

Dixon the Driver

Dixon; Driver- The Mighty Kifaru

Length: 32ft

Weight: 17 tons

Dixon, the Bantu driver of the Kifaru is the means by which we get from town to town here in Africa. Sitting up in the coach doesn't give you the proper perspective on how we're actually moving, so I negotiated a day in the cab to see how it's done.

Dixon is a 40yr-old Kenyan piloting the Kifaru from Nairobi down to Jo'burg. While a vast majority of our interactions are from Kenyo, our leader, quite early on I realized that it's Dixon who also plays a major part.

The Scania truck, retrofitted to be an overland road-runner was built in 1989 and comes with an 8-speed manual transmission. Looking across the cab to the command module sprawling across the dash to my right, there's no shortage of gauges for Dixon to monitor. One of our new travelers, having transferred from another truck, commented that it seemed that Dixon must be driving an automatic since the shifting was done so fluidly. As the Tanzanian landscape spun by, I can surely testify that it's not automatic, it's just Dixon, dancing on the stick and clutch.

Hill ahead, *fifth, fourth, third....*

Dixon's been driving for about 20 years and comes from a family of 7. While he has a father, he mentioned having to support his 3 brothers in the late teens, and a 13 year-old sister. As the endless miles of pavement rolled beneath the Kifaru, Dixon made sure my tour included a comprehensive playing of his I-pod of local African dance music. Though the Swahili lyrics escaped me, the rhythms were intoxicating.

The road flattens and we can start making time, *4th, 5th, 6th....Dixon's left hand moves the shift in rhythm with the pulsating music...*

The Tanzanian landscape was dotted with sisal orchards, road-side produce stands and small enclaves of earthen villages every few kilometers. To these eyes and a fading memory, the roads here appeared newly paved. We were traveling east and the route between Arusha and Dar a Salaam was an important one, so this upgrade shouldn't have been so surprising.

The road begins to wind. *4th, 3rd...*

For the last few days, ever since we crossed over into Tanzania, I had been noticing large red "X's" spray-painted onto a vast majority of the buildings and signs we passed. Along-side the "x's" were what appeared to be a date and a number. I had thought this was a somewhat misguided attempt to give the

buildings street numbers. One of the major benefits of sitting up front in the cab is the ability to ask somewhat silly questions. When I asked Dixon what was up with all the spray painting, he mentioned a major improvement was planned for all major roads throughout Tanzania, widening the road from its present 15 meters to an astounding 60 meters. Before you get out your tape measures, the width of the tarmac is only part of the equation here. The local merchants were only barely displaced when the present road paving was completed. Since that time, the “official” structures are only about 20 feet from the end of the road. In addition to this, buskers have set up temporary shanties that encroach the open space in between. The “x’s” designate buildings that will have to be demolished, and the accompanying date is the date this is to be done. Considering there were whole towns with “X’s” this is going to radically change the landscapes we passed today.

Dixon starts singing along with a tune, I struggle to keep up with the bass-line, but together we make it through. He tells me it’s a song about a lost love....aren’t they all...

The hours and miles passed smoothly throughout the day. Dixon was dancing on the clutch throughout, synchronizing with the beat of the dance music blaring thru the dashboard speakers.

The sisal plantations soon gave way to oranges and the roadside vendors sat behind neat pyramids of the bright orange fruit hoping for a sale. Dixon mentioned that he had a cousin who works in this area and sure enough, as the Kifaru took a sharp right, we slowed momentarily for Dixon to yell out a Swahili acknowledgement to his relative. Dropping 2 gears, we were back up to speed in no time at all.

A steady climb out of town, 6th, 5th, 4th and the slow pull ahead...

To say the cab was crowded was an understatement. In addition to maps, three days worth of left-overs and all manner of tools and equipment, the area behind the seats also serves as Dixon’s bedroom. During the drives, this area is filled with mattresses and pads, too numerous to fit into their assigned spaces. Any sudden use of the “jake” brake causes a “gear-slide” rushing towards us from behind. I’m totally useless in the cab, so I made it my point to predict these slides and try to hold back the onslaught.

Over the course of the day we covered close to 300 kilometers, marriage (or the lack thereof), siblings, politics, and the politics of overland touring. His work as a driver has taken him throughout Africa with Absolute and a few other companies. He’s seen more than his share of problem passengers over the years and takes it all with shrug and a smile. He’s got a devilish side that helps him break the ice with all the “clients” as he calls them.

Where Dixon really shines is on the dance floor. After most long days of driving, he makes a bee-line to the local bar until dinner time. His favorite drink is a Tanzanian drink called Konyagi, a gin drink notorious as much for its taste as it’s low cost.

In addition to driving, Dixon is also responsible for the maintenance on the truck. Within the first week, we had overheated the refrigerator by blocking the vents with our spare gear. We pulled into Nikuru to restock on lunch and supplies, but Dixon had to head out to find some electricians. The notion of finding a

specific technician for your African issue is fairly impractical. In the end he found two guys with some wire snips and a small blow torch. Twenty minutes of wire twisting, heated discussions in Swahili and a final round with the blow-torch to make the final connections and we were good to go. Later there were issues with the gas pump moving fuel between our reserve tanks. There two Dixon cleaned out the fuel lines and got it all squared away.

Another long stretch of road as far as the eye can see, 5th, 6th, 7th...

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