

Killed by a falling coconut in Bagamoyo.

A most unlikely scenario, you are thinking. Not so. It could have happened. But I choose the title just to conjure up what kind of trip it was. Expect the unlikely, the unusual, and the downright outlandish to happen. My impression of the journey is that so much happened, and sort of simultaneously. I had difficulty finding a suitable start and ending to the story.

(We were in Bagamoyo. The coconut did fall from one of those tall palms, but none of us was standing directly beneath it at the time.)

I'll follow the chronological order. We crossed on the Kazungula ferry into Zambia, from Botswana. Everything ran smoothly. Nothing more was expected of us than to stand by. A runner was employed by our guide. He did all the necessary, but the main task was to ensure that all our paperwork was elevated from the bottom of the pile on the immigration desk to the top.

Our guide employed him and we duly paid for his services. We were quite new to border posts, but we were set to learn a lot more over the next month.

My first time in Zambia. On the road from Livingstone to Lusaka, I felt unsettled...I had left behind all the trappings of my social and cultural milieu...but what made me uneasy? I couldn't say, because those trappings are so unconsciously assimilated I didn't know how they were manifest. I know there were strange road markings, no fences, no signage...everything was different and new. This was unmediated space.

Thanks to fellow travellers, I visited the Victoria Falls from the Zambian side. What a three dimensional experience! The volume of water plunging to the gorge below, a walk over a swaying rope bridge with mist and spray rising from below and what seemed like buckets of water from above. I was soaked, and all the while the roar of the falls in your ears.

We drove through Lusaka on our way to our third camping spot in Zambia. A deceptively simple sentence. Our guide talked us through in an attempt to keep us calm. There were streams of traffic, some going this way and some that. We tried to follow our leaders or keep them in sight. Often the traffic came to a standstill and we were jammed among many forms of transport. The hawkers took advantage of the standstill and they swarmed among us, selling everything under the sun. Our guide said that anything, absolutely anything requested of a roadside hawker could be had...it would be procured with the minimum of delay. There was difficulty telling in what direction we had to move next.

We entered the Zambian countryside. The road ran through innumerable villages, quite close to each other. We had to keep an eye on the speed signs and the traffic on the narrow road.

After a few villages had passed, our guide came onto the two –way and in quite musical tones, asked if we were not enjoying the villages. Had we ever seen such a beautiful country, the big blue sky, the sheer exuberance of the villagers, everyone bustling about with something to do? Vegetables and fruit for sale were piled up on tables - tomatoes, squashes, watermelons, greens etc. The ladies, all wearing colourful khangas about their waists and another cloth holding the baby in a sling. There was a general scene of activity, food cooking on open fires, people cycling in and out, children running about but never into the road... dust and smoke filled the late afternoon air. And above all the cheerful beat of music, pretty loud.

Our guide asked if this was not so much better than the South African culture at dusk, lived behind closed curtains and in front of TV. I heartily agree now, but then we were so new to the scene, that we were focussed on potholes, cyclists carrying unbelievable loads both vertically and horizontally, trying to make out pedestrians in the dust. We thought, *what?*....when he expressed his appreciation of all he saw.

We had a bit of a rest at the next stop, camping for two nights, instead on one. This was right in the middle of Zambia at Kapisha Hot Springs. Before we arrived, I wondered if the spa was in the bush or like a blue swimming pool, I had no clue. But it was a little Eden....the hot spring was a small eddy off the main river, a circular area right in the bush roofed over with palms and natural vegetation. The water was clear and constantly warm. I won't mention Africa House here as it is another subject, but it is a mansion built near the springs after the turn of the century by an Englishman...when it was thought no doubt that the sun would never set on the Empire.

While driving through Zambia, I was struck by the good manners and the excellent English of all the people we encountered. These were not too many and mainly at the camp sites, but even the most humble staff member was fluent in English and perfectly mannered. I remember coming across a road worker at a stop sign ahead of road works, on the way back. I spoke to the man warning traffic with a flag and was very surprised to find that he could tell me about the whole scope of the project and who was funding it in excellent English.

My visual impression of Zambia is of a land so rich in natural beauty and so fertile. Etched in my mind's eye is the tall yellow grass at the roadside, the hardwood trees beyond and sometimes the burnt red of the soil beside the road. I did feel that there were few views to see, it seemed that we were travelling along a flattish escarpment. And above all there was the big blue sky.

Border post Tunduma, into Tanzania.

One noticed quite early on the many little mosques in Tanzania, a predominantly Islamic country. The ladies here were all wrapped in colourful sarongs with their heads covered.

The long lines of one storey little shops seen in Zambia were continued, the villages very similar but with plenty of mopeds here. Some *Serengetiers* claimed to have seen five people on one moped but I have a picture of four on one moped, and this kind pile up was the norm.

The lay of the land was very interesting. Everything was very green, a bright green associated with volcanic islands. Often the land seemed to have ridges and furrows and valleys, all covered with grass. Our guide persuaded us to see the lay of the land independently of political borders, the lakes, the Great Rift Valley, the plateaus, the highlands. We should appreciate the whole for the wonder that it was, and we did. He was even reluctant that the real world should intervene. We were not particularly interested in what was happening in the rest of the world, we were a world unto ourselves. I like to imagine the land in a geographical sense, but going from country to country, it became apparent that political policies had real consequences.

Another feature of Tanzania is the much stricter road traffic enforcement. Outside every village the speed limit changed, for the duration of the village. Traffic officials dressed in white were all over the place, some with hand held radars. We all tried to avoid fines, but were all caught, most of us a good few times. The fine, paid on the spot, was thirty thousand shillings. This sounds pretty alarming, but worked out to about R180. A never really got the hang of the shillings. I bought Malawian gin for about twenty thousand Malawian shillings and this was a sort of benchmark. I was thinking of buying a real glass wine glass, but it cost as much as a bottle of export gin, so I didn't.

The road conditions did hot up a bit. Busses and trucks had right of way, irrespective of the rules of the road. In fact, larger vehicles seemed to have right of way and we fitted into the pecking order above the normal road sedans and below the busses and trucks. One had to always be ready to make a plan should a truck driver decide to drive on your side of the road.

This is getting longer and longer and we haven't got to the Serengeti yet. I can't help this as it was a long road trip.

Finally we are in view of Kilimanjaro, metaphorically, that is. We are on the road to Kilimanjaro and intend to camp at its base in the town of Moshi. Our guide sounds a cautionary note. It's true that Kilimanjaro is the highest peak in Africa and we are on the road to this mountain, in fact drawing quite close. He mentions that cloud cover sometimes obscures the mountain, and it is quite blocked out from view. I don't think he went as far as to state categorically that we will not see it. He always left a little hope.

But as it turned out it was completely obscured. We joked about this as we all had a clear idea in our minds of the picture that would be taken with Kili in the background. Coming back from the Serengeti on the same road, headed towards Moshi, I kept my eyes on the

clouds in the general direction of where I thought it was. We drove on and on, and in the next shocking second, it materialised in front of my eyes, five kilometres up in the sky. I only saw the peak, a jagged series of peaks covered in snow. I shrieked, we stopped the car and stood and stared.

Next stop was the world renowned Ngorongoro crater. We ascended through beautiful green countryside, green hills as far as you could see. And dotted in these green valleys and hills were the Maasai homesteads, that is, kraals of sticks around a central area. From time to time, one saw a Maasai warrior, as the herders are known....far away, but an unmistakable splash of bright red in the landscape. We saw many Maasai on the roadside as well, and they add an amazing cultural dimension to this landscape. All swathed in cloths of red, ranging to dark blue and violet, they are adorned with silver bangles, earrings and necklaces. They have large herds of cattle which they run within the Ngorongoro conservancy, even down within the crater. They are armed with nothing but spears and share the same space as lion and other wild predators, guarding and protecting their cattle. Apparently the government of the day has tried to 'bring them into the 21st century', insisting that their children attend school in western clothes and that their hair is cut etc. I would hate to see them go, they are so much a part of this landscape. They have been fighting a rear guard action, but tourism may be their much needed support. I remember that one among the *Serengetiers* mentioned that they seem to have an uncanny communication with their animals, judging by the way they can manage them close to the roadside.

This seems to be an apt time to mention the ablutions along the road. I happen to clearly remember the showers at the Simba Camp, on the heights above the Ngorongoro crater. We had been forewarned that there were two ablution blocks but only one had hot water. At this point of the trip, this was good news indeed. I hastened to the said ablution block and quickly claimed a shower. At the same time an overland bus had arrived and there were plenty of young girls there as well. This was only an average experience and is in no way remarkable. There were better and worse experiences. The shower was hot, as promised. But the cubicle was so small that I couldn't even fit my bag in with shower goods etc., let alone a towel. There were no hooks at all so I had to stuff my clean clothes above my head between the water pipe and ceiling. The bag I had to put outside and hope for the best, though I remembered my camera was in there too. During the shower my clothes fell down and I dressed in wet clothes, but not deterred, I went to the basins to comb my hair. Again one couldn't put the bag down. The floor was a river of water, and there were no surfaces anywhere. The overseas students all had perplexed expressions, asking each other where the toilet paper was and so forth. Toilet paper is not to be had in Africa.

We had a succession of experiences, each mediated by our guide. Sometimes he said, 'I think you should shower this morning as there is hot water and I cannot guarantee hot water at our next camp'. By then it was the norm to shower once a day. Surely it was

sufficient to shower either in the morning or the evening. At the next camp there might or might not be hot water. There might not be water. The shower facilities were often so *rural* that the other ladies declined to shower. However we all survived this ... and it had left a lasting legacy of thinking two showers a day to be superfluous, after all.

Toilets. I will describe I think my worst encounter, at the border post going into Malawi. We had new money and Denis gave me 4000 of whatever it was (Malawian shillings in note form) to go to the toilets. I gave the guard 4000, and he said, 'no, it is 400' and gave me back the 3000 shillings in notes and someone else ran for change. He provided me with 2 squares of toilet paper. I entered the toilet enclosure. The door did not close or lock. The toilet seat was broken and the ceramic toilet bowl itself was a credit to its makers, still in use after so many years. The floor was awash with what I hoped was water, so high as to almost wash over my shoes. I couldn't touch anything.

Denis related to me the experience of a fellow *Serengetier*...he also went to those toilets I think, and he mentioned that he had to squat without knowing whether he would be able to right himself again. And I am giggling as I write this. None of us were/are exactly young.

Out there in the open, I only had to contend with computing the lines of sight between the vehicles, not always in my favour.

OK. Serengeti, here I come.

But before that, back at Simba camp, during the night, we were surrounded by a herd of buffalo, chewing the grass. They had been there before we went to bed, and our guide, who was camped quite close to us stood there and said, 'this is interesting', using the word in the same way the Chinese use it. I am somewhat naïve, even though I did see the video of the buffalo tossing a lioness, and got into my sleeping bag without turning a hair. During the night, I woke to the sound of buffalo right around the tent...chomping grass at my ear level. It was freezing cold at that altitude and I found myself shivering. Fright and/or cold!

At the Seronera camping area within the Serengeti, we set up camp for four nights. Every night, while camping, we made a fire and ranged our chairs around it. That first night, I remember settling down into my chair with a nice glass of wine, and a sociable smile on my face which slipped somewhat when I heard a lion roar, not that far away from us. It was pitch dark, and at first there was only one lion, then another, then a symphony. It sounded exactly like the CD I have of animal sounds. I play the lions roaring for the grandchildren to frighten us all, and there I was listening to the real thing, in the Serengeti. That night a hyena called very close to the tent. One had to be careful about packing all food away, and nothing in the tent with you. Lions have been known to wander through the camp.

To be honest I didn't quite know what to think of the Serengeti. At first there were so many lions, posing in so many ways for the camera, it was just too perfect. Every granite koppie was decorated with not one but a few lions. I had never seen anything like it. We went for a

ride to the far south, along a muddy route off the beaten track, and saw the most amazing landscapes...the best I have ever seen. Granite boulders, ancient gnarled trees, euphorbias....completely untouched, it seems, since time began. Big, big dramatic skies above.

As if that wasn't enough, we saw six leopards in fairly close succession. All draped in trees, and I think I only saw four. We have always been the most stupid of safari goers, and seldom see what everyone else sees, but that day I did manage four. What a rare privilege.

On our third day, we saw the masses of wildebeest moving north into Kenya, following the new grass. It takes time to appreciate even the obvious. This is what it all looked like before the arrival of the new all-powerful predator on the block, man! The lion was still king, and he was totally uncompromised. He *is* king in the land of the endless plains and wide open skies, the Serengeti.

If you're still with me, we are about to go to Zanzibar.

We retraced our steps, and headed to Dar Es Salaam.

We camped at a beach front resort, swimming in the sea, and listening to the vibrant Tanzanian sounds from the bar at the resort. On the following morning we left for Zanzibar at 4.00am our time and 5.00 am Tanzanian time. We jumped into tuk tuks that transported us to the harbour, where we boarded the pedestrian ferry for the Dar harbour. Standing room only and we were packed in like sardines with all the locals. They did not face forward around us, but turned to face us directly, taking in our shoes, our clothes, bags etc. I said to Denis, don't turn suddenly, you will knock someone over with the kit bag. Someone shyly said to me 'the zEEP is open', the zip on the bag into which they had been peering. I thanked them and closed it.

Zanzibar is a whole subject on its own. Suffice to say it was an exotic, fascinating glimpse into a very old culture. Zanzibar has been the centre of much political intrigue over the centuries. It is the most convenient stop on the trade routes from India, Asia and the Arab coast, and the most easily defended. Since the first century, there is a record of trips down the African coast as far south as present day Mocambique. Ras Mkumbuu on the River Pangani was mentioned as the port of destination in the 1st century. This is just north of Bagamoyo. Although the original people along the Somali Coast are a mixture of Cushitic people from Ethiopia and Bantu people from the Cameroons, the influence of many other nations formed the Swahili culture. A quarter of Swahili words are of Arabic origin.

It is a fascinating story. The monsoons made it all happen. Arabs, Indians and Asians arrived on the Eastern coast of Africa on the monsoon. They had to wait till the winds were favourable again to take them back home, and this could be up to six months later...hence the social and cultural mixing that took place. Later in the 16th century, the Portuguese arrived, and the European powers in the 19th century, all adding to the mix.

For centuries, Zanzibar was the centre of trade in the area. Gold from Zimbabwe, ivory from the hinterland and later slaves. Bagamoyo was the main port for the transfer of slaves to Zanzibar. The name means 'lay down your hearts', as they knew they would never see Africa again. Slavery seems to go quite far back but was at its height in the 1860s. Arabs imported slaves to desalinate the marshes and make them fit for cultivation, as well as tending date plantations etc. The French imported slaves to the West Indies on the sugar plantations.

When slavery became more and more difficult due to British gunboats, many, thousands were kept right there on Zanzibar tending the clove plantations.

My own favourite memory of Zanzibar is of the dhows, the wooden sailing vessels that also go back centuries, with triangular lateen sails or square rigged. You see, I have read just enough to know too little.

Two lovely nights at coastal resorts next to Lake Malawi followed. We wound our way back to South Africa, via Zimbabwe and two nights at Mana Pools next to the Zambezi River.

We camped almost every night and nearly always in a new spot. We had a throw-up tent that expanded under its own tension and all you had to do was crawl in. It was very light and thin, especially if you were surrounded by buffalo, but otherwise fine. For two nights after I arrived home, I dreamed I was camping. On the first night, I dreamed I was trying to set up camp but my gear was been blown up into a big tree. On the second I woke up suddenly during the night and wondered where I was. I looked up, and thought we must be camping near buildings as I could see a window.

Jean Baker

Cape St Francis, August 2015

