

RoadKing – Composite

RoadKing #1

Whilst travelling thru ORD with too much gear, gut and angst over any number of unresolved issues, tis best to get caught up in a gaggle of middle-eastern potentates as they negotiate the new body scanners. No it's not metal they're after, so when you explain that your belt is actually attached to the pants, being overly willing to "drop trou" gets you a free pass for you and your gear.

When in Istanbul, please note that the complimentary pistachio's only come out after the 4th round of beers. This is to discourage the less serious diner and move traffic along.

Apparently there are no men with 42" waists in Istanbul. This loosely translated to 4X at the bazaar and thankfully there was a store for that.

Interpreting street signs and tram stops is a hoot. While familiar with bohemians who were too cheap to "buy a vowel" when writing Czech, the modern Turkish is the next step. You basically write out the letters then present the written word to the gaggle of birds procreating freely outside your window. The birds actually add the punctuation, a peck here, double-dot there, haschecks all around. It's quite the efficient system and gives the birds something else to do.

There were lots of cats down by the pier, but no squirrels anywhere. Interesting wharf-side amusement; shooting an air rifle from the pier towards the water at a string of balloons placed among the breakfront. Great fun is had until someone decides to shoot their friend in the rear. This might explain the lack of squirrels.

RoadKing #1a – In Through the Out Door

Last bit of reliable internet for a bit here at the lovely Wildebeest Campsite in Nairobi.

You make fast friends at an oasis. Yesterday we went out for lunch at an Ethiopian place. Sort of like sitting in Chicago and going out for a bit of Wisconsin. I went with the "mixed meat surprise" since I now have had all my shots. The goat (it was all gnu to me) was quite tasty. No utensils, the food comes on a large dish-rag that you tear off and somehow funnel your gnu into. I'm told the dish-rag will eventually disintegrate, but I didn't ask where.

The local market here does have Pringles and just about everything else. Beer here in the camp is \$2.20 a litre, but there were whispers of \$1.10 in town, so off I went. There were large signs warning of intense pollution during "drive time" on Ngong Road, but I had to see it to believe it. I think the cars here run on burnt oil. Reaching Ngong Road, the main artery into Nairobi City Centre, you smell it long before you see it. Like the migration on the Masai Mara nearby, an endless stream of dilapidated vehicles shuddering single-file hoping not to break down before reaching their destination. It's not a Mobile Station here, but rather Kobil; literally the Kenyan Mobile. The various beasts, each belching a

different hue of brown or black, make the sky resemble art class where you mixed all the colors together to see what you got. And when you're walking alongside, it has a taste.

I'm heading out on the 7:30 shuttle to my truck. Locals describe the ride as a modified cattle car with human cattle. Hope I get fresh straw...

Will try to get back to you when I can. Time for a final repacking and some \$1 beers....

Carleton Your Doorman

RoadKing #2

Jambo from Lake Naivasha Kenya,

Day 4 of 84 here. Masai Mara was "boo-hoo kitty" with lots of migration, none near our truck. Got to see plenty of lions and some nice shots were taken. Now by the Lake, spent today hiking around this Green Crater Lake and came within 50 feet of giraffe. Needless to say I had the lens for that.

Our truck, Carifu, is a noble beast, clearly the largest thing on the road. We are 16 at this point, up to 26 during spells. Hope the newby's like traveling on the roof. We've wired Ipod's into the stereo so we're a rockin' troop transport. All the school kids learn "Hi, How are you?" so walking down the street today we must have met every child with the same greeting.

Africa is an "ish-ish" place. The truck leaves at 6:30am-ish. The tours are 3-4hrs-ish. Food is edible-ish. Have barely scratched the tour, but it's all going well. Shot 680 pics in the first 3 days, which could be a bit light.

Temps in the 60's in the AM, 80's daytime.

Funny stories abound, but the funniest by far was the email I got today from a client wondering when I'm coming back from vaca so I can help them with some printing issue....

I'm home on the truck. Many like-minded souls from UK, Ireland, Aussie, Kiwi. But we spoke the same language before we arrived...

Onward..

RoadKing #3

Dateline Jinga, Uganda – Day 8 of 300: Hello Humans. Sitting here at Jinga sucking down a Sprite as I watch the Nile River rush past, it's hard to believe that you all haven't been here.

After a rather tame running of the Massai Mara, we drove up to Nakuru for a 12hr game drive. Saw both black and white rhino, very close to lions and giraffes and then had our drive auger the van into a huge hole. Disregarding the explicit signs saying not to exit the vehicle, we did, and watched a black rhino start to take interest in our predicament. I went into the bush a bit, looking for boards or wood to get some traction to no avail. The Rhino got disinterested and in short order, another tour van came along with a cable and pulled us out. Everyone then took a detour and our intrepid driver did the same, only managed to hang us up again. Back out into the wild we went. This time were able to rock the van out of it and on we went.

Today was the warmest day, probably close to 90 with the humidity. The Nile runs from left to right past my computer screen and is really spectacular. We're here for 4 nights. The majority are taking in the white-water rafting, but I may opt for the 2 day rafting where you camp along the Nile. Traveling with 15 other opinions and abilities is quite interesting. It's definitely an acquired taste and I'm sticking to Ramen noodles.

Off to dinner along the Nile....

RoadKing#4

You can get a combo-meal at the "Happy Time" fast food place in Kampala Uganda for \$3; no toy

Coke is everywhere and all advertising is on a per-building basis. Coke (and others) pay local businesses to paint their entire building red and have a large logo above the awning. In smaller enclaves, there'll be like 5-6 consecutive buildings painted the same to advertise Bic Pens, Airtel phones or more Coke.

Speaking of Coke, they make a Ginger Beer product here called "Stoney Tangawizi" which is quite good.

Uganda's beer is "Nile Special" – True Reward from the Source; I've sworn off the stuff since I really got "overserved" while white-water rafting. I drank at least 6 gallons of river water when I got dumped into the churning rapids. That was enough for me...m

Pepsi can be had in Entebbe, Uganda but that's the only sign of a cola wars.

Every campsite has a well-fed dog as greeter/scrounge.

RoadKing #5

If it's Thursday, then this is Kabale, Uganda. Day 17 on the truck. How time flies when the truck hits every pothole. I've bonded nicely with Dixon, our driver who tells me the truck weighs in at a robust 17 tons, but then the discussion is whether that's US ton's or UK "tun". There's a lot of math being done out here.

For those living vicariously through the "ahBotswana.com" site, you'll notice another "X" beside Queen Elizabeth. And here goes:

After Jinja we covered some ground over 2 days staying at fairly non-descript campsites. Queen Elizabeth is a grand dame, but her namesake National Park left us wanting. Except for hundreds of these little deer hopping about, the place was empty. Took a hippo cruise in the afternoon that delivered some nice shots as we were able to close in on hippo's, croc's and elephants.

From Queen Elizabeth, we kept driving to.... For our \$50 Chimp trek. It was an early departure and just outside the gate, our driver was just saying to keep a look out for leopard when we almost ran one over. It was pitch dark so photo's were impossible, but we have now seen lion.

So there I was, strapped up with camera and lenses heading out for chimps. I was with a group of Dutch who did their best to include me in their discussions, but even so it was better than hearing the complaining of my truckmates. There's always something that's just not up to "proper" English standards out here.

After 3.5hrs, over hill & dale, on and off the trail, we finally got our chimps. 150' up in the trees and almost invisible, but they were there. After such a long hike we were sure that the other groups had seen them, but they hadn't. One group then took to running thru the forest to somehow "catch" the chimps, to no avail. One of our women dislocated her ankle in the process.

And now we're onto Kabale, base for the much anticipated "Gorilla Trek's" to come. Uganda and Rwanda limit the trekking to 8 people a day. We've sent our first 8 early this morning. I'm going tomorrow on the longer/steeper "Kisoro" route. I'd like to say I chose this, since I never do anything easy, but it was the luck of the draw.

The communal meal was goat the other night, the hard part was going with the leader to pick the goat. Circle of life I suppose. Stay safe and sound and I'll let you know how this "silverback" got along with the real one...m

RoadKing #6

Truths:

The yellow cheese-box is 32' long, seats 28 and drinks diesel like a fish does water.

You can only use US currency dated after 2006 in Africa, all prior notes are considered forgeries.

The Chipate is going to be the next big sensation to hit America if I have anything to do with it. My business partners, Omar and John from the Uganda Chipate Company are very excited to franchise.

Whilst taking on Category 5/6 rapids on the Nile, it's best to eject early rather than late. Early people might find the shore, late people get flung back into the rapids for another run thru the "spin cycle" that approximates water-boarding. You're told to go to your "happy place" and stay calm when this happens. You get rescued by kayak in something called the "birthing position" which I will demonstrate upon my return.

A clean, functioning bathroom is a national treasure in Uganda. Taking a picture of one is not considered crude, it's an honor. Bring your own TP though, it is scarce.

A "boda-boda" is a small 100cc motorbike used for transportation in East Africa. Cheap and only slightly less dangerous than the white water rafting.

Trust your driver. Lots of the lookie-loos on the truck with me honestly believe they can alter the "hell-bent-for-leather" approach of the fearless pilots by screaming "slow down" when seasoned road-warriors like myself have mentally checked into our "happy place" and are awaiting the rescue kayak.

Chimps do their thing high in trees.

Gorillas do their thing in places called the impenetrable forest.

Chimps and Gorillas are easier to see in the zoo. Return to your happy place.

Money-changers magically appear at border crossings and have a calculator in one hand and a thick knot of cash in the other. Their "vig" is usually about 5-10% but you can't buy a beer with your good looks or the last countries gazoonies, so you give a little.

I appear to be the biggest Mzungu in these parts, Google it....

When I ask locals how old they think I am, the general consensus is 65. Most days I feel it.

I have learned that a proper English egg breakfast (or "brekkie") is 2 eggs (any style) and 2 pieces of toast. Failure to produce the 2 slices of toast invalidates the meal, therefore eggs alone cannot be eaten.

The truck has only teetered about 40 times. Once we even had lift-off of one of the back wheels as we approached horizontal. Compromise between drivers on horrible roads is quite entertaining.

Bananas can be had out here for about 75cents per bunch, and that bunch is an entire coil of about 40. Pineapples are about 50cents each. Coke comes in glass bottles here. Dorito's and Pringles are staples.

Bananas last about 10hrs after they're purchased, even the green ones.

Bananas trees are planted in 3's, 1 year apart. That way there are bananas every year. In Uganda there are as many banana trees as dandelions in the states.

Cigarette packs come with Swahili/English warnings that smoking gives you sickness and more comically, that smoking makes you impotent.

A young boy wearing only a tee-shirt is referred to as a “semi-naked Rob”.

Fathers with more than 5 kids all smoke. Their wives make them.

Our rafting guide warned that picking up marsh plants gives you hand-syphilis. If so, I have this now since he said this AFTER we were all throwing these at each other.

Always hire a porter. They’re cheap and a way to help the local economy.

More from a special location tomorrow...

RoadKing #7 – The Island

After rolling thru Uganda, Rwanda, lackluster gorilla and chimp trekking, the mighty Kifaru has rolled into Tanzania for a trip across the Seregeti, Ngorogoro Crater and now to the coast. Took the “slow ferry” 2.5hrs here to Zanzibar 2 days ago. They were playing the remade “Karate Kid” movie but the ferry landed before the big fight finish. Hope it came out OK.

In Stone Town we ate at an open-air market where about 100 road-side shanty cooks spent the night hawking basically the same skewers of seafood and chipate. In the morning I did a photo shoot of the winding streets in Stone-Town. Very reminiscent of the French Quarter if you swap French for Islam and contort every road.

I am clearly the largest Mzungo on the island as well. Soccer jerseys abound, but here I’m a 4xl and there are at present none on the island. Did get some sandals custom made this morning from an old car tire. The soles are cut just a little short, but it’s not like I’m going to hike in them.

My cabana here overlooks the Indian Ocean and a walk along the shore brought me to any number of enterprising locals trying to sell everything from cheap trinkets to full-body massages.

The Kifaru (Rhino in Swahili) will be pared down to 12 upon our return from the island. We’ll add more when we get to Victoria Falls but nowhere near as many as we landed with. Frankly I’m still not sure how the truck held 27 people, their gear and attitudes about what’s “proper” but Dixon the driver just put on new tires before we left Arusha, so the ride should be a little quieter.

Today was spent combing the beach for pretty shells. I can’t seem to find any old photos out here, so I pursue the shells with the same “hawk-like” fervor. I also went running. I know, hard to believe, but for the first time in about 7yrs I felt like it. I set no records and probably amazed the local fisherman to no end, but this coastal air is wonderful for my growing beard and receding hairline and running makes both flow like a summer breeze.

Tomorrow this bohemian goes snorkeling. Considering the water-boarding I got back in Jinja while white-water rafting, this should be a step up.

We roll out of Zanzibar on Friday which is just about right. Like Vegas, you sort of run out of things to do after the 3rd day.

Have set up a little side business selling off pretty shells to my fellow mzungu's, who are long on cash and like to sleep in. Not enough to buy gold ingots with, but my bar tab is now covered.

RoadKing #8

Going Down South...

Leaving Tanzania and driving towards the border with Malawi, the mighty Kifaru became involved in a local skirmish. At first we noticed the brush burning on both sides of the road, then the truck was stopped by large rocks being rolled into the traffic lanes. We luckily had the windows rolled up because we apparently rolled right into a civil disturbance. The police had shot a local boy and like in England, the riot was on. There were about 50 young kids running by the truck carrying rocks. At first we thought they were heading for us, but then the local police showed up and it was apparent that the kids were running from the police. 10 minutes clearing rocks and we again rolling.

We're now entrenched at Kande Beach resort, still on Lake Malawi. There were upgrades to real rooms with real beds but the views weren't any better so I deferred. My tent-mate John takes the upgrades, so I get the tent to myself.

The truck and it's inhabitants are always looking forward. In 5 days we'll be on houseboats for 2 nights, then onto Victoria Falls.

The beard grows as the hairline recedes. Pretty sure there's only one supply of hair to go around. The waves are high on Lake Malawi, keeping the fishermen on shore. They're using boats hand carved from tree-stumps, the first primitive boats we've seen out here. The obligatory camp-dogs are doing their best to entertain themselves, and us in the process.

There's constant pressure here to buy local trinkets. One way to diffuse this is to claim I'm from Australia where it's illegal to import animal products or wood. I'm sure the big yellow truck is seen as a rolling ATM to the locals so their approach isn't all that surprising. While we haven't rolled past an area of dire poverty or starvation, I'm sure everyone would prefer to have a little more. I frankly just wish the local trinkets would be more appealing.

The only Dorito's available south of Nairobi have been Sweet Chili flavor for some reason. They make some local chips from casaba, a white rooty deal here. Bread goes stale in 3 days. We've thrown out about 45 loaves so far. Snickers bars are about \$1 each but made from low-melting chocolate.

The Malawian beer of choice for locals is something called “Kuche Kuche” which translates to either “this label is better looking than this beer tastes”, or “drink enough of these and we’ll have sex”.

The Zambian money changers were bad at math. Anyone who bothered to calculate the exchange from Malawi Kwachia to Zambian Kwachia got about 30% more on the black market. Zambian calculators don’t have commas separating the thousands..

Roadking #9

Of Houseboats and Lions

Dateline Gwero, Zimbabwe

Entered “Zim” 4 days ago and got the “shakedown” at the border for a \$30 visa, the last in Africa. We drove to Lake Kariba where we shelled out \$135 for 2 nights on a houseboat. There were many glorious boats in the harbor, and then came ours, the Peregrine. Looked like it was built in a high-school shop class. Lake-worthy yes, cosmetic no. The first day there was both a round of fishing and a round of game viewing. Neither particularly successful. Then came a night of wild drinking and a costume party and our luck changed. We caught enough fish for dinner (the author landing 7 tilapia) and the game drives produced crocs, hippo and elephant.

From Kariba, we spent today driving south thru Zimbabwe and stopped for lunch in this remote area of scrub just off the road. All of a sudden 2 police cars arrived out of nowhere and guns were about to drawn on us. Turns out President Mugabe was about 10km’s away and they were clearing the path. Our large truck Kifaru got traded for a slightly smaller Eeyore before Kariba but it’s still massive on the road. Thankfully a flurry of Swahili explained our being there and the rifles were put on safety.

We’re here at Antelope Park for 3 nights for game drives and some more down time. Going to be a hectic 4 weeks heading into Cape Town.

Zimbabwe is on the US\$ after rampant inflation ruined the local currency. The money changers at the border were only too happy to sell me a set of worthless paper from 2008 with great denominations such as 50million up to 100 Billion. I thus have become a billionaire and it only cost me a few bucks.

Such is live on the road. We’re due to pick up a few more people in Victoria Falls but for now we’re still an even dozen. We swapped out Dixon along with the truck. David is our new driver and his specialty is hitting more pot-holes than Dixon.

The weather is here, wish you were beautiful....m

Roadking #10

A Day in the Life

(or How I Spent My Summer Vacation)

Tuesday: 6am > I woke up. Usually I have to start a fire, unlock the backpacks or check for wild animals. Here in Victoria Falls, I have nothing to do, so I walked to town for a newspaper and a tasty looking sausage roll thing. Got back to camp and realized the newspaper might have tasted better than that sausage roll.

Most places that have "Falls" in their names, generally are situated by water. VicFalls is no different, only they make you pay dearly to see water. Yesterday I forked over \$30 for a walk by the falls to take some pictures. Today paying money at the water wouldn't be the half of it.

Driving down here I got to ride in the cab with David, our new driver. He's from Kisoro, the Ugandan town where I went gorilla trekking, which was sooooo August. Anywho, he kept asking me what "adventure" I was going to sign up for. All along I had thought that a nice canoe safari and the waterfall tour would be enough. Sadly wrong. Somehow, during the VicFalls orientation, the guide asked if there was anyone who wanted to bungee jump off the bridge. Nope not for me, but then Kenyo, our guide, raised his hand saying that he thought he needed to do this again. As if in some sort of trance-like state, my hand slowly levitated, careful not to spill the beer in it. But of course no mere 130meter bungee jump would be enough for our intrepid traveler, the ominous sounding "Big Air Combo" with its trilogy of terror sounded like a much better deal to this bohemian.

So there I was at 10am, walking the long dusty road to almost certain peril above the Zambizi river. There would be 3 of us facing the gorge this morning, a girl named "Sweet Sally" also couldn't resist the urge to throw all caution (and your body) off a bridge.

The jump is actually on the Zambia side, so you bring along your passport and go thru a very lax security check. Once you say "bungee jump" they give you a nod of respect or a head-shake of insanity. Off to the main gate for your voucher and a weigh-in, which gets written on your arm like cattle heading to auction. "109-3" was my number, 109 is weight, 3 is how many jumps.

First up was the gorge slide. Relatively harmless, you get bolted and belted in, attached to this tram carriage and pushed out along this cable strung across. As long as you keep your feet up for speed, you generally make it across. That was the easy part.

Next was the bungee. Jumping off a "proper" bridge was crazy enough, but then most of the non-jumpers on the truck were lining the edges to get proper camera angles if not to offer encouragement. Kanyo went first. They wrap towels around your ankles to keep the elastic from fraying, (or was it your ankles?) a bit of small talk and then it's "go time". Toes over the edge, arms out, looking at the horizon (am I really doing this?) 5-4-3-2-1-Bungee!

The Roadking pushes his sculpted figure out away from the platform. Like Tarzan (Johnny Weismuller version), his form impeccable as he executes the perfect “human spear” launching himself in a slow graceful arc, reaching out to meet the oncoming Zambizi river. The Roadking ponders the great life he’s lived, the American Dream, the tubas, the old photos, friends left behind...all over now because there’s not a real sense that the elastic on his feet will be enough to stop this human freight train from getting dipped in rapids below....then

“Boing!” like the cartoons of my youth, the cord actually made the “boing” sound as both jumper and elastic reached their limits. The Roadking wouldn’t die this day, yet again he would bounce, and bounce hard. 6 times. Later observers would note that the typical bungie experience has 3 bobbles at the bottom. But the “King” got twice the daily allotment. The jumping was easy, the bouncing was hard. First bounce the cord started wrapping around my neck and I thought that THIS would be the move to kill me, but I pushed it off before my next bounce and all was well. I was suspended upside down for over 3 minutes which wasn’t good, the stent in my ticker stayed put and I survived. But then, while still trying to process what you just survived, there’s more....

They say the “gorge swing” is an appetizer for what is to come. Like any decent gourmand, I had my main course and saved the appetizer for later. After being retrieved from my inverted “bungie” state, it was back into another harness for the “swing”. There are basically two moves in this swing: the drop and the swoop (or the clean and jerk). The toes are once more over the edge, but then you jump straight down, like being dropped down an elevator shaft. The elastic bungie is replaced with firm steel cable, so once you reach your limit (both your own and the cable), you pull some major “G’s” getting jerked away from the bridge. If my spine wasn’t re-aligned during the “jump”, the “jerk” fixed that and sent me on a fairly intense journey above the Zambizi. I had slid, jumped and swung. Enough was enough.

3 jumps, \$155, back to my tent by noon. Done and dusted. A brief respite for 2 litres of water and then I ran out of adrenaline and took a wee bit of a nap.

I’d like to say the day is over, but it’s only 2pm. There’s still a lot of daylight out... most of the days are not this exciting, but you get the sense that you’d better be rested for when they are. Who knows what I’ll be talked into next...

Asante sanne

The Road King.

RoadKing #11

It’s Not the Width of the Mokoru, but the length of the pole.

That triple drop towards the Zambizi was SOOOO last week. Now it’s Botswana (ah Botswana...and just got back from 3 days on the Okavango Delta, the biggest inland delta in the world. We’ve picked

up 3 more Irish, making the number 4, which is just right. Learned a lot about drinking that I didn't know.

To get to the delta, they load you and all your gear, tents, food and fuel into these dugout canoes called mokorus. These in turn get moving via Botswanan's good with a long pole. The delta is no more than about four-feet at it's deepest and full of reeds, lily pads and marsh grass. The mokoru's are barely above the waterline but we never tipped.

When we landed on our island, we pitched tents, dug latrines and hit the local watering hole. Game drives on this and other islands eventually revealed lots of elephants, gazelles even leopards, (well just their paw prints). Termite mounds over twelve feet high. We called it "Hotswana" since we're clearly into the 90's here.

Today we mokoru'ed back and found the "cement pond" and the bar, both well stocked for our arrival. The days are just clicking along.

RoadKing #12

Jambo from Namibia.

After getting off our mokoru's we gassed up the truck and headed south. We had 2 more people join us in Botswana, but they lacked the proper paperwork to cross into Namibia so we had to leave them at the gate. This week was 2 days at Etosha National Park where we saw plenty of wildlife in our last national park. Tops had to be this herd of 12 elephants including 4 very young ones. They were just standing in the road. Spent 2 nights sleeping out at these illuminated water holes waiting for the critters. Got rewarded with a leopard and a mother rhino and calf. Shooting at 3am with just a spotlight overhead was a hoot but worth it.

Yesterday we visited a cheetah farm and the enclosed photo shows how that went. Having 3 cheetahs licking my arms simultaneously was a little scary, but I've already jumped off a bridge, so there's little I won't get talked into out here..

Namibia has a few places where you can hike to see aboriginal rock paintings, which have been nice walks, quite a departure from the endless hours spent rumbling down the dusty roads here.

Advice:

Never lose a pool game at the bar in the Cheetah park. They have a "device" there that's quite unique, utilizing a bottle of schnapps, a stuffed warthog and a bit of tubing. Use your imagination.

When sleeping by a watering hole, it's best to bring along a sleeping bag. The mosquitos cover you like a blanket, but a sleeping bag itches less.

Shopping in southern Botswana, they started carrying Pepsi with pull-tabs.

There is no grass in Namibia. When judging the quality of the dirt in which to pitch your tent, make sure the dirt isn't too dirty. The "dirty dirt" gets tracked onto everything and just makes a mess. What you want is a dirt with a decent "soil-content" which offers just enough "give" without blowing in thru the out-door.

It rained last night for almost 10 minutes, the first since Kenya. I was kinda busy with the warthog and the schnapps but it was quite refreshing.

Key phrase of the week: "A dirty mind is a joy forever"

RoadKing #13 Towards Capetown

Day 68 of 74

The Eeyore is rolling along, lots of sand along the western edge of Namibia, most of it the Namib desert.

Recent Adventures:

Sand-boarding the dunes near Swapkomund. Laying on a 2'x4' sheet of thin Masonite you're pushed off the edge of a dune. Your only job is to pull back on the top edge of the board, creating a curved "runner" and hang on. We were timed coming off a bigger dune and I topped out at 68km's. Not the fastest, but fast enough. Braking done by dragging your feet and a lot of hoping...

Climbing "Dune 45" Sestrium, Namibia. It didn't look that steep, but it was. The goal was to catch the sunset and that was accomplished. Heading down definitely easier than heading up.

Orange River provided 2 nights of camping and decent internet, a rarity in the field. As the truck nears the South African border, there are fewer people and higher prices. We're down to 2 nights left in the tent and most on the truck are getting nostalgic for early August when we had the whole trip ahead of us.

Life is lived going forward, but understood looking back.

I sit here tonight, wearing sandals made by Massai in Stone Town, Zanzibar, a shirt I bought off a street vendor in Istanbul along with matching pants (size 60). This first 60+ days on the road has been amazing and traveling by truck definitely adds something. The pictures I hope to bring back will showcase the highlights, but it's the mental pictures, when the camera stayed in the bag, that I think stay with you longer. Tough to capture a 10-hr drive thru the sand-dunes of Namibia or the hill country of Rwanda, the endless banana fields of Uganda or the sands of Tanzania. The lake district of Malawi, the shady street vendors in Zambia who paled compared to the slick-willies in Zimbabwe.

I've rafted the Nile, snorkeled Zanzibar and Malawi, climbed dunes and then sand-boarded down them in Namibia, jumped off bridges in Zimbabwe and learned to make chipate's in Uganda. The quest for the perfect photo has taken me chimp-trekking, hippo-boating, house-boating, gorilla-trekking, cheetah trekking, game driving the Serengeti, Ngorogoro Crater, walking with lions at Antelope park, rhino trekking in Zimbabwe and getting lost in Etosha National Park. Some were hits, some were misses. But I had (and am having) fun. It's hard to imagine trying to do all of this on my own, so the truck seemed a logical solution, but communal travel was new to me. Having someone (and many someones) voice an opinion about the proper way to mince garlic was a new experience for me, but we endured it all.

I'll be leaving for Nepal about a week earlier than I had planned. The unexpected is common here, TIA – This is Africa.

2 months down, 8 to go....

Mark – on the good ship lollipop

RoadKing #14 Adios Africa

"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.

RoadKing #15- Where's my Sherpa?

Namaste from Nepal. The flight here was long but luxurious as Qatar rolled out their red carpet for the big guy. Best thing at Qatar airport was a real A&W rootbeer float.

Observations:

I was wondering where the thin African sleeping mats ended up after our tour. Apparently they're broken down into two-ply and shipped to my hotel where I can use them for wiping or sleeping on. But I'm not paying for comfort, just a room with a lock, and the lock is iffy.

The constant din of horns, be it from car, motorcycle or rickshaw gave me something to ponder as I walked to a few temples about an hour away. Initially I thought the horn was wired to the brake. With the crush of people and livestock moving constantly the cars are jostling for position just like everyone else and when the brake is applied, the horn definitely goes. But once I secured my own driver, I saw that the accelerator is also wired with a horn since any movement to speed up is also heralded with at least 3 beeps and a honk. Then just yesterday as I strolled thru the broken pavement on the promenade, I noted that even a clear stretch of road with no braking or speeding up also generated beeps and honks. Now I'm convinced the worn tires are also wired with ever 10 rotations creating a sound. I think people here generally like the sound of horns. Kathmandu abhors a vacuum.

Walking the streets is another issue here. I thought walking in downtown Chicago was tense, but this is something else. I've found the key to survival is to walk on the outside edges of your feet. That way you can cut, duck, dodge and scamper much more efficiently. The goal is fear, or the lack of it. Over 200 years ago the fierce gorkha soldiers defended this land with steel nerves and those fearsome knives with the bent blades. The Nepali visitor must also display this same fearlessness while walking the streets. Cars, carts, bikes and all walks of humanity, as well as animals great and small will come within a whisker of taking you out as you amble across the rubble. The key is to keep your head on a swivel and though you may fear death constantly, it's best not to show it. Five cars have come close enough to hitting me that my leg hairs got parted, but I marched on, lest the sweat of my brow blurs my vision.

Many people here wear surgical masks as they stumble thru town. Initially I thought they were ailing, and as a courtesy they were shielding us healthier ones from their ick. Not so, it's actually the other way around. There are 7 World Heritage sites spread throughout the K'adu valley. I have seen most and can report that unlike most other national treasures, these are working shrines. The Hindu's are big on

sacrificing, so this is definitely not the place for an ASPCA rally. The stench at most was overpowering and has me reaching for my facemask., just wish I had one...

Kathman-Do's: Flight over Everest was fantastic. Just don't assume a 1hr flight takes 60 minutes to return. We got fogged in once we left and spent 2hrs sitting the tarmac at Pokhara. Boudah Temple with its miles of colorful prayer flags, on a sunny day is stunning. Try the buffalo mo-mo.

Kathman-Don'ts: No street signs, no right of way, no waiting at any time, no traffic lights, no garbage cans, no fast food. Take a pass on anything said to be made "American Style".

There's this time thing that's worth mentioning. There I was, minding my own business watching bad Hindi serials and I notice that both the cable and my computer say 6pm when my watch says 5:45. The show ends and all is well, my watch battery was dying, no biggie. I walk outside trying to find a replacement and suddenly my watch is in synch with this smiling clown face across the street. Cue the Twilight Zone music. Turns out that the internet and cable route thru India which is somehow 15 minutes ahead of Nepali time. I guess the date-lines are discussion points here.

Nepal is the first country I've been to that's not trying to emulate the US. Sure they wear Ambercrombie shirts, but only because they were traded for. The Nepali work hard to scratch out a living growing rice or driving rickshaws, but they're happy. With so many people living so closely you'd think there'd be territory wars or stiff competition, but that's not the case. Add in the religious aspects and ethnic components and for a country this size to be in general harmony is pretty special. Just mind the traffic and the dogs.

There are dogs absolutely everywhere, but no pets. They have to fend off the rickshaws, motorcycles and cars like everyone else. You can tell a lot about a place by the way they treat their animals and here everyone fends for themselves.

If you have garbage, you just pitch it out into the street. Someone will eventually come to sweep it away. Or not. Or set it on fire. Right there on the street. With dogs watching. The smoke makes them bark. Almost as shrill as the cars honking. But this agitates the roosters to crow, the stench causing the shop owners to light up incense to mask the smell, which further agitates the dogs to either mate or start fighting. Night falls over the tiny hamlets and burgs in the countryside. For almost 20 minutes there is a national silence, then someone drops a large pot, or a truck downshifts thru town. Which alarms the dogs. That frighten the chickens. Who run into the street. Cars honk. Rickshaws tootle, motorcycles beep and another day begins in Nepal.

RoadKing#16 Misty Mountain Hop

This intrepid traveler has finally come down off the mountains and seen what a beautiful country Nepal can be; you just have to hike up about 10,000ft to get away from it all.

Monday October 24th 12 relative strangers boarded a bus heading towards the high ground. Lots of apprehension about gear, fitness and food, but we set out. I had the added joy of hiking with a plugged ear but up I went.

Our “dirty dozen” would hand over the bulk of our gear to 5 porters who would bind our packs into groups of three and then use these forehead straps to heft this mega-packs up and down the same trails we were grunting thru. Seeing what they were going thru made it difficult to complain about the steep grade.

Each day’s destination would be laid out, we’d eat breakfast around 7am and head out by 8am. Hills and dales quickly gave way to long steep grades in both directions as tiered rice fields faded into dense forest and rocky outcroppings.

We all developed various degrees of colds, the “Annapurna Cough”, epic runny noses and our combined “traveling pharmacy” got plenty of use. The aim for all was to somehow get up and over Thoring La (aptly named “mountain pass”) on day 11 (17,000ft). As our menagerie wound their way up and around the bend, we found ourselves at “peak level” and were surrounded for several days by the Annapurna Range, a long line of snow-capped peaks almost too vast to photograph (don’t worry, I got them all).

The morning of the “passing” we got hiking at 5am. A harsh stiff breeze blew up my skirt as I hit the trail. All along my roomie “English John” and I had lead the pack of hikers and soon we were alone out in front. Within an hour we had gotten thru the steepest part and watched the sunrise paint the surrounding peaks with a subtle glow. We hiked on. We both crested the summit around 8:30, took our pictures and ducked into this little shanty for a pot of lemon tea.

The descent was almost harder than the climb up. Steep and long, it took almost 3hrs to get back down to semi-level. Congrats all around the rest of the day, as we figured the worst was over. But this was only day 11. Over the next 5 days we would continue down the mountain, but on day 17 we had the joy of climbing almost 5,000ft of stone stairs to reach the mountain town of Gorapani. This just about did in the intrepid traveler, but a piece of warm apple pie helped to calm the spirit.

It’s hard to contrast the first 10 days spent in the valley with what I saw up on the mountain. Suffice to say that if you’re able to come out here, get yourself up into the mountains. There are any number of ways to do it, flying, driving tours even riding a burro.

The abject beauty of the mountains here is something greater than the Rockies, Kilimanjaro or the Swiss Alps. The ability to hike the 150+ miles of the Annapurna Circuit and effectively “earn” the right to take these pictures was a great achievement for us all.

So now it's onto Australia later today. Darwin is over 100-degrees this time of year, so the thermal gear gets packed away and I move on.

Last night, while repacking my bags for the 5th time, I was interrupted by the sounds of a live band playing some cover-songs. I got things stowed away and followed the music. Turns out the band, "Strings" was playing at a shisha bar right next door. You haven't really lived until you've heard the Nepali-cover version of "Stairway to Heaven". My night was completed when the drummer, who looked like "Animal" from the muppets, got out front and gave a soulful version of "Half-Breed" by Cher. Turns out he's half-Mongol and this was definitely a crowd favorite. It was then that I determined that though I may get back to Chicago, I don't think I'll ever really be all the way "back". Nepali cover bands do that to you.

Nepali keywords: Nameste, yak-steak, mo-mo's, Nepali-flat-road (hint, it's not flat). Fried rice, Fried noodle, fried pakoda, basically fried anything, lemon tea, black tea, mint tea, ginger tea, Sherpa, goat, chicken, cold shower, solar heating.

The 19th of November will mark my 4th month on this little ramble and I'd love to hear from you my audience, even if it's to say that all is well.

Road King #17 This Ain't Kansas, So It Must Be Oz

G'day from Tasmania, the island state south of the bigger island of Australia. Over the last 3 weeks I've traveled thru the beer-gut of Australia looking for the odd and the unusual and actually found what I was looking for.

First some Nepal stuff. Folks were asking where I stayed while hiking up in the mountains. The trekkers stay in these "tea huts", promoted as local accommodation. The brochure paints this picture that you're staying with locals with grandma slaving over a primitive stove making big pots of rice for all the bedraggled hikers who stagger thru the door. Far from it. There were plenty of bedraggled hikers, but these towns were ready to service the horde. Most "tea houses" were stone hotels with sumptuous plywood construction inside with perhaps a bit of particle board thrown in. There was usually a full menu available as long as you liked your rice and pasta and liked it fried. For the places we stayed at, there could have been one generic menu with a sliding price guide that adjusted with the altitude. Going up? So were the prices. Heading down, same deal. A 1-litre bottle that cost 70cents in Kathmandu topped out at almost \$5 near the top. A financial appetite suppressant of sorts.

But onto Australia. Beginning in Darwin, I sought to travel thru the remote center of the country, thus bypassing the sun-bunnies on the coast. From Darwin I took a 4x4 tour of Kakadu National Park, then another 3 day tour to get to Alice Springs. I wish there were fantastic sights to report, but the highlight might have been seeing "Paulie" the wild steer tamed by Crocodile Dundee in the movie of the same name. "Paulie" died a while back but he now resides at a rest-stop in the Northwest Territory (NT). From Alice Springs to Adelaide took a week, but the sites were many. The "Olga's", Australia's "pink

belly", Uhluru (foreigners call it Ayers Rock) and Kings Canyon were hiked and photographed at great length.

I flew out to Kangaroo Island for a 4 day trip where I got to sleep at a lighthouse on the west coast and met large lizards on the trail (the hoary goana).

From Adelaide down to Melbourne the highlight of the 3 days was probably the coastal "12 Apostles" rock formations and having a day off in Melbourne.

Animals I have seen and eaten on this trip: Gazelle, Ostrich, Camel, Zebra, Oryx, Springbok, Yak, Buffalo, Emu, Kangaroo, Goat, Warthog, Wild Boar, Sheep,

Animals I've seen but not eaten on this trip: Elephant, Lion, Platypus, Koala, Wombat, Wallaby, small lizards

So from the listing, if I've seen it, more than likely I've eaten it.

The last 10 days were spent in Tasmania, the large island to the south-east of the bigger island of Australia. I rented a car to get to places not on the general route. The scenery was spectacular and it's nice to see miles of uninterrupted coastline without subdivisions and resorts built up on every square inch.

Australia has many things figured out. After a few hours behind the wheel, I'm thinking that driving on the left-hand side of the road has advantages, given the roads are constructed properly. Australia abhors stopping, whether by sign or light. Instead every few blocks has a traffic circle which takes care of a lot of congestion. Food. Imagine driving down the road and seeing a sign for a rest-stop that comes with a gas grill free of charge. These are everywhere in Australia. The notion that you could just drive down the road and then cook a steak at a rest-stop is pure genius. Also employs a road crew to keep them serviced and clean.

Australia has been as wonderful as advertised. From the barren plains of the never-never, the lush forest hikes on Kangaroo Island and the 10-day National Park tour of Tasmania; the down-under is a hard place to get to, but worth the effort.

Travel advice: Fly to Melbourne, take a 5 day tour up to Adelaide and back, then spend a week or so in Tasmania.

On to New Zealand Travel advice: Fly to Melbourne, take a 5 day tour up to Adelaide and back, then spend a week or so in Tasmania.

I've included a little slide show of some sights I've captured. My photo editing tool isn't the greatest out here in the bush, but it'll have to do...

9 Sleeps til "Chrissy" here: Merry Christmas, Vesele Vonoce, Falice Navidad and have a Cool Yule....next up New Zealand.

Road King #18

Kia Aura from New Zealand. Things have been happening so rapidly down here I thought I'd tap a few keys and let you know that all the rumors about New Zealand being the world's greatest adventure land are true. But bring your Visa card. It'll get plenty of use down here.

First day out of Auckland, within 2hrs of leaving the big city, I'm barefoot on a beach swiping my credit card to go kayaking thru this Cathedral Cove. The synergy on these "Kiwi Experience" busses is good and usually half the folks could get talked into just about anything.

Kayaking the first day, then it was "black water" rafting thru a cave in Waitomo the next, looking for glow-worms. Cave water is very cold, but bohemian santa has a full beard to keep his chin warm. There were even cookie breaks down there.

The wallet got a break when I opted not to go sky-diving, but the next day we climbed the Tongariro Pass, reportedly the best single-day hike. I finished in a little under 5hrs and have definitely hiked better, but you hike along the edge of a volcano, then thermal hot-springs and end up with a 3hr descent thru a rain forest.

Spent "Chrissy" in Wellington, the Capital. Has to be the most picturesque capital city I've seen. Then the south island. While prices are a little better than in Australia, it's still about \$3 for a can of Coke. After a 3hr ferry ride, we encountered some beaches and 2 days of rain. Lots of rain down here but lush rain-forests are the result.

RoadKing #19

Can't remember if #18 went out but if so, here's the addendum. After a 2 night stop in Wellington for Christmas, I made my way via ferry to the south island. The Kiwi Experience bus driver duly warned us to have our passports and New Zealand currency ready when we crossed over to the south island. Most were in on the joke, but one poor girl up front actually went up to a concierge and asked where she could get a visa for the south island.

I was adopted by an odd mix of brits called "the crew" and spent the 10 days on the south island reliving some precious college experiences that won't be itemized here, but it was a fun time. Went swimming in a lot of lakes, hiked for 8hrs on New Year's day and generally had the best time on my whole trip (as far as meeting new people).

Arriving in Queenstown, I had 5 glorious days off to get my act together before trekking the "Great Walks" here. The Routeburn (3 days), Kepler (3 days) and Milford (4 days) are considered the Holy Trinity of trekking here. I reserved these on the first day possible, July 1st 2011 and hoped for good weather. I got about 60% of what I was hoping for. The rains on each trails highest pass kept me from seeing the glorious overlooks reproduced ad-nauseum on the brochures here, but the rain coming down the hill on Milford was truly epic. Waterfalls into the trail pushed water almost waist deep when I waded

thru. Good thing expensive boots dry quicker. 10 days of hiking in 12 days here left me a tad winded, so it was with great ease that I agreed to be driven around the southern tip of the island by my REI super-salesman-now-trekking guru, Jim. He's been here like 8 times and knows the roads less traveled. We ended up camping most nights which was fine, seeing areas I wouldn't have gotten to otherwise. After about a week of that we picked up another guy from Chicago, Dave and together we started trekking some more remote areas of the south island. I had nothing left to prove but did well with the good-natured competition and welcomed companionship. The weather on these hikes didn't always agree with us, but most of our gear was quick drying. Like Alaska, when NZ is sunny and clear, it's a remarkable place; when it's not, bring a jacket and go out anyway, you can always buy postcards of when it was sunny there.

After 6 months on the road, my flight out Monday will mark the end of my "mid-section" of the grand tour(www.ahbotswana.com) (as if this isn't your homepage). I've ridden it, climbed it, jumped off it, flown over it, cooked it, dried clothes on it, eaten it, sprained it, bandaged it, been repelled by it, drank it and laughed at it all along the way. I've tried to be good about documenting the important stuff, but opted to do more of it and write less, if given the chance.

Subway down here actually has free refills so they're a favorite (lime coriander sauce is the bomb). Snickers bars are about \$1.65, Soda is about \$2.50 and beer is \$6-7. I'm a big fan of instant noodles both on and off the trail, but when pushed here are my top 4 hamburgers in En-Zed (in order):

#1) Ferdburger (Queenstown) – Massive artery-blocker on a bun. Place is open 22hrs, closed from 5-7am

#2) Red Star Burger (Wanaka) – Place looks like a dump, but somehow they craft a masterful burger

#3) Devil Burger (Queenstown) – Go for the "Hot Devil" with jalapeno's. Kiwi's don't do spices, so this is a rare treat

#4) Burger Fuel (Auckland, Taupo, Wellington)- Go with the "Ring of Fire" Jalapeno's again in a ring around some sort of molten lava sauce. A Liquifying experience, should you need it.

The bags are packed (hah! I wish) for the next stop on this tour, lovely Punta Arenas, Chile. Will be taking a Bilbo-Baggins-esque stroll around the peaks of Torres del Paine park and the Fitzroy range in Argentina before Antarctica.

The hair is long, the beard is longer. Have maintained my tan from Africa as I follow the sun here. Am becoming somewhat of a local legend in Queenstown off some dancing done on a bar next to the hostel. Frankly I think it was somebody else. I should have been sleeping...

Bring the Visa card and hiking boots. This is a wonderful place to tramp....

"I believe in dreams, but how can men that have never seen light be enlightened?"

RoadKing #20

Hola from South America;

Thought I should cobble a few phrases together before boarding the Plancius for my fortnight in Antarctica, you know, just in case.

Swapping my bunk in Christchurch, New Zealand for one in Puerto Natales, Chile took almost 30hrs, landing in 3 countries, and paying a pair of "reciprocity fees" which felt a lot like bribes to me. The goal of this leg was to hike around Torres del Paine National Park here and see Patagonia at a slower pace. The bag was carefully packed, but hoofing for a week took food which weighed more than I thought.

The hike went well for 4 days, exposing me to all elements there, wind, rain, bright sun and even a light dusting of snow. The gear and I held up OK, but I sure have been thru a lot of rain out here on the trail.

"I believe in dreams, but how can men that never see the light be enlightened?"

RoadKing #20 – Antarctic Achievement

Towards the end of February I became one of the twenty-five thousand annual visitors to Antarctica. The first time I hear that statistic it sounded terribly inflated, but in a world measured in billions and trillions, this number sounds almost cozy.

Ushuaia has but one pier and tethered securely to the last berth, the Plancius was neither the largest nor most colorful on the dock that day, but I viewed her as a taxi with lifeboats, and as long as the cab drops you at your destination, the cosmetics don't really matter all that much.

A gaggle of passengers and luggage were piled near the gang-plank, Scurrying about, the staccato clicking of digital cameras, like gulls pecking the shore at low tide; documenting all visible features of boat, pier and place. I had my "world" strapped to my back, so after a few "pecks" of my own, I was up the gangplank, equally as giddy to begin this, the most remote voyage of my life.

Accommodation: If this were a plane, I'd clearly paid for economy class; on a boat the term could be 'steerage', but the four souls in room 203 chose the term 'ballast'. Clearly designed as a 'triple' with three of everything down to the complimentary water bottles and chocolates, adding a fourth just meant there was less room for both passengers and gear to get jostled along the voyage ahead. There would be no jostling of anything; we were packed in too tight.

As the Plancius slowly spun her way thru the Beagle Channel, we 'centurians' were kept on the move, attending all manner of briefings, announcements, drills; then returning to our berths to unpack. The general congestion and commotion suggested an arctic dance competition. We the happy-hundred

attempted each style of 'dance' to the best of our abilities; trying to keep our ports from our starboards and get settled in.

Along the way we were introduced to our life-boats which resembled more of an amusement park ride than a survival vessel; each designed to carrying half the passengers and crew, all wearing life preservers. Most scoffed at the premise, but we, the 'ballast of 203' might appreciate the additional room.

The calm waters of the Beagle Channel gave us a smooth exit from civilization. During the on-board introductions, our captain mentioned that the upcoming Drake Passage would hopefully pass beneath our keel without incident, but then he paused and laughed, 'well it's always good to hope.' That was enough for me as I took up my place in the queue for a sea-sickness patch, just in case hope ran out.

All decks of the Plancius were a flurry of activity. Being a 'floating base-camp' in the Antarctic, all one-hundred souls were dressed for action, clad in miles of Gortex, festooned with all manner of Velcro, snaps and zippers that glittered in the deck lighting.

Within two hours the Beagle led into the Drake Passage and the real sea voyage began. Having heard tales of rough-seas in no way prepares one for the reality of the situation. While I had no doubts the Plancius, with her steel plate construction, would weather the Drake in good stead, I couldn't say the same for myself. My internal bravado had me valiantly try to "tough it out" and remain vertical, but I quickly found the only solace was being laid out in bed. The ship wasn't tossed at sea; it went through the 'agitation' cycle of the washing machine that was the Drake Passage, and we along with it.

My cabin-mates were suffering the same or worse than I was, which offered just a touch of solace along with the rolling and rocking on board. Somewhere in the first three hours of this 'agitation cycle' my sea-sickness patch got jarred loose, but by this time I had resolved to laying prone for as long as it took to reach calmer seas. Unfortunately the crew had other ideas. Every other hour for the first twelve, there was some manner of orientation that *had* to be attended. Since we in 'ballast class' had signed up for all of it, we were constantly shuffling up three decks to learn how to buckle into this or fasten ourselves to that. Then we'd race down the three decks to the safe haven of our room 203.

The Passage takes two days and the only way to describe it as being "cocooned". Most would venture out only to catch a bit of food or attend an orientation but the halls and lounges remained barren as we rock and rolled our way southward.

On the morning of the third day, the seas flattened out, the anchor dropped and we were at our first "base". The internal "quease" we all felt passed as quickly as it came, and we were ready to leave the ship.

Over the next six days we would climb, kayak, snow-shoe, camp, hike and boat in and around this perpetual winter wonderland. The point-by-point details are still a blur, but thankfully the camera delivered pin-point focus and I can't wait to share it all once it's all processed.

I am “home”, I am safe and on the move again. Trading my Argentine pesos for Bolivian bolivars and going to see the Amazon. My beard is doing well and misses you all terribly, so does the face behind it.

More later when it happens to me...

RoadKing #21 A Frozen Focus...

The mighty Plancius is a ‘base camp’ Antarctic exploring vessel. On a more typical ship, every time you want to do something other than take a zodiac cruise, you’re swiping your Visa card. Kayaking? That’s \$1,000. Camping? Another \$1,000. The financial “carrot” offered by the Plancius is that for a slightly inflated boarding price, every activity was included with no wear & tear on the Visa. For this original Bohemian, that was enough to get me to cough up the dough. By checking all the boxes on the “activity list” I ensured that there would be absolutely no quite moments sipping tea looking out the porthole.

Frankly I was surprised my ballast-mates and I even had a window; meaning we were above the water-line. On the way down I envisioned a thin Nepali mattress being laid over the rivets holding the hull together. Quarters were cramped but we were adventurers who didn’t need much sleep.

First day was kayaking. Roomie Rob (aka Pottery Barn, but that’s a tale for another time) and I get put out to sea within the first hour. Rob came equipped with this “Go-Pro” head camera that took a picture every two seconds. He looked like some sort of aquatic mine worker with this camera bolted to his forehead. We pour into this zodiac, get driven into this small cove and then manage to snap ourselves into our kayaks. Rob is ahead of me and after executing a flawless doughnut around the zodiac, comes up beside me and somehow rolls the whole craft. Ten minutes into Kayaking and we’re performing our first open-water rescue. Rob ends up dangling off the edge of my boat as calmer heads figured out a way to get the “pottery” back into the raft. Undaunted, Rob took another ten minutes to drip-dry before getting back out there. It was that sort of trip.

The penguins you see at the zoo are pristine display pieces which amuse the patrons with their antics. In the wild they proved to be smelly aquatic rats with flippers. “Happy Feet” was an animated movie; “Cr*ppy Feet” was more the reality. Whole islands of it. Our “welly” boots barely had enough traction to keep us upright as we trod the shores, cameras at the ready. Too bad cameras can’t capture smell, *that* would be a treat.

The skies spun around us like a whirling dervish, delivering spots of sun, dark clouds, rain, sleet, snow and rare moments of calm over the six days we were “down low”. We ship rats would spend considerable time getting “plasticated” to combat the elements, enough to stay dry(ish) while still being able to perform the task at hand. Since I had to lug my gear for seven months before getting to the boat, I lacked a few of the warmer, cozier clothing options the others so brazenly flaunted in front of me. Fleece, Polar-tek, down booties; they had it all, I had one pair of water resistant pants and a gortex parka; and my beard.

Last full day on board, after we had poked and prodded several coves, islands and inlets, the French expedition leader offered us the option of taking a “polar plunge” off the Antarctic shore. Option my foot; this was an imperative. The ‘ballast of 203’ quickly outlined the rules; for the dip to count there had to be total head submersion. We were all surprised at the low turnout on that final shore, and the even lower number of “counting” efforts. Of course I was one of the first in, (owing to my inability to correctly “rock, paper, scissors”) the somewhat frozen sea water curling all hairs into a wild peach-fuzz look. Upon review of the photos, it was determined that I looked like Mighty Poseidon (without the trident). There was a moment, when I was but thirty feet from shore when all blood shrunk back to my core to preserve life functions, leaving me a stumbling mass, hobbling to shore. The body warmed relatively fast on shore, but the feet took a bit more thawing on board the Plancius. Someone suggested warm soup would help, but only if they poured it over my feet.

After the “plunge” we had a last lunch overlooking a calm bay. There was a last round of zodiac tours to see massive icebergs, seals and penguins up close, then we put on our sea-sickness patches, pills, mystic ointments and balms and returned to our cocoons for the voyage back thru the Drake.

It was a big effort to get there, both financially and physically, but worth every dollar/euro/peso.

RoadKing #22 Amazon to Empanada

After my adventures at the end of the world, everything else must be gravy. I flew up to LaPaz, Bolivia to see about booking a trip into the Amazon to try my luck fishing for piranha. After a solid day of flights and layovers, I was barely able to put my pack down before running off to meet up with Mel and Jed, fellow travelers on the overland Africa adventure that started all of this. Over a sumptuous meal of llama and pork, we compared travelogues and beard growth (Jed, not Mel).

La Paz is laid out like a box of Lego blocks thrown into a corner. Steep streets with vendors and traffic on each curb, sidewalk and entryway. Not quite as oppressive as Kathmandu, but they’re trying.

The first order of business was to arrange flights to this Rurrenabaque (called ‘Rurr’ for short). Sadly I was about four minutes too late to book the last seat on the desired day, so my consolation prize was two more days in La Paz. There are only about a hundred tourist agencies on “gringo road” so there was barely any competition. I chose a typical “package” deal; three days in the Pampas and two in the Amazon.

The Pampas was a great tour, after a delayed flight, I took off a day late but had a great time. Saw a ten-foot anaconda, caught and ate a piranha, had several special moments swimming with the pink dolphins and even ran into one of my “crew” from New Zealand way deep in the jungle. It was a great time.

Of course I return to Rurre to find that my Amazon tour has been canceled due to some political unrest, but I then went out kayaking into the same jungle and it was fine.

Returning to LaPaz, I had a last leisurely day before heading down to Uyuni for the famed “salt flat tour”. I booked a “semi-cama” bus seat, semi-reclining seats, fully compacting my legs. The bus is designed with Bolivians in mind and they’ve clearly got shorter legs. I did for a bit as well when I got off that bus. The tour left about an hour after I arrived. Spectacular wide open plain of white salt. We saw thermal springs, a train graveyard and lots of flamingos. For all that sun, there wasn’t much heat which helped. The last morning we went for a dip in these thermal springs before we were shuttled to the border with Chile and dumped out.

A short hop on a shuttle bus brought me to San Juan de Atacama, a pleasant burg of tree-lined streets. I was there long enough to book yet another bus and find dinner. This time the intrepid traveler got it correct, booking “cama”; full reclining seats, movies meals. When you’re forced to take a twenty-two hour bus, treat yourself right.

Santiago is the place I oughtta be, so I spent 5 days scouring town, looking for cheap thrills and expensive meals. Or was it cheap meals and expensive thrills. Tracked down a place called “La Piojera” which translates to “hair lice”; and went four rounds with their fabled “terramota” (earthquake) drink. I thought I was ahead on points until I stood up. Clearly the ground beneath me shoot, 7.5 on the Richter scale. The walk back to the hostel was more a pasa doble than a tango.

Saw museums, and enjoyed the finer points of the empanada, served by “empanada lady” in her tiny stand. My last night, while placing a final order, I could have sworn I saw a little tear forming as she curle the edges with her gnarled fingers. Sure, some say it was the molten hot-sauce causing it, but there was a real bond there between maker and consumer.

Road King #23

Say what I will about Bolivia, but they had the best polished shoes in the world. A small army of “boot blacks” could be found on every corner. They wore winter gloves and ski-masks to (presumably) prevent the polishes from poisoning them, but it gave them the look of a guerilla militia More than once I was asked to get my hiking boots polished. I really don’t think they understand that you can’t polish the suede. And patent-leather shoes really DO reflect up...

The “Cholita’s”, the ethnic women shaped like bowling pins with the little fedoras; they’re the tireless workers in town. The streets are a mess, but organized roughly the street vendors into zones. There’s the meat street, toy avenue, light-bulb alley, toilet-town, endless clothing streets and even a place for horribly mastered bootleg music and video. How they make any money is beyond me since everyone has the same stuff for sale directly next to each other. The absolute best street was “helium town” where there were about fifteen dealers all selling those shiny mylar balloons filled with helium. I guess when you’re walking home from work, sometimes you just need a “my little pony” helium balloon to set you straight.

Bolivia was inexpensive for sure, an attractive lure for the young traveler short on coins, but there is inexpensive and there's cheap. La Paz struck me as cheap. I had a few meals that were decent, but most could have come with a side of Pepto-bismal. I had hopes of finding some great ethnic shirts, but again I'm viewed as a XXXL giant in a land of Liliputians.

Chile was a lot more cultured, but also a lot more expensive. My boys at the LaChimba hostel had the inside track on living well with few pesos and their advice served me well. The hostel was actually three Victorian-era homes loosely conjoined front-to-back. Of course I get assigned to a room in house three, so the hoof to my bed was quite the odyssey of twists and turns. Still the highest rated hostel didn't let me down. Took in the museums, a few street markets and a place called "head lice" for a drink called a "terramota" (earthquake). Effective and aptly named.

I flew from Santiago four hours west to Easter Island. I had thought all along that heading to Antarctica was the cherry on top of my ice-cream trip around the world. If so, then Easter Island is the topping on the cherry. To say "you can't get there from here" is accurate unless you're in Santiago or Lima, Peru; and for all intents and purposes, this was my last stop on the round-the-world trip. The large stone heads (Moai) are generally located along the edge of the island along a road that went pretty easily from rambling to rubble. I traveled by bicycle which surely helped fill the days but exposed me to some pretty intense heat and headwinds. It took the better part of two days to take in all the sites and then settled in for a few more empanadas, some swimming and snorkeling closer to my tent.

For the most remote civilization in the world, you can still get Pringles and Pepsi; so it's not really that disconnected. There is but one town on the island, Hanga Roa is a tourist paradise of restaurants and tropical bars but the high prices had me lingering at the empanada shack by the pier. Tuna empanadas were fresh and filling.

The flight out of Easter Island was delayed nine hours, so we all got one last afternoon in the sun for some swimming. Not a bad place to get stranded. With the wheels touching down in Buenos Aires, the traveling has almost come to an end on this trip.

All this traveling has been another form of education for me and now, it's time to "graduate". I don't know when or where my next travels will take me, but this trip has taught me a lot about how to get it done. There's so much to see out here, but after seven continents and nine months, your eyes get tired (or at least mine have). There are almost 40,000 photos stored on my various drives so that'll take some time to sort thru. I hope to see you all in the future and have enjoyed "taking you with me" thru the twists and turns the world has to offer. There are two more "RoadKings" to follow so before I get too mushy here, click on the next ones and enjoy..m

RoadKing #24

If this is the end of my road, to think back to the beginning takes a lot of effort.

There were hard to find pants in Istanbul, buying all the malaria pills in Nairobi, and the animals; I've seen green alligators, and long-necked geese; some humpty backed camels and a chimpanzee. I've seen cats and rats and elephants, but sure as you're born, I just can't see no unicorns.

I've have

Been Blessed by a lama, and eaten llama (it's the second "L" that makes this NOT cannibalism)

Ridden and eaten a camel

Spent the night in cars

Closed down bars

Snorkeled in Zanzibar, Malawi and Easter Island

Drank an earthquake

Gone after Gorillas of the Mist and missed

Touched the Devil's Marbles in Australia

Walked with Lions

Walked three Great Walks in New Zealand

Been Licked by Cheetahs

Jumped off a Bridge in Zimbabwe and the cord didn't snap

Slid Down a Dune in Namibia

Learned how to make Chipate in Uganda

Endured four days crossing the Drake Passage

Climbed up a Table (mountain)

Squoze Seabuckthorne Juice

Fossicked for Opals in the Outback

Ate Nepali Mo-Mo til I couldn't take it No-Mo

Learned it's all "Sweet-As" in New Zealand

Took the "polar plunge" in the Arctic

Learned to love Rugby

Been Tolerant of Cricket

Ate both a “Ferd” and “Devil” burger in the same day

Swung Across canyons

Jumped with Massai

Rafted the Nile

Lost my hearing for two weeks in Nepal

Climbed the stairs to Gorapani one day only to come down the next

Shot the Remarkables on Kangaroo Island

Climbed Cradle Mountain in Tasmania

Slept in a lighthouse in Australia

Swam with dolphins in the Amazon

Touched an eel in New Zealand

Completed a “Centurion” + 20 more with my “crew”

Shared a buffet with Maori

Hiked the steepest road in the world

Ate Yak in Nepal

Slept in a tent in Antarctica

Slept under African stars

Fed a Cayman

Caught and ate a piranha in Bolivia

Circled Uluru in Australia

Slipped on Penguin poo in the Arctic

Collected sea shells in Zanzibar

Bonded with a koala

Taken 26 flights and not lost my luggage

Sat on the world's largest meteorite

Tracked a Rhino in

Stared down a leopard seal in the Arctic

Poled a mokoko in Botswana

Swung the "Bin Laden"

Climbed Dune45 in Namibia

Slept in hostels, (ex) brothels, bars, cars, tents, teahouses, airports, buses, plane, trains and the occasional doorway; literally from the outhouse to the penthouse and everything in between

Rode boda-boda's, tuk-tuk's, and rickshaws, walked, stalked, tramped and stamped my way thru field and forest, mountain and morass, seashore to summit to breathe the rarified air of the traveler.

Used the words "Pole Pole", "Jam Jam" and "Sowa Sowa" and was understood

Kayaked and climbed, shuffled and slid, in snowshoes and barefoot, slid, skid tripped and tumbled my way thru impenetrable forests, sandy coastlines, vast open plains

Found the land of sky-blue waters, of ancient seas, thru broiling suns, driven snows and the occasional horizontal rain, seen many a sun; rising and setting with a fair amount of burning in between.

Gotten lost and found in most populated areas, discovered this is more fun than following silly maps

Scratched the ears of a few hundred camp dogs, and probably half-as many cats; jealous of the lifestyle they've attained

Checked in and out of about 50 hostels, some fantastic, some true flops, but all serviceable for what I needed when.

"Lost" between three to five items a day, only to "find" them upon further review. Learned to worry a lot less about the actual whereabouts of things not in my pockets

Trusted the souls of thousands of fellow travelers who haven't rifled my bags; occasionally cut in line or taken the bottom bunk, but not messed with my stuff

Marveled at the simple ability to connect to the internet in the oddest of places; from the remote tea-houses of Nepal to the shores of Easter Island, I caught my emails.

Gone from "Big Man" to "Mzungu"; from "Yeti" to "Santa" yet rarely found tee-shirts that fit

Seen more animals than I could ever name, content to view their lifestyles when the picture wasn't there

To those who may be inspired to fulfill their own “bucket list”; here are some tips:

Finish all the food on your plate; it may taste horrible, but there might be times when your next meal isn't guaranteed

Don't trust mileage signs, the distance “to” somewhere is always longer than coming back

Wear a hat; nothing more painful than burnt scalp

Appreciate each day; it's always better on the road

Get used to walking – a lot of walking. It's cheap and good for toning the thighs and calves

Invest in good gear; you don't need a lot but what you have needs to last

Learn to rise with the sun, the locals do

Generally the dogs of the world are friendly if you are

Kangaroos can be mean, especially the big red ones

Remember to laugh when you get really lost; helps to reduce frown lines

Take chances, trust your instincts and remember to take advice

If you don't book ahead, occasionally you'll sleep in doorways

Try not to buy more than you can carry; shipping is expensive

Have a talent, or at least a few good stories, there will be times when you're called on to entertain

Lines in the sand take a lot of effort to enforce; be flexible

You will see naked people; try not to stare or point

It helps to have a book with you, if not to read, then to sit on to pad the world's concrete

Don't forget your battery charger, and bring more memory cards

The fruit on display is probably over-ripe, the fresher stuff is usually in the back

Sleep is not over-rated; the lack of it can cause you to make mistakes, and that costs time/money

Take less, you can walk farther and enjoy more.

Try to remember the details of each day before collapsing into bed. This will help greatly when you're regurgitating the stories later

Lay hands on everything (except where it says not to) your sense of touch helps describe things later. While you're at it, *lend* a hand. You'll make friends faster, and you'll need friends

Take chances, both in planning your day and choosing your meal, surprises happen

Bring quick-drying clothes

Eat where the locals eat and ask questions; guidebooks are written to sell guidebooks

Things change, prices go up and though you may be convinced that something is the "greatest", tomorrow is another day.

Leave the I-Tunes and ear-buds at home. There's nothing wrong with listening to the local soundtrack

Try to carry your own cup. There will be times when it gets filled up with the most amazing local drinks

Budget enough money and time to splurge a bit along the way. It's better to be over-served and a bit bored than the other way around.

Learn to say "Thank You" in every dialect and use it

Treat your feet well; you can go farther without a limp

This has been my adventure, go have one of your own!

RoadKing #25A (Random notes found in backpack)

In Chile, Architecture is spelled with a "Q"

Argentinian beef lived up to the hype

Life goes better with chimichurri sauce in South America and "mystery green" in Nepal

Pringles potato chips are available around the world, Africa, Nepal, Argentina