

RoadKing #14 Adios Africa

(Early October, 2011)

“Twas and early morning yesterday, I was up before the dawn.

And I really have enjoyed my stay, but I must be moving on”

As the sun rises over today, our last aboard the Eeyore, it’s easy to remember back to the first morning back in Nairobi where I had more questions than answers as I packed and repacked my gear trying to figure out how to get my 80-litre lifestyle into my 65-litre bag.

While my planned 84-day adventure here got clipped by 10 days, I’ve seen, smelt, walked and talked my way almost 10,000 miles and I think that’s going to have to be enough here. What follows is a very rough draft of a piece I’m working on...

TIA – This is Africa

Boarding the Kifaru back in Nairobi over 2 months ago, I honestly had no clue what I was in for. Considering how little we use the term “overland” in America, I was pretty sure I’d be the sole Yank. That part held true. The rest, well that was to be revealed.

Packing 20-odd souls in a rolling yellow cheese box for extended travel sounds more like a social experiment than optimized travel, but somehow it worked. The daily bickering, sniping and gamesmanship displayed were no different than a small office back in the states, but when you add long hours sitting in a rambling truck, with little chance of escape it becomes something different.

I guess the analogy of a “rolling social experiment” held true. Teams of 4 were created and truck duties rotated; cooking, truck cleaning, dish washing and security. The care and feeding of the truck and us “truckies” gave us plenty of time and tries to perfect each duty and the daily success and/or failure gave us all something to talk and/or whisper about.

Of these odd souls, there were 3 vegetarians, (1 die-hard, 2 would each fish/chicken) so every dinner meal had to be altered to allow a vegetarian option. Then there was one girl who could eat no beans, a leader who ate no green peppers or peanut butter. But if you were on the truck, you’d better be comfortable eating starch. Lots of starch. Sort of like eating a mattress so there’s less room for anything else. Most of the brits on board tried their hardest to duplicate the Queen’s methods of proper food preparation and menu selection. Thankfully Africa complied and we were able to get it all out here, down to the proper digestive biscuits made in the proper shape (square not round). Of course, as most of you know, I will, and have, eaten anything that wasn’t moving. For me these flutters regarding how to properly prepare potatoes (and it’s potat-TOES) seemed pretty goofy.

The ability to get along with a crowd this big presented daily challenges, as who sat where, (were they alternating between the front and back of the bus?) where do we set up our tent? where's the showers? were they hot? Is there a For-Ex? It all sounds petty, but 24/7 close contact can make these big issues.

The locations have been amazing, an Impenetrable Forest, Dune 45, Victoria Falls, Chimp-trekking, Serengeti, Zanzibar, Okavanga Delta, Etosha park. Overland is really the only way to see all this and still have money left for the endless Coke's and Simba crisps.

Remote? Yes, but also we got to experience the slow emergence of a continent. Leaving America, there were countless things I forgot to bring and my days in Istanbul were filled with last-minute shopping for things I felt too obscure to be found in Africa. Far from it. We've traveled to some pretty obscure outposts here only to find the little general shop carried all sorts of equally obscure items, down to USB thumb-drives for laptops. When I was here 10 years ago, cell-phones were just emerging. Now the competition between providers is every bit as fierce as it is back home.

The Kifaru and now the Eeyore have both proven their strength along some fairly inhospitable roads, both the truck and truckie "bending but not breaking" thankfully. Their drivers, Dixon and David are more "road therapists" knowing days ahead of time, when the road would be bad. Considering how few roads there really are out here, that's not too surprising I guess, but they are and were both capable pilots. In all these miles, thru 10 countries and 4 major language changes, we've only had to turn around once for a missed direction.

It was the road that ended up mattering a lot. From the pot-holed dust-buckets of the Massai-Mara to the sleek ribbons of macadam here South Africa, we drove 'em all. A long day spent sitting on the back of the truck banging pot-holes wasn't a good one. Riding so high up you spend days looking down from the perch; on top of countless ramshackle towns, across the open plains looking for the odd movement in the brush; being on top of it all was definitely the way to go.

The library on board, some 50 odd books covering death to romance, have been thumbed thru by us all. I had the time and inclination to work thru 4, but my gaze was constantly diverted by the rolling scenery (and my daily 3hr mandatory beauty rest) which challenges us all to describe in adequate terms.

Traversing Africa the long way, has exposed us all to the great diversity in each area. The lush green banana fields of Uganda down to the dunes of Namibia; the rapids of the White Nile to the inland delta. When it came time to pitch our tents, the wide variety of campsites from lush thick grassy knolls to barren piles of flattish dust, we've slept on them all.

Tents. Military grade but roomy. Irish John and I had no problems setting ours up and took it as a matter of pride to be the first every day (are we petty?) For the first 60 odd days, we put the rain-fly up, somehow concerned about a sudden squall coming upon us. Then we realized we could save almost a minute by not putting it on, since there's been no rain since Uganda.

Food for lunch. A constant concern. Since we're not driving, either you're looking out the window, sleeping or snacking. The glossy web-site for Absolute promised "local shopping" for our daily bread.

Most of us took this to mean getting to hoof the local road-side shops for something, anything to eat. After literally endless kilometers connecting the dots, we truckies prayed that the daily bodega would have enough variety to make a meal. (a bag of crisps and a Coke if it didn't).

Some would get creative and buy fresh produce, meats and cheeses (for a proper lunch) but a majority of this would get tossed as they'd forget that the refrigerator gets turned off at night or that bread goes stale the 2nd day or they'd just forget their left-overs. Then it would be up to the "truck cleaners" to dispose of the waste. We must have thrown out 200lbs of food during our run down here.

Overland with a truck and tents isn't for everyone, but it's definitely added a flavor to those we've driven past daily. But I must be moving on.

Back about a week ago we were spread out by this river and while chucking some un-edible snacks, I found these words written on the side of the garbage can. They might be from some sage poet, but I'd like to think that they're remnants from some other traveler tossing out his inedibles:

"The past is done, the future unwritten, but today is a gift, that's why they call it the present"

We arrived here in Capetown and like the ending of a lot of great movies, the conversations die down and each of the characters slowly fades into the sunset. The camera pans down and in the sand, the treadmarks & footprints left by the truck and the truckies quickly blur into nothingness with the first passing winds. The marks we made here in Africa probably won't last a week, but the marks made on all of us will last a lifetime.

Next up is Nepal. Heaven help them – big Mzungu is coming.