

The Dangers of Africa
Part 1: The Hippos of Botswana
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The Hippos of Botswana
a travelogue by Ehud Reiter

Tuesday, day: My truck/camping tour drove through the Kalahari desert to Maun, Botswana. The "desert" was beautiful, and not nearly as desolate as I had imagined (not a single Hollywood-style sand dune!). We didn't see any bushmen, but we saw plenty of wildlife. Several times we had to stop for "zebra crossings". In England, a zebra crossing is a place where cars stop to let pedestrians cross. In the Kalahari desert, a zebra crossing is a place where trucks stop to let a herd of zebras cross the road!

We had passed through several picturesque villages. The people lived in mud huts, but the huts were clean and well looked after. The villagers looked healthy and well fed, and school-age children seemed to be going to school. 1980's Botswana seemed to fulfill the 1950's image of post-colonial Africa: still poor, but with a peaceful and democratic government, a high economic growth rate, and a satisfied population. The violent dictatorships and ruined economies that plagued the rest of black Africa had somehow passed Botswana by.

Tuesday, late afternoon: We arrived in Maun, and went to a campsite by the local river, where we would stay for the next few nights. The campsite was run by a (white) South African couple, and mainly catered to (white) South African tourists. The local villagers and townspeople were really surprised when some of our group ventured outside the campground and tried to start some conversations. Apparently, most visitors to that campsite wanted nothing to do with local blacks, and were very quick to call the guards when a local "trespassed" on the campsite.

Anyways, enough politics. One local teenager asked me what I did for a living. A perfectly reasonable question, except that I couldn't quite figure out how to explain to an African villager that I wrote VLSI CAD software. I finally just pointed to my digital watch, and said that I helped design such things. Whereupon my new acquaintance quite logically pulled out his own digital watch, and asked me if I could fix it! Surely, after all, if I knew how to design a digital watch, I could fix one that was broken. Unfortunately, our modern high-tech world doesn't quite work that way.

Wednesday: Maun is near the Okavango delta, which is a superb wildlife area. Around half our group signed up for an excursion by plane into the delta, but I said I would just hire a canoe for the day, and go paddling around.

The problem with paddling around African rivers are hippos. Most Americans have a pretty benevolent image of a hippo, shaped by Saturday morning cartoons, but hippos kill more people in Africa than any other large animal (malaria-carrying mosquitos are the deadliest animal of all, of course). Hippos are not carnivorous, but they are easily scared, and an attacking hippo can easily take apart a small boat. In fact, just last week another tourist at the same campsite had gotten too close to a hippo, which then attacked and seriously injured him.

But, I was assured, this tourist had been foolish. He had seen the hippo from a distance, and had tried to paddle in very close to get a good photo. The manager assured me that if I just avoided any hippo I saw, the chances were that the hippo would leave me alone. Of course, if I happened to get too close to a hippo that was submerged and thus could not be seen ... well ... crossing the road is dangerous too, isn't it? There were crocodiles in the water as well, but the manager said they wouldn't bother a boat. Swimming was not advisable, however ...

So, a bit nervously, I set out, keeping my eyes peeled and constantly looking around. After an hour, though, no hippos or crocs had appeared, and I started to relax. The river was beautiful, and birds were everywhere. Lots of villagers were doing chores by the riverbank, and I had the feeling of gliding through cameo shots of African life.

After two hours or so, I noticed a funny looking rock ahead of me. I started paddling closer to investigate, when I realized that the rock had two proturbances that looked awfully like a pair of eyes. Then I noticed that the rock has a mouth, which was opening in a huge yawn ... hippo-time! I instantly stopped paddling, and wondered what to do now. I was around 30 feet away, which surely was far enough so that the hippo would ignore me. On the other hand, the hippo was definitely looking in my direction ... and a local kid, who was watching all this from the shore, started gleefully yelling "Hippo come! Hippo kill you!".

I turned the boat and headed for shallow water. I forced myself to paddle slowly and calmly, figuring that a slow calm object would look less threatening. Anyways, since I wasn't an Olympic-class rower in a racing scull, I had no hope of outrunning the hippo, so acting innocuous was my only chance.

I reached the shallows, and started breathing a bit easier. Now, at least, if the hippo attacked I would see it coming - it could not spring up unseen from the river bottom. And the river weeds would hide me from the hippo. Out of sight, out of mind, right?

At this point, I noticed the head submerging. The hippo had decided to do something. Was he going to go downstream and look for a better grazing spot, or was he going to come upstream and investigate this strange wooden object that had appeared on his river? I held my breath, grabbed onto some weeds to stop the canoe from drifting, and just sat there, wanting to look as innocuous as possible if the hippo decided to come upstream. The minutes passed ... and nothing happened. Slowly, keeping to the shallows, I started paddling again, heading downstream and back to the campsite. When the kid who had shouted "Hippo kill you" disappointedly turned back to his chores, I figured I was safe, and started to relax.

Thursday: After Wednesday's experience, I decided to cheat, and see the river the American way ... on a motorboat. With a few others, I rented a boat for a day, and headed off. It was a great day, and we saw lots of wildlife in the air, in the water, and on land. The highlight of the day, though, was when we came across a family of hippos. In a motorboat, the tables were turned. We zoomed right up to the hippos ... and this time it was the hippos who ran, not I.

The Dangers of Africa: A Travelogue Part II: The Women of Malawi

Day 1: My truck camping tour drove into Malawi from Zambia. In the early afternoon, we ran across a village that was having a wedding, so we stopped and joined in the fun! We quickly became the guests of honor, a position which was sealed when we donated our wedding present - a tablecloth that someone had picked up in Zimbabwe but no longer wanted. With a market value of \$10 or so, that present established us as gift-givers of unprecedented generosity (the usual wedding gift seemed to be a set of plastic cups and bowls). After the wedding, the village chief invited us into his hut, where he passed around some goat meat and home-made maize beer. Both meat and beer circulated quickly, as everyone tried to find a convenient plant (for the beer) or dog (for the meat).

The poverty of the village really shocked me. This was the first time I had seen up close children with swollen bellies from worms or malnutrition, adults with horrible looking eyes from glaucoma, and people with leprosy. Malawi is in any case one of the poorest countries of the world, and what little money there is seems to inevitably find its way into the pockets of the local dictator, Hastings Banda. Of course, massive corruption is a problem everywhere in Africa, but Banda doesn't even make a pretense of caring about his people. Other African leaders did seem to care a little bit, or at least were smart enough to realize that their long-run take would be higher if they gave their people enough money to live on. Banda, though, had just squeezed the country dry, and then squeezed some more for good measure.

Day 2: I wanted to visit some people in the city of Blantyre, so I left the group in the town of Salima Bay, and caught a bus to Blantyre. No one in Salima seemed to know when the bus would leave, but someone said he thought 10AM sounded about right. So, I showed up at the bus stop promptly at 9:30AM, only to find out that in reality, the bus didn't leave until 5PM!

This kind of thing happens a lot in Africa, and you pretty much have to grin and bear it - no point getting uptight about something you can't change.

Days 3,4: I stayed two days in Blantyre with friends of friends (actually, my boss's brother) who were expatriates there. The expatriate life was, well, different. Servants seemed to drift in and out of sight all the time, and when I asked my host how many servants he had, he replied that he didn't know ... I went to one ex-pat party, where everyone was telling jokes about how incompetent, corrupt, and lazy the local people are. I guess ex-pats everywhere in the Third World tell these kind of jokes (the locals usually are incompetent in the ex-pat's field of expertise, or the ex-pat wouldn't have been hired; corruption is an unfortunate fact of life in most poor countries; and ex-pats often work incredibly hard, usually much harder than they would back home). Some of the attitudes reminded me of South Africa - but here, though, the whites did realize that they were hired help, not rulers, and that the country belonged to the local blacks.

At the end of Day 4, I caught a bus up to the town of Nkhata Bay, on Lake Malawi.

Day 5: My bus arrived in Nkhata Bay at 2 in the morning. Groggily, I found what looked like an open area, unrolled my sleeping bag and pad, and went to sleep. I awoke around 6AM, only to discover that I had gone to sleep in what looked like the village's main square, and was getting plenty of curious looks from the locals as they started their day.

As I woke up, I realized that I was now, for the first time in my life, alone in a Third-World village, with no other white people in sight. A pretty awesome feeling - no longer would I be buffered from contact with the locals by 20 white companions, or the impersonality of a city. I rolled up my sleeping bag, and set off to see what the day would bring.

The first order of business was to find a proper place to sleep. I found a local "hotel" just off the main street. The rooms had concrete floors and sagging beds (and nothing else), the toilet was an outhouse, and the only running water was a few communal faucets, but at \$2 a night, I couldn't complain about the price! Actually, I was so amused when the "manager" carefully wrote out a receipt for \$2 that I forgot to give him the money (he didn't ask for it, either, but fortunately I remembered later).

I then headed off to explore the village and meet people. Malawi is an excellent place for doing this. The dictator, Banda, has strongly emphasized English in the school system, so it usually is possible to talk to people under 30. Also, whites are rare outside of the cities, and are treated with great respect.

I met many people that day, but a few really stick out in my mind. There was the woman who ran a local restaurant, and who explained local eating habits to me (cassava and more cassava), and then gave me little helpings of various things to try. There was the young man (early 20's) who was trying to figure out how to get out of the village and into the "big time" (Blantyre, I guess). There was the worker who saw me reading a newspaper from Blantyre and begged me to let him see it, even though the paper was the worst piece of newsless propaganda I had ever seen. There was the hotel manager, who invited me to a pot (marijuana) party.

And then there was "Mary" (I never found out her real name). She was in her early 20's, worked as a secretary in the nearby "big city" of Mzuzu, and was down in Nkhata Bay to have some fun over the weekend. I first saw her walking down the street, with her full body well set off by a simple white blouse. She saw me looking at her, and later showed up at my hotel. After first buying me a Coke, she got right down to business - sex. I was obviously interested in her, and she had never done it with a white man, so why didn't we just hop into my room and have some fun?

Why not indeed? As we sat around drinking Cokes, I tried to figure out what to do. One problem was the smell - Mary (like many Malawians) used coconut oil in her hair, and the oil had gone a bit rancid. Another problem was that I was sure this would be a performance the whole village would be interested in (my window didn't have much of a curtain, and I could already see curious locals gathering around it). Most importantly, though, there was VD. I hadn't kept up with these things, but I had very vaguely heard that there were some very unpleasant strands of VD floating around central Africa. Still, this seemed very abstract, and Mary was very close and obviously willing and eager ... but I told her no, and headed off back into town.

Well, Africans can be persistent. At around midnight, I heard a loud knocking on my door. Groggily, I got out of bed and opened the door - and there she was! Well, persistence is admirable, but there's nothing I hate worse than being woken in the middle of the night - so I slammed the door shut and went back to sleep.

A few months later, I found out that AIDS had originated in central Africa, and was probably endemic in the region. So, I guess I made the right choice, and survived unscathed what was probably the most dangerous incident of my trip to Africa!

The Dangers of Africa: A Travelogue Part III: The Mountains of Tanzania

Day 0: My truck camping tour drove into the town of Moshi in Tanzania, near the foot of Mt Kilimanjaro.

We had already spent a week driving through Tanzania. The country's founder and guiding spirit, Julius Nyerere, was an idealistic socialist, and he had created a country where people were poor but equal. The villages mostly seemed to have schools, clinics, and running water, and the people looked healthy. On the other hand, the stores all had empty shelves, and what modern infrastructure (roads, railroads, banks, hotels, etc) the country had was decaying. Police checkpoints were common, and the prisons until quite recently had been full of political prisoners. Although Nyerere himself was honest, corruption was rampant in the lower levels of government. Tanzania felt like an African version of Eastern Europe: basic human needs were met, but the country was economically depressed, politically repressive, and generally felt grey.

Fortunately, tourists are pretty immune to local politics. Eight members of our group were going to try to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro (19,000 feet). Besides myself, there was Bob, Claire, Dinah, Jan, Jean, Sharon, and Susan. Two guys and six girls - contrary to stereotypes, mountain climbing, at least in our group, was more popular with women than men. Jean and Dina had some previous climbing experience, but the rest of us had never done anything like this before.

Days 1,2, and 3: There is a well-established routine for climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. It takes 3 and a half days to climb up, and one and half days to come back down. There are huts to stay in along the way, and porters are usually hired to carry your food and equipment. Except for the fourth day, when you actually reach the summit, the "climb" is just a hike along a trail. The scenery is beautiful, and always changing. The bottom of Kilimanjaro is tropical forest, but above that is a layer of meadows and flowers, and above that is a layer of desert and bare rock. The final layer, which we would see on day 4, is glaciers and ice.

The hiking for the first three days is pretty easy. You only climb about three or four thousand feet every day, and the path is gentle and in good repair. Porters carry all the gear, so you just stroll up and enjoy yourself. We had a guide, but we had no need for him for this leg of the trip.

I was careful to pace myself and go slowly. I have a tendency to walk too fast and tire myself out, so I told myself to relax, and take my time. I tried to always stay behind someone else, and let the other person set the pace. I noticed that Bob (the only other guy in our group), had taken a more macho attitude. He was always far in front, and the first to arrive at the hut for the night. When the rest of us would finally arrive, Bob would usually start boasting about how he was going to be the first one up to the summit, and how he was probably going to have to come back down and give the rest of us a hand in reaching the top.

Day 4: The big day. The fourth day of the Kilimanjaro climb is the real test, as the path gets worse and the altitude starts taking its toll. Kilimanjaro is a volcanic crater, and the path goes up to the crater rim at Gilman's point, and then goes around the rim to the highest point, Uhuru point, which is the summit. Most people make it to Gilman's point, but then are so tired and miserable that they turn back and don't reach the summit.

We were woken up at midnight, and were on the trail by 1AM. The first to turn back from our group was Bob, the macho guy who had been boasting that he was going to be the first one up. Perhaps because he had worn

himself out by setting a fast pace during the first three days, he decided to turn back after only an hour or two. The rest of us, annoyed by his previous boasting, did not try to dissuade him.

After Bob turned back, the seven "survivors" gradually broke up into two groups. I was in the "fast" group, along with Claire, Dinah, and Jan. In the dark (it was 3AM), we lost contact with the "slow" group, consisting of Jean, Sharon, and Susan. We found out later that they, like so many others, had gotten to Gilman's point and turned back there, not reaching the summit.

So, now there were only four of us left, out of the original eight. As the path got worse and the air got thinner, I think we all started wondering why we were crazy enough to try to climb this mountain. I could no longer think clearly, but just concentrated on trying to put one foot in front of the other. Dinah, the only experienced climber in our group, was having even more problems with the altitude than I was, and began gradually falling behind the rest of us.

At 7AM, we reached Gilman's point and the crater rim. We all collapsed onto the ground, and took a well-deserved rest. Dinah declared that she simply could not go any farther, and was going back down to where she could breathe. Claire, Jan, and I looked at each other, wondering whether we should be sensible and go back with Dinah, or prolong the misery and push on. At last, I said "Come on, we can't turn back now", and we headed off.

So, now there were only three left, out of the original eight. I only have the dimmest memories of walking around the crater rim to the summit. At a reasonable altitude, it would have been a Sunday stroll. At 19,000 feet, I'm amazed that I made it. It wasn't so much that I was tired, as that I had no control over myself. I walked that path like a drunk, staggering from one side to another. At times, there was a significant drop (100 feet or so) next to the path, so this was pretty dangerous. I might have seriously injured myself, except for our guide, Sam. Sam kept an eye on me, and whenever we got to a dangerous part of the trail, he would walk next to me, ready to pull me back when I got too close to the edge.

Well, we made it to the summit, somehow - first Jan, then Claire, and then me. We took some photos, signed a book, rested for a few minutes, and then headed back. For me, walking back to Gilman's point was even worse than walking to the summit, but, with Sam's help, I made it. My strongest memory of the climb down was Jan scrambling down as fast as she could, until she got down to 17,500 feet or so. There, she could breathe, and think, and enjoy herself, and start laughing at the clumsy antics of Claire and I as we came down from the top to join her. When we reached Jan, we all collapsed on the spot, and started laughing. For, we had somehow made it to the top of a 19,000 foot mountain, and would carry the memory of that accomplishment for the rest of our lives.