover and they take me to Paderborn in a taxi van. I go immediately to my doctor. The ultrasound images do not show anything unusual. And my pain is gone. I imagine that after mistreating me with so much pain, the kidney stone was simply scared by the pain killers, broke up, and was passed with my urine. I never noticed this, I was in so much pain anyways. This was, in fact, the second kidney stone in my life. At the tender age of two years, I had to be operated for one. Today, this is fairly routine, but back then it was a difficult operation on such small children and had a high fatality rate—I survived both stones.



## Ascension Island, Saint Helena, South Africa, Mauritius, Mayotte, Tanzania 2017

*After a flight on a rarely used airline—the RAF—to Ascension Island in the South Atlantic, I take a boat to Saint Helena. This island is most famous for being Napoléon’s last exile. My ship continues to Cape Town, but a severe mechanical failure slows us down by two days, wreaking havoc on my travel plans. Eventually, I meet Dorothea and we do some Indian Ocean island hopping on Mauritius, Rodrigues, Mayotte, and Zanzibar, the most pleasant of them.*



Four days after our return in February 2017 from the Caribbean (see page 868), I am off on our next winter-avoiding trip. It begins with a spectacular flight on a big airline that everybody knows but nobody (whom I know) has ever flown on: the RAF, Royal Air Force, to its “unsinkable aircraft carrier” of Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. It played a major role in the Falklands/Malvinas war of 1982 with Argentina, see page 844.

Public transport in the UK was privatized under the Thatcher government and is now barely functional. Getting to the Brize Norton airbase of the RAF via Birmingham and Oxford (pronounced: Hucksfutt) is a lengthy project. When I get there, it is another hour from the base’s entry checkpoint to the check-in counter, then a long wait in a drab hall. No cafeteria, no restaurant, just a small shop with drinks and snacks. Frankly, the security check (X-ray) does not impress me as particularly serious. Once in the departure lounge, I ask the ground staff whether I can take a picture of the plane. “No, this is forbidden, but one or two is ok—please wait a second, we will open the door for you, so you do not have glass in front of your lens.” Very helpful. But it was total night and my

pictures are too dark.

Our RAF Air Tanker, a modified Airbus A330, normally provides fuel to fighter planes in full flight. But now it serves for passenger transport, mainly military and British families headed for a holiday on Ascension or on the Falkland Islands. As expected, the food is rather drab, and my seat neighbor Kevin gives me his, realizing that I am close to starvation. He is originally from St. Helena (Saint Helena, pronounced Heelee'na, whose inhabitants are called the *Saints*) and has lived for over thirty years in the UK. This is his first time back, ever. He will meet cousins on Ascension and has rented a house on St. Helena for his three-month stay.

We land on Ascension's Wideawake airfield at 08.00. Some people take photos, and so do I. The light is pessimal, with the rising sun behind a thick cloud just above our airplane and a second one behind it. And I cannot walk around the planes, of course.



Figure 589. The Brize Norton airbase.

Entry formalities are somewhat complicated, with a 20 GBP fee and a long wait for a mandatory 9-minute video about the island, with all the no-no's. The one impressive thing is the danger when swimming off the wild beaches; a 19-year old serviceman drowned last month. A friendly bus driver takes me to the Obsidian Hotel, the only one on the island,

where I check in for my room 26 at Hayes House. Quite ok, extremely soft mattress and paper-thin cardboard walls. I hear the neighbor's TV loudly. I am exhausted and lie down from 09.00 to noon, without really sleeping. Internet is 5 GBP per hour and 15 per day; someone bought the package and says it does not work. So I do not buy it. And I compose an SMS to Dorothea, but have no phone connection.

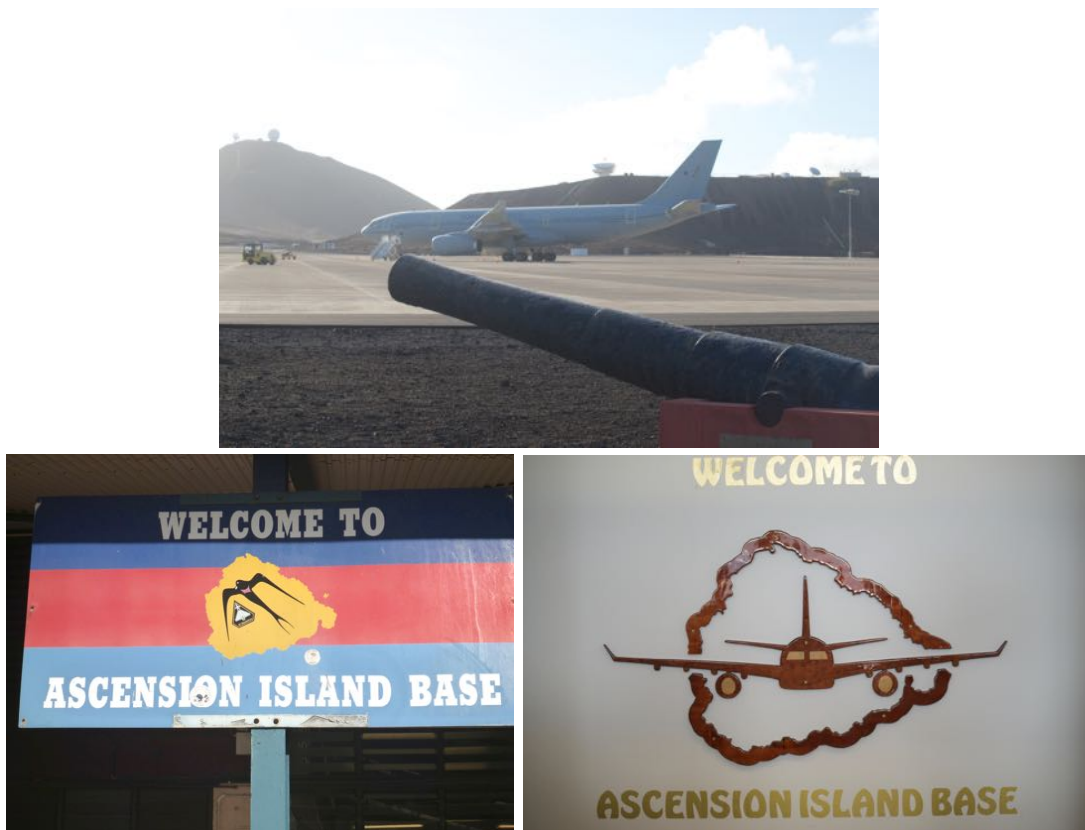


Figure 590. Arrival on Ascension Island.

On my first short walk around Georgetown, the capital, there is not much to see. Shopping is at the supermarket, open until 18.00. The streets are all black volcanic material, some major ones are tarmac. Still not quite fit, I stroll up the volcano behind Georgetown. Nice views over the town. Dinner at the Obsidian Hotel is, as expected, bland English food, well-done roast beef with no choice of cooking, veggies cooked until they melt, and an undefinable brown sauce covering the whole mess. Lots of food, too much for me. The only enjoyable thing is the Argentine merlot. And I am not a Merlot fan ...





Figure 591. Georgetown impressions. Second image: the whole of Georgetown, traditional British letter box, last image: “Sir, your taxi is ready.”

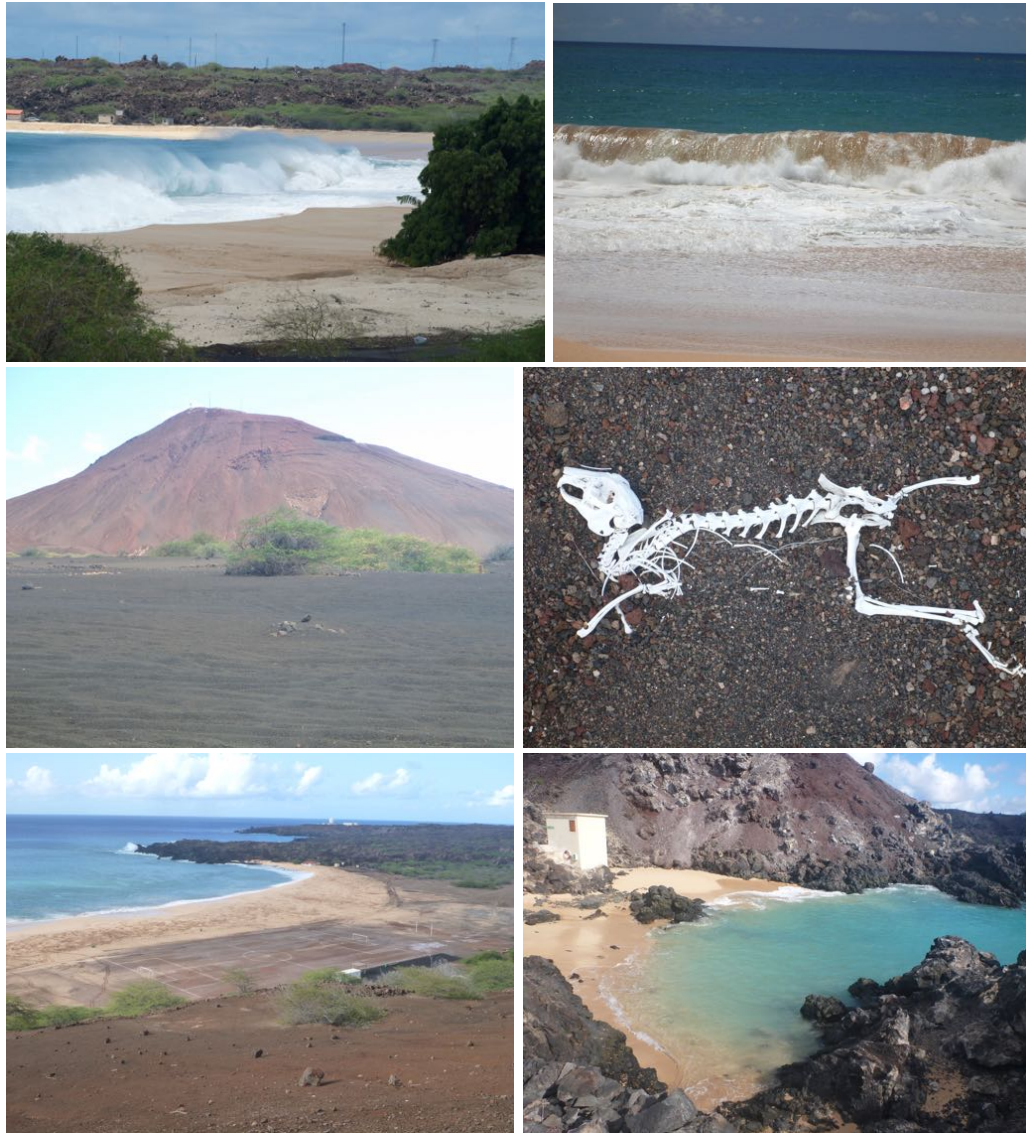


Figure 592. Hiking on Acension Island. Last image: Comfortless cove.

My tour for turtle watching starts at 21.00, in complete darkness. Our group of about twenty-five people marches down the road to Long Beach. We are led to a turtle laying her eggs, and can actually see them dropping out from her behind. I do not know anything about turtle anatomy, but assume this is the outward end of her vagina. The eggs look like little clumps of yolk or so, contained in a fluid like egg-white. No shell, and it does not look like something edible. I wonder what the bad guys at Tortuguero were stealing—this kind of turtle egg? See page 594. We are equipped with red-light torches and may shine

them on the turtle. White light would scare them into aborting the whole action. I take lots of pictures, no flash, and wonder what these monochromatic images will look like in black & white. You see the result below.



Figure 593. Turtle laying eggs at night and the hole that she creates.

Breakfast ends at 09.00 and I wake up around noon, blissfully undisturbed. I set out on foot. Long Beach looks like an intensively bombed area, crater next to crater over a large area, with clear marks from the turtles' fins. Some turtles crawled past all the craters up to the tarmac, then had to return. A few minutes rest at a beach hut, then I go on towards Comfortless Cove. There is no marked trail, just tire tracks going off in this and that direction. Eventually, I reach a large military installation with many signs "Entrance prohibited. Danger from RF." (radio frequency). But those signs are only visible from the other side, coming from the road. Has my brain been fried? Have they implanted via radio a key-logger in it? It is still about an hour to Comfortless Cove. What a name! In the 18th century, apparently sailors were kept here who came from ships infested by some contagious disease like cholera. There is even a small cemetery. The beach itself has rather wild surf, and from above I see no turtles, which allegedly are abundant here. To my chagrin, no-one else is around; I had hoped for a lift back into Georgetown. Now I have to walk, my back starts hurting from my camera's weight. I go past a US installation which looks like radar, where the tarmac starts. And luckily, after half an hour some US soldier stops and gives me a ride to close to town. I am so grateful, walking all that distance would have been painful.

After my short stay, an inconvenient check-out procedure requires me to have my baggage ready by 08.15, while my ship leaves only in the evening. I meet Howard, an entomologist from the British Museum of Natural History. About thirty species of beetles are named after him. Now he is retired but has a short-term contract to investigate some creepy-crawlers in St. Helena. Tim, his colleague working at a museum in Dessau near Berlin, joins us. He is originally from near Dresden and does not speak de Englisch vell. Howard persuades me to a glass of rosé at the *Saints' Club*, then another one. Oh well,



so I won't ever visit the nearby Fort Hayes in my lifetime. Anyway, it is not impressive from the outside.



Figure 594. Loading the RMS.

We are on time at 14.30 at the pier, interminable waiting for the various bureaucratic procedures, we finally sail at 19.00. The shuttle boat *Atlantic Queen* ferries us over to the Royal Mail Ship *RMS St. Helena*, out at anchor. This will be my home for the next week and a half, to St. Helena and Cape Town. Barges bring cars, trucks, and containers to the ship. The loading is not easy because of the swell, but this could have been done earlier. Overall, the whole procedure seems little thought-out and certainly without concern to the passengers' interest.

My cabin is at the basement level. I share it with Simon. 19.30 is dinner time. The head honcho John Hamilton threatens to send me back to my cabin, because I am wearing short, not long "trousers". I refuse and eventually he lets me in, not without repeating a stern warning for tomorrow's dinner. We'll see, maybe I find that note to the contrary from the Andrew Weir (AW) Shipping Line.



Figure 595. On board.

I sit at a table with five Saints, all of them emigrated to the UK. After ignoring each other for a while, I start a conversation which works quite well. Although admittedly, I am not much interested in their family history. Afterwards I sit for a while with my friends Howard and Tim, having cheese and wine and making fun of the stiff waiters. One of them objects when I take the box of crackers to our table, to offer it to the two others. The whole ship is a crazy outdated world, still living in a rigorous colonial style.

Getting up to my top bunk is easy, getting down is a pain. Too much for me to lie down during the day or after dinner, when I would want to relax for half an hour. I sit outside most of the time, day and night. It is always windy, but pleasantly warm at around 26 degrees. My fight with the braggadacious John goes on. He teases me about finding my note, expecting a “no”. Sorry, but I found it. He insists on seeing it, and I show him the ship’s brochure *Magical Voyages* to him: “Is there a dress code? There is no strict dress code . . . In the evening, Guests may prefer to dress slightly more formally during the evening - a tie however is not required.” John dismisses everything, saying that they do not mean what they write. The “may prefer” is actually a “must” in his opinion. I strongly disagree, other people are listening in and agree. In the end, he gives me one of his carnivorous smiles and says he will contact the head office about this. I hear nothing

more from him and at dinner I walk to my table unhindered and short-panted.

I talk quite a bit with my friends Howard and Tim, the two entomologists. They are ok, Tim is more constrained by his East German past and lack of English. At two dinners, I sit with Andrew, a big bald lawyer from Birmingham. He travels to St. Helena to defend some (supposed) criminals, mainly sexual offences combined with alcohol. He has traveled a lot, speaks German and French, subscribes to DER SPIEGEL, and knows a lot about the world. We agree on almost anything we discuss, in an entertaining way. At his recommendation, I buy from the bookstore *The Dark Room*, a book by Jean-Paul Kauffmann about Napoléon on St. Helena. This journalist was imprisoned in Beirut for about three years. The book is quite depressing, as depressing as the atmosphere at Longwood is and has been to Napoléon. The rather indecisive battle at Eylau, now Bagrationovsk, plays a major role. Too bad I did not know about this last August, when Anton and I drove on our motorcycles through Bagrationovsk on the border of Kaliningrad Oblast in Russia with Poland. Andrew provides the most intelligent conversations I have on board. The other passengers I meet are less entertaining: Gail from St. Helena, who owns *Coles Courtyard Hostel* and leases it to the National Trust, a boring companion of hers, Kevin from the Air Tanker, a few other Saints back for a visit home. Except at dinner, people leave me in peace. I finish our tubes paper with Guillermo Matera and work on pseudorandom generators with Daniel Loebenberger and others.

The checkout procedure for St. Helena is again a nuisance. The others have to leave their bags packed at 16.30, while we go ashore only the next morning. So they are without their things for the afternoon and evening. What a failed organization!



Figure 596. Welcome from WW II fortifications and downtown Jamestown.

The next day, my alarm rings at 06.45, I quickly throw together the meager belongings that I take ashore, leaving the bulk on the ship. After some waiting, I get on the last ferry to the pier around 08.30. A stupid little bus takes us 100 meters to immigration and customs. Dogs sniffing everywhere. Outside, Kylie from the National Trust holds her sign “Joachim Gann”. Well, that must be me, and we walk to her *Coles Courtyard Hostel*



in Jamestown, the “capital” of St. Helena. Good that I do not have much stuff to carry. The place is simple and old-fashioned, in a white-washed older building right next to a creek *The Run*—or is that a sewer?

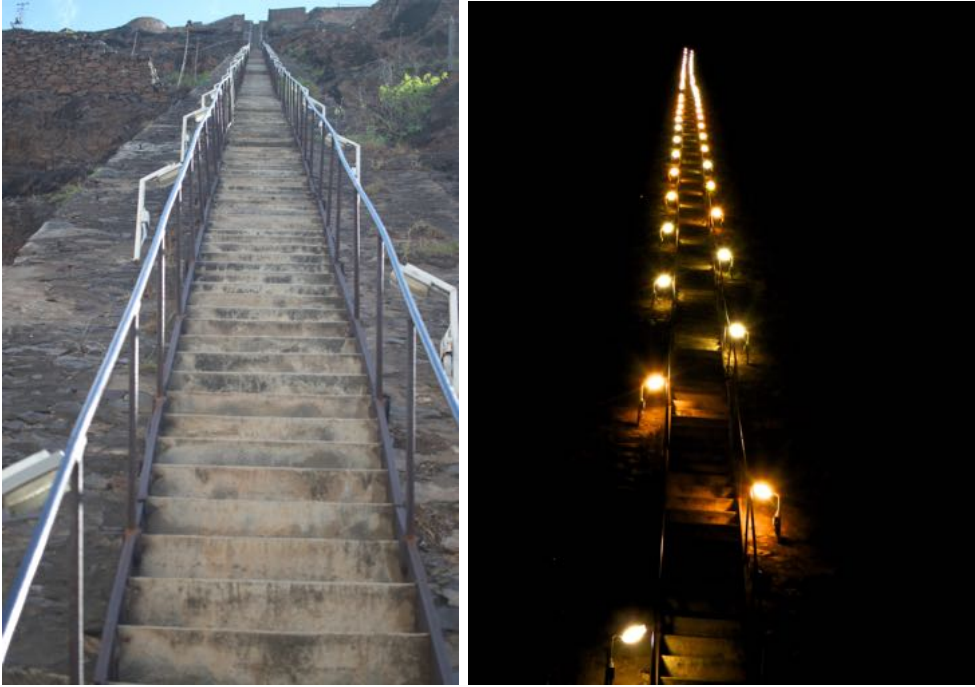


Figure 597. Jacob's ladder by day and by night.



Figure 598. The only road exiting the town, views from above and below.



Figure 599. Royal insignia and a cool licence plate. A pleasant garden and restaurant. The narrow trail along the *Run* to my lodgings; the entrance door is barely visible at left.

St. Helena is known to the outside world as the last exile of Napoléon Bonaparte (1769-1821). His military genius led to his conquest of most of Europe between 1793 and 1814, until he was defeated and exiled to the Mediterranean island of Elba. After his escape, he took control of France again until his final defeat at Waterloo. The British insisted in exiling him in a safe place this time, on the far-away island of St. Helena. He was not treated well there and housed in an inhospitable location. His Longwood House had fallen into disrepair, and the place was damp, windswept and unhealthy. No British magnanimity towards a defeated emperor. In the first years, he dictated his memories with all his former vigor, but eventually his health and resilience gave way and he died after six years in this drab exile. Most Brits aboard the RMS do not care much about Napoléon, but for a continental European like myself this historic location is the major attraction on the island.

A friendly young woman at the Tourist Office tells me where to catch a bus to Longwood House. I walk there, wait five minutes, get on the bus, and a minute later it gets going. Great luck, the next bus is five hours later! The driver drops me in front of Napoléon's abode. Unfortunately, it is closed today and tomorrow because its French caretakers do not work on a weekend, not even on the rare days that the *RMS St. Helena*

is docked. This is consistent with our impression that the French expats in their former or present colonies work hard to keep their workload down to a minimum. I walk around and take pictures from a distance.



Figure 600. Napoléon's prison: Longwood House. *Napoléon Street*: the only reference I saw in town to Napoléon, except in a book store.

A Land Rover stops besides me: David, Howard, and Tim. They take me along to Horse Point, with a great view into an abyss and down into the sea. We see some endemic wirebirds, little animals rushing around. They only exist on St. Helena, and their population has increased from 200 to 600 over the last years under a successful protection plan. On to two view points over the airport runway near Prosperous Bay.



David explains the problem with wind shear: the strip runs north to south, the prevailing winds come from south or southeast. Larger planes must land from the north. Two sizable bluffs, called King and Queen, block the wind on that side, creating violent vortices that can shake a plane like a plume. Difficult.



Figure 601. Longwood House and Clingham's Store in Longwood Estate, given up a long time ago.



Figure 602. The end of the runway, King and Queen behind it.  
Steep hills around the landing strip.

The *RMS St. Helena* was scheduled to go out of operation in 2016, after 26 years of service, in line with the airport's planned opening. But due to the neglected problems with wind shear, she is planned to continue until 2018. Some small planes have landed, mainly medevac, and usually in the opposite direction, where strong tail winds make landings difficult but at least manageable for experienced pilots. Scheduled service with a fairly small Embraer airplane and a reduced number of passenger (76 instead of 99) from Cape Town via Windhoek in Namibia began in late 2017. A planning disaster which

reminds me of Berlin's infamous airport BER. It is not clear whether it will fulfil the planners' promises of making the island easily accessible.

I get out at Napoléon's place again, and then walk back towards Jamestown. Nice views, nice hike along a road amid dense vegetation. Eventually, a bus driver gives me a ride, but he is not at work and does not charge any money. Very friendly. At the end, a spectacular drop into the steep valley of Jamestown, surrounded on all sides by steep hills. Its main street is a showcase of intact Georgian architecture from the 18th century. A spectacular set of 699 stairs, called *Jacob's ladder*, leads to the upper town on Ladder Hill. In former times, all goods, building materials, etc., had to be carried up those stairs; see Figure 597.

Unfortunately, the ship schedule does not allow me more than one day on St. Helena. As we sail at 11.00, the island is visible for a long time. And then, only the infinite nothingness of the Southern Atlantic is around us. The weather is pleasant, days of sunshine and overcast days. Air and sea temperatures are around 26 degrees, there is always a breeze on the upper deck, where I sit most of the time. I enjoy sitting out there, the ocean stretching to the horizon, left alone with my thoughts. At night, sometimes my jacket is required.



Figure 603. Looking back at St. Helena, and on board the RMS.

At the table: BJ, myself, and Andries.

At dinner, I sit with BJ (Bert-Jan), a seismic engineer from Groningen working in Dubai, and previously in the Caspian Sea, Lake Aral and elsewhere. We have a few stories to exchange, he tells me how his two Land Cruisers almost got stuck in the northern part of

Lake Aral, close to the waters that still existed twelve years ago. I recount my motorcycle visit to the lake in 2011, see page 984. Our table companion is Andries from Pretoria, who worked for five years as a surveyor at the St. Helena airport. His English has a funny accent.

One day at 16.24, the chief engineer comes up to me and hands me a mask with a dark glass in it. He points at the sun and - there is a partial eclipse! I even take some pictures. They do not come out optimally, because I do not have the time to set the camera correctly. The eclipse takes only about half a minute. At the Captain's Cocktail Party on Monday, I am admitted in my shorts against my expectation, although there was a dress code. I guess they have given me up as hopelessly incorrigible. A couple from Solothurn, Switzerland, on board, in their early thirties, are dressed to the hilt, in a tuxedo and black evening dress. They are *Bünzlis*<sup>22</sup>, not very interesting. On Tuesday, I sit by myself outside for lunch, two elderly ladies join my table and one of them says: "You must be the person that Andrew Jackson talked to." So my fame has even spread to St. Helena. Too bad that there is no person now on board as interesting as Andrew. However, I do not necessarily need company to have a good time and enjoy the outdoors most of the days and nights.

One Monday, passengers are told to reserve their taxi for our arrival in Cape Town by Wednesday, then on Tuesday at 11.30 comes the announcement that the taxi reservations close in half an hour. What can I do? I do not have an idea of where I will go. There is a general disregard of the passengers on board, but worse is to come. On Tuesday, they announce that the starboard propeller is not functioning; it does not turn the pitch (angle) of its blades as required for speeding up or slowing down; the shaft always rotates at the same speed, and the ship's speed is dictated by the propeller's pitch. This means a slowdown of the voyage and they are expecting to arrive two days late. Disaster. It means that I lose my flight to Mauritius, where Dorothea is waiting for me. Instead of supporting us, we are not even given free internet time to make changes. Internet access is incredibly expensive, 1600 British pounds per GB. Yes, one thousand six hundred. I give Michelle at the ship's bureau an email to send to Air Mauritius. She says she will do that, but does not. Instead she sends it to the shipping line's travel agency, which operates our boat and replies that, of course, they will be happy to sell me a new ticket at an outrageous price. Grrrh. I call Dorothea twice on Wednesday and twice on Thursday with the bad news. The really bad news is that I do not know what will happen. And the worst is the disrespect with which the office treats me and the other passengers. They even close from noon to 16.00, as if there was no urgency. I am livid. And the others feel the same, except for the few that stay in Cape Town.

Andries, my table companion, tells me that the RMS had the same problem when he sailed in February 2013. Obviously, AW Shipping has not been willing to spend the money required for maintenance and repairs, and continues its lack of support even after

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<sup>22</sup>Swiss German for boringly conservative.



this incident. Two months after my visit, in April 2017, the RMS is stranded for at least two months at St. Helena, with the same type of propeller problem that caused our delay. The first passenger-carrying commercial charter flight lands at the St. Helena airport in early May, to evacuate those poor souls.

I cannot really enjoy the fine weather because of my tension over what will happen, and my anger at the lack of support. In the office, they tell me that my travel insurance will cover all costs. I do not have such an insurance. In fact, I never buy it because it is far too expensive for the fairly small amounts covered. The impertinent John Hamilton goes so far as to accuse me of being illegally on board because of this.

On Friday, I still have no confirmation from Air Mauritius and call them. The long wait “un agent sera avec vous dans quelques instants”<sup>23</sup> costs a lot of money, probably all of the 20 pounds that I got for free from Michelle after harassing her sufficiently, together with other angry passengers in the line. The Air Mauritius office is even more useless than the one on the RMS.

When we finally arrive, we have a beautiful view on Cape Town and its Table Mountain. I ask the Andrew Weir office for help with a hotel, but they refuse: “go to the Tourist Office”. Thanks, typical of RMS service.



Figure 604. Marvellous views on arrival: Cape Town and the Table Mountain.

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<sup>23</sup>An agent will be with you in a few moments.

So I take a taxi to the Tourist Office on Lower Burg Street. My big-mouthed taxi driver from Malawi does not know it but eventually stops close to it. In that office, I find the first really helpful person in a long while. She calls over thirty hotels and guesthouses, filling four pages with her notes. Almost all end in “(F)” for full. I am almost despairing, but she is not. Finally she gets me a room. Many thanks.

A taxi takes me to the *Dale Court Guesthouse*. After having gone through thirty other places, I expect this to be a bad choice—but what can I do? However, it turns out to be wonderful, possibly the best choice among all. An older restored building, Yolanda the friendly manager, and my room has its own private balcony, just as I requested. It is only a ten minutes walk to the Victoria & Albert Waterfront, where I enjoyed pleasant evenings with my colleagues seventeen years ago, see page 396.



Figure 605. The Victoria & Albert Waterfront.

I send some frantic emails to Air Mauritius, all in vain. Nobody is listening at that end. On my last day in Cape Town, my alarm rings frighteningly early at 05.45. My taxi arrives on time at 06.30. As predicted, the driver ask for more money than agreed, but eventually he caves in. Of course, the Air Mauritius counter in the airport is closed. In fact, a sign says “Tuesday to Friday”. It is Monday, but they are not open Sat, Sun, Mon! What kind of service!

Two friendly ladies at the SAA ticket counter help me substantially. They can see in their system that my reservation has been changed to today, but no ticket issued. They cannot do anything. But after moving them to tears with stories of my beloved wife stranded on a lonely island, they get into action, calling several times the Air Mauritius office in Johannesburg. In the end, I get my ticket against a hefty surcharge. But they need my credit card ... I promise to show it to Lauren in Johannesburg, which I do. Finally I am set to go. I was considerably nervous these last days, because Air Mauritius and the RMS were so arrogantly uncooperative, not responding to my urgent requests (nor to

those of others). Customer service is not their business. I exchange several text messages with Dorothea, who is moving to another hotel. She has some difficulties rearranging our planned flights to Rodrigues, a small island east of Mauritius, but is working on it.

After all this nerve-racking trouble, the actual flights are blissfully uneventful. The drive from the airport on Mauritius to our hotel is 75 kilometers and correspondingly expensive. My driver Brij is very talkative and fills my tired ears with his philosophy and family history, but I play along in good humor. At 20.30, we are at *The Blues Hotel* in Grand Baie, and the friendly innkeeper shows me the way to Room 304. And there she is, Dorothea in all her beauty. I am so glad to hold her in my arms after all this uncertainty. Maybe she reciprocates 😊

We sit on the front veranda, almost outside, have a beer and listen to two guitarists playing easy listening, *Hotel California* and the like. Nice, relaxing, just what I need. I slowly get back to normal.



Figure 606. Our first meal on Rodrigues, in a simple restaurant.  
The beach at Port Mathurin.

The next day, we have to get up at 08.00 for a 13.35 flight! Brij is right on time at 09.15 and takes us to the airport at a discount fare, as he offered yesterday (and now tries to ignore). The Air Mauritius ticket counter is closed, with a lady behind it doing nothing. Sorry, we need our tickets to Rodrigues issued, and she does, quite efficiently. We pay a small penalty for shifting both flights by one day. Excellent, the last scheduling



problem removed. Why could Air Mauritius not do this by email since a week ago? What a frustration!

We have a lot of time on our hands, sit outside for a while, and make our flight with little time to spare. On Rodrigues, we take a taxi to *Les Cabanes d'été*, which Dorothea has reserved. We have a nice room and the view from the large balcony over the Baie Malgache is impressive. The owners, Christine and her husband, are most charming and welcoming, and their neighbor brings us delicious fresh fish from her own kitchen.



Figure 607. Restaurant in Port Mathurin.

In a rental car, we drive to the “capital” Port Mathurin, then to the recommended beach at Pointe Cotton. Disappointing. Nice forest leading to the beach, warm water, but nothing for snorkeling. “Too dangerous” to go out too far, because of undercurrents, cautions a knowledgeable local. I do go, but indeed there is nothing to see. Dorothea flees from a few drops of rain into the car.

Our next stop is even more disappointing. The turtle farm has over a thousand turtles and is open until 17.00. When we arrive around 15.15, they tell us that the last tour was at 14.30 and now the place is still open (restaurant and shop), but one cannot see the turtles. This is a real cheat!



Figure 608. Cemetery with a view.

Back to Port Mathurin and Anse aux Anglais. A pleasant village, somewhat reminiscent of Sambaqui, see page 841, with a nice restaurant.



Figure 609. Murals on Rodrigues.

We drive by the most beautiful prison that I have seen—but I have not seen many of them. The outside walls are decorated with colorful murals, from a local artist or



school children. Does this improve the life inside? Later, we see nice murals and funny announcements elsewhere. A lively form of local art.



Figure 610. In the local patois: *pas boire, après conduire*—do not drink and then drive.



Figure 611. Brown noddie.



After breakfast next day, they pick us up for our boat excursion to *Île aux Cocos*. Another disappointment. The boat ride takes about an hour, quite pleasant under a fabric sun roof. A French couple in their twenties rides with us. On the island, several tour companies have built a hut for everybody's use. We anchor off it, all alone except two guys from the Fisheries Department, who open and close the hut every day. We explore the coast.

There is an incredible number of brown noddies (*Anous stolidus*) on the ground and in the trees, the females with little ones and also with a single egg. They are not shy at all, with a flight distance of maybe 30 centimeters. Some bold ones attack me, one kicks me on the head from above, others whiz by my head at a distance of centimeters, so that I can feel the swoosh of air. This gives a bit of a Hitchcock feeling.



Figure 612. How many noddies?

I walk around one end of the little island, the other end is closed for pedestrians. Lunch from plastic containers is filling and quite ok. Coke and beer. The young French guy has taken this opportunity to propose to his girl friend. We do not witness the actual proposal, but then share a glass of Veuve Clicquot with them. All the best! Finally it is time for our marvellous snorkeling opportunity. What a disappointment! Zilch. There is nothing to see underwater except sand and grass, some sea cucumbers, and three fish. That's all.



Figure 613. Noddies with egg (egg nodd?), crab, peaceful anchorage.



Figure 614. Infinite Dorothea in the ChillPill pool.

When we arrive back from Rodrigues at the Mauritius airport, Anil, a policeman, is waiting for us with a sign “Joachim”. Christine’s husband on Rodrigues has offered to



call this pleasant man, and we get the easiest car rental ever. We check the car, no paper to sign, I just give him the money as agreed, no receipt, and that's it. He drives us to ChillPill, a pleasant hotel right on the sea. I have a cold beer at one of the two places in town that are still open at this extremely late hour of 20.30. This is not Mallorca. Our room is tiny, the bed is too narrow for us, and we do not sleep well.



Figure 615. Infinity pool and around.

In the afternoon, we go snorkeling, hoping that this time it will be interesting. And it is, though far less so than at other places where we have been on other trips. Just hopping off the beach, almost in front of our hotel, there are corals and fish. Not many, and not exciting, but at least something. There is a fairly strong current along the beach and I can just lie on the water and watch the underwater world from above, magically pulled as in an elevator. Dorothea is moderately courageous, and one time I take her by the hand and we both swim out. Nice, although she almost breaks my hand in her strong grip of fear.





Figure 616. Dorothea relaxed on Mauritius ...and still she smiles.



Figure 617. Variations on palm trees.



Figure 618. Around the *Noix de coco*.

When we leave Mauritius, Anil meets us at 08.30 on the front terrace of the airport and we hand back the car keys. All went well, I do not even have to buy gas, we drove so little. The fuel gauge is still at 3/8, as in the beginning. If only more car rentals were that easy!

Via Réunion, we fly to Dzaoudzi on the French island of Mayotte. It is geographically part of the Comores, but in a 1974 referendum, the majority vote was in favor of remaining part of France. Mayotte is now the poorest department in France, the poorest member of the European Union, and the richest of the islands in the Comores channel between the African continent and Madagascar.



Figure 619. The ferry between the airport island Pamanzi and the main island of Maore.

Three steps take us to our hotel: first a bush taxi (van) for 1.40 Euro, then a barge from the airport island Pamanzi (Petite-Terre) to the island Maore (Grande-Terre) of Mamoudzou, the small capital city, and finally a taxi for 1.60 Euro to the village of



Tsoundzou II. But that does not work, I go and ask everywhere, the taxi drivers do not want to go there because of traffic jams. Legally, they are required to, but they just refuse. I ask at the tourist office, and the second time a lady there calls up a cousin or so of hers. He will take us for 25 Euros. I agree, because I thought there was a serious problem with the road. Later I understand that this was vastly overpaying.



Figure 620. Some rain at our guest house.



Figure 621. On the road, with a sofa in the middle of nowhere.

We get to *La Guinguette* in Tsoundzou II with a few traffic jams, but nothing like the everyday chaos around Cologne or Paris. François, the owner of our guest house, comes to pick us up. It is just a few minutes' drive to his place, but it would be hard to find on our own. Taxi drivers would not know.

The guest house is in a pleasant and well-kept home, with swimming pool and three terraces. But our room *studette* is tiny, very little space to put our stuff. And the bed is too narrow for us. François will put us in his bigger studio tomorrow. Dorothea bought some provisions at the supermarket in Mamoudzou and we have dinner of noodle soup. Oh well. In the evening, I sit by the pool. Our terrace is unusable for me, because François' TV is blaring from upstairs all the time.

François calls the Tropik Rental company and we arrange a car rental for three days. Otherwise, we do nothing the whole day. Dinner again simply noodle soup and carrot salad. We are so modest ... Actually, the problem is that without a car, it is hard to get anywhere from our guest house.



Figure 622. “Best restaurant” recommended by François, and poor dwellings just across. Off-road vehicle.

Next morning, our rental Renault rolls in. We sign the papers at the Tropik Location office, have a café au lait and pain au chocolat in Passamainty, and drive south along the coast. The road is good and well sign-posted. We do not get lost, except that we miss the turnoff to Plage de Ngouja, but then find it easily on our second try.



We arrive in the early afternoon, but the restaurant is closed and Dorothea waits on the beach in the shade, while I go snorkeling. For a long time without success, but then I see a turtle. A big fish holds on to its carapace. The turtle nibbles at the grass on the sandy bottom, then goes once to the surface. Visibility is very poor, 2 to 3 meters only. A bit more in the few moments of sunshine. I use my flash for some pictures, but they turn out worse than without flash, because the drifting silt reflects the flash light. It is a peaceful moment, swimming there above a turtle which seems to look at me from time to time, without showing any apprehension. I am quite tired when I get out and change into dry clothes.



Figure 623. “My” turtle.



Figure 624. Do not leave your luggage unattended!





Figure 625. An electrically powered lemur.

The next day, we drive along the northern coast, after the heavy rains have stopped. Less interesting and wild than in the south. We stop in front of the entrance to the *Hotel Trévani* without realizing that it is there. Only after driving further and coming back do we see the sign. A friendly welcome on the terrace, table with a perfect view of the beach, but no food. Drinks yes. We relax for a while, then I walk along the beach of black volcanic sand in the surf. Not particularly nice.



Figure 626. In town.

After some shunting of cars at the guest house, we talk until 02.00 with the newly arrived Jörg from Kaiserslautern in Germany. He is a sports fan and runs a ticket reselling

business out of Dubai, buying thousands of FIFA world championship and Olympic tickets under false names and selling them with a hefty profit. He has traveled to all FIFA countries but 13, and tells stories about Turkmenistan (visa expired, hiding in a hotel, paying extra for the visa violation), Somalia, and other countries. An enjoyable evening.



Figure 627. On the beach.

On our last morning, we return our car to the rental company. They tell us we have to wash the car—what? Never heard of that! Another wait at the car wash. My complaints and ranting distract the lady at the rental outfit sufficiently that she does not notice the big black marks on the right rear of our car, where I scraped the gate at our guest house. They take us to the ferry *la barge*, we catch one with a minute to spare, then a bush taxi to the airport.



Figure 628. Beach and market.



Figure 629. On the ferry.





Figure 630. Boarding the ferry.

With little waiting, we get to the Kenya Airways (KQ) check-in counter for Nairobi and Zanzibar, but then trouble starts. Our flight to Nairobi is on KQ and Nairobi-Zanzibar on Precision Airlines, code-shared with KQ. But KQ has messed this up and not entered the second flight properly. The girl at the counter refuses to give us boarding passes to Zanzibar, let alone check our luggage through. “You can do this easily at Nairobi”—hahaha, we will certainly miss the second flight, given our short connecting time of half an hour. I spend over an hour running around and discussing with the station manager. The consistent answer is: “sorry, we cannot do this”. True, they really try, but we do need proper check-in. Finally a senior guy from some ops department, not part of KQ, comes and fixes our problem. “We first had to make sure that nothing else works, then we can do this manual override.” They probably call this customer service. After over an hour of waiting and insecurity, we get our boarding passes and luggage tags.

We eat and drink something. As we stand in line for immigration, the last call for our flight is announced. We push ahead, people are very understanding and helpful, and we go quickly to gate 5, as announced. And there—nothing. We wait for over an hour, having two beers and buying duty-free goodies. Eventually we move to the gate 5 waiting area, as announced. A good number of people are waiting, but for a different flight. Finally, a

KQ girl tells us that we have to go to gate 4, and indeed everybody else is already inside the plane. A brilliant example of African non-organization.

During our few days on Mayotte, the skies are heavily laden with rain and oppressive temperatures. That is natural in the tropics, but we also feel the human atmosphere to be morose, with little friendliness among the people and towards us.



Figure 631. Our hotel with a decorative fuse box behind an ornately carved wooden door.

The *Zanzibar Hotel* in the capital Stone Town is a marvellous old building, with high ceilings, a heavy wooden entrance door studded with metal spikes, creaking wooden floors, and a beautifully antiquated feeling. The receptionist is not the brightest, shows us a wrong room until I remind him that I reserved one with a balcony. Our room has a lot of old-world charm, antique furniture including a canopy bed and nice seating on the

balcony. I reserved it for one night, but we will stay for another day. There seem to be no other guests besides us.



Figure 632. My shattered lens and Stone Town doors.

Breakfast in the hotel is good and friendly. A long climb up many stairs is rewarded by a beautiful view of the old town. Already the nightly drive through Stone Town yesterday made a favorable impression on us, but the daylight experience is even better. It is a well-preserved Omani-African small town, with many buildings tastefully kept and restored. In fact, the large country of Oman was ruled for centuries from this small island. We walk through its narrow lanes and streets down to the beach, where many boats land. Later we have lunch at a pleasant restaurant right there, in the calm and cool shade of large trees. The house of Tippu Tip (1832-1905), a big slave hunter and merchant at the end of the 19th century, is under renovation. He had helped Stanley on his disastrous



cross-Congo expedition and was buried near his house. In the former English club, now the *Africa House Hotel*, we have our sundowner on their terrace facing the ocean. It is empty when I arrive around 17.00, but later fills up. The narrow steep circular staircase up there is a bit of a challenge for some of us. We have dinner at one of several shady restaurants by the beach. Overall, our week on Zanzibar is the most pleasant one of this whole trip.



Figure 633. On the beach.

For lack of guests in the Zanzibar Hotel, breakfast is served in the Tausi Hotel on their rooftop terrace. We had ordered a rental car for three days, to arrive at 11.00. The first hitch is that the reception does not advise us of their arrival until 11.30. We get a battered Suzuki Escudo four-wheel drive. One of the problems is that on one occasion, I have trouble opening the locked car. From then on, we just do not lock it anymore.



Figure 634. Stone Town lamps.



Figure 635. Look at me, Tippu Tip! From your house.





Figure 636. The former British and the former German consulates.



Then comes a major annoyance. Apparently, we need a local driver's licence, costing 20 000 TSh (about 10 USD). The guy from the rental agency drives to the responsible agency at the edge of town. But their system has changed, we have to first pay at a bank and then present the receipt. Good idea against corruption. But the implementation is faulty. At the first bank, we do not even stand in line because the queue is too long. I withdraw some cash from an ATM. That works very well to my surprise. At the next bank, we dawdle for quite some time, the rental guy is not pushy at all about getting our business done, and then the bank system shuts down. No internet connection. We drive back to the agency and someone from the rental office brings the paper with the driver's permit. Easy, no previous payment required. Three hours after we started out. Why did we not do it this way to start with? A further annoyance is that they give us an empty gas tank, which means that we can only put in minute quantities if we want to return it in the same state.



Figure 637. The *Sea View Lodge*.

Well, eventually we are off, buying gas first. We drive across the island to Jambiani and stop at about a dozen lodges and hotels. We do not find the perfect spot, often no swimming pool or no air conditioning, two conditions of Dorothea. Finally we land at the *Sea View Lodge*. Our triple room is spacious and comfortable, its only drawback is that it is by the pool and people pass in front of our veranda. The owner Farouk is a heavy man, has lived in Tanzania, England, Switzerland, Italy, and other places, speaks nine languages according to himself, and talks a lot. Quite funny, we get along well.

At Farouk's suggestion, we drive to the *Jozani Chwaka Bay National Park*. We have to take a tour with a rather boring but loquacious guide who shows us the cute Red Colobus monkeys (*Piliocolobus*). Its only known habitat is this small jungle area, and it is considered a rare species, but here we see many of them. Dorothea is attacked by a wasp, slips as she is chasing it away, and falls on her back. This time the right hand side, and fortunately it is not as bad as in St. Martin, see page 869.



Figure 638. Our Danish friends at the lodge and fisherwomen.



Figure 639. Village road and a young woman hurrying on the beach.





Figure 640. In the village.





Figure 641. And who are you?

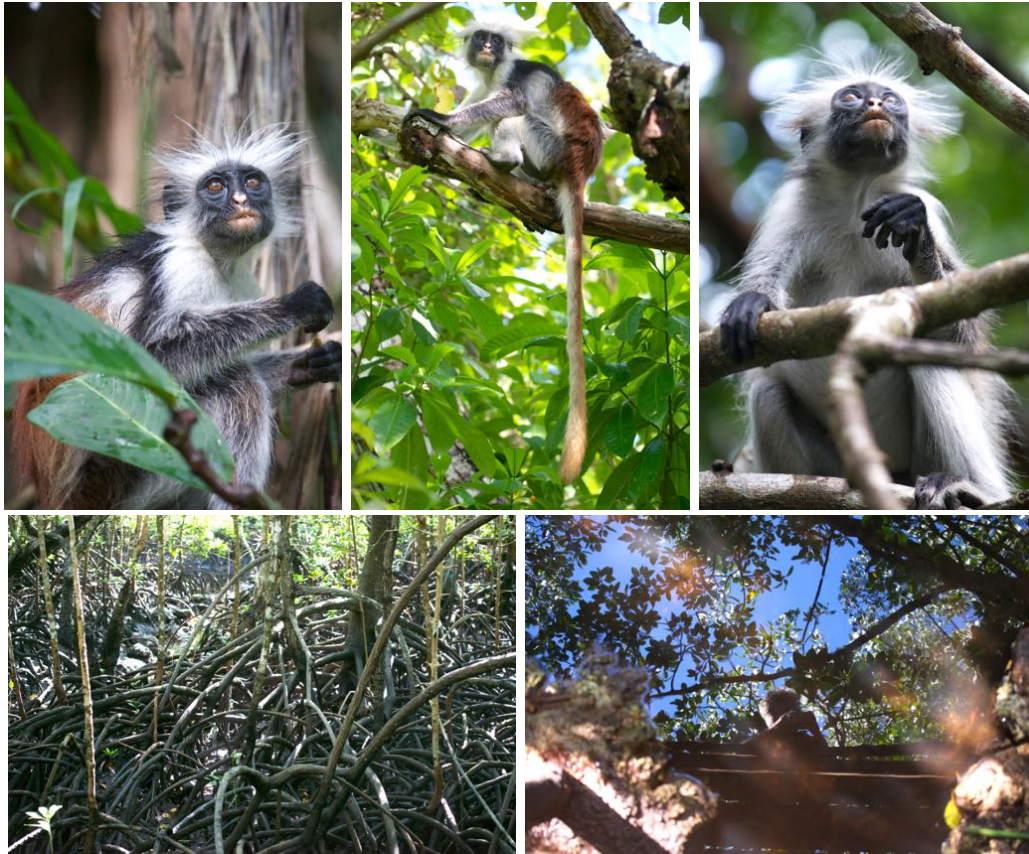


Figure 642. Red Colobus monkeys and a mangrove swamp.

We have dinner at the spectacular *The Rock* restaurant, on a rock just off the beach in Michamve. Nice view for our sundowner, then good food.



Figure 643. *The Rock*.





Figure 644. Community initiatives.

Again at Farouk's suggestion, we try snorkeling at the *Blue Lagoon Lodge*. It is closed now in the low season, but a lonely waiter serves cold drinks. I walk quite a bit along the beach and then swim near to the tourist boats, hoping that the snorkeling will be good there. But that is not the case, little visibility and few fish. Disappointing.



Figure 645. On the spice tour.

Dorothea goes with two Swiss (originally from Northern Frisia and from Brazil) on an instructive spice tour. Impressive is the young guy climbing up a coconut palm with



a rope around his feet, relaxing at the top: *hakuna matata*. At the end, there are nice presents made from palm leaves for everybody. I have a lazy day, writing, sorting photos.

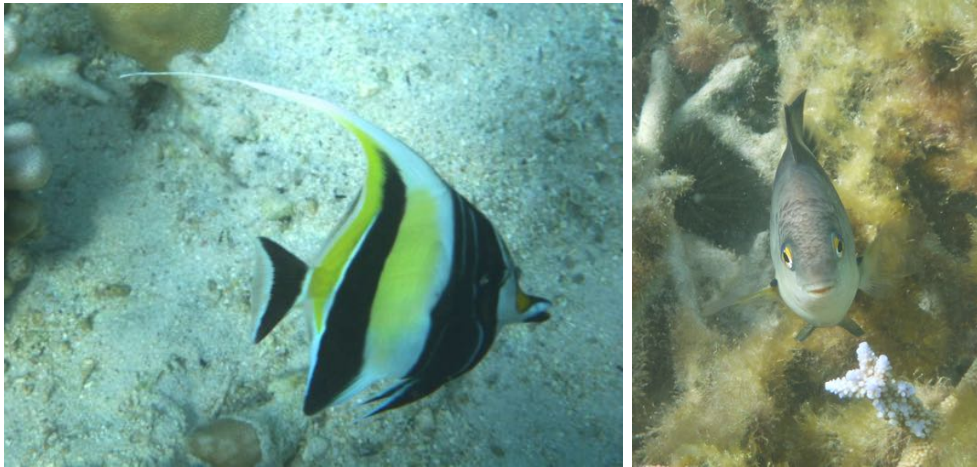


Figure 646. A Moorish idol (*Zanclus cornutus*) at right.

Dorothea has made friends with a Danish family, takes their daughter for a walk along the beach and in the pool, plays the sea monster for their little boy. Mu picks me up with his boat at 14.00 for snorkeling. The boat ride is fun, a tiny nutshell, interesting sailing. The snorkeling is another disappointment, no sun, poor visibility, corals and fish are three or four meters deep and hard to see, let alone to photograph.



Figure 647. Boat trip with Mu.

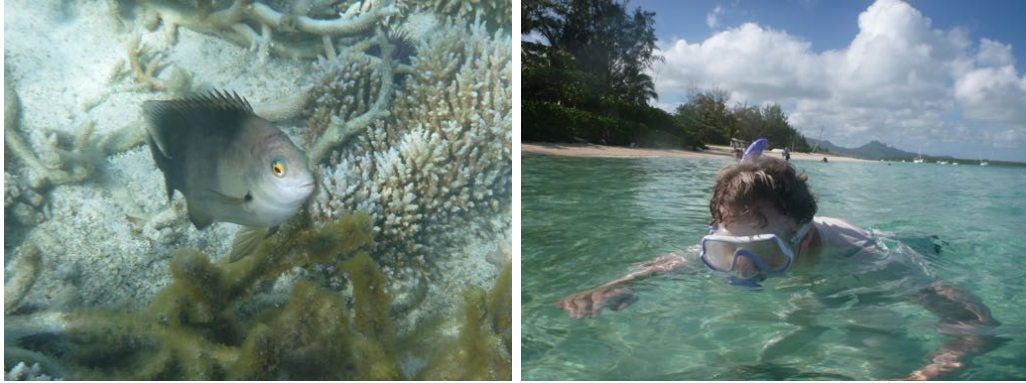


Figure 648. Strange animals in the water.

Overall, we still dream of our wonderful snorkeling experiences in Indonesia, the South Pacific, and elsewhere. But on our recent Caribbean and now Indian Ocean trips, nothing came even close to that. Large tracts of corals are dead, the fish are few. Is this due to the global warming—corals have a narrow interval of tolerated temperatures?

We fly home via Arusha, with a glimpse at Mount Kilimanjaro in the distance, and Addis Abeba. Good-bye Africa, for this year at least.





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