

## CHAPTER 5

# AFRICA

**W**hile I was in South America, I received an email from Elroy and his wife Mandy, motorcyclists from South Africa who were following my travels on the web. They offered to host me in Johannesburg upon my arrival there, and I was not about to disregard such a warm invitation. I eagerly accepted and looked forward to meeting them in person.

Elroy picked me up at the airport and used the time on the drive home to explain road rules as they apply in Johannesburg. Lane splitting is legal, and speed limits are not normally adhered to. After midnight, red traffic lights and stop signs are only suggestions. There are speed cameras permanently mounted along roads, and you must slow down for them, but can speed up afterward.

Over dinner Mandy took over and offered a lesson in Afrikaans, the world's youngest language.

"You only need to know three words: 'Howzit,' 'lekker,' and 'robot.' 'Howzit' is a general greeting and is the shortened form of 'How is it?' The reply, of course is 'lekker,' which means great. 'Robot' is our word for a traffic light. If you ask for directions and somebody tells you to turn right at the next robot, don't look for a shiny tin man."

I needed to finish a week of paperwork before Mandy and I could get the bike out of customs. An hour after the last stamp was placed on my forms, the bike was assembled in the parking lot and I was ready to follow Mandy home. I was grateful for her guidance, as this was the first time on the trip that I was driving on the left-hand side of the road. I kept Mandy firmly in sight as I relaxed and let the fact sink in that I was on my way to start the next leg of the journey.

"I'm riding a motorcycle in bloody Africa – I don't believe it," I murmured to myself. I let out an old-fashioned cowboy whoop while a delighted smile settled on my face.

After a day of running errands in Johannesburg traffic, I was comfortable with the left-hand driving. Following other vehicles was the easiest way not to screw up, and I made certain that I was never at the front of a line of cars, especially coming into a traffic circle.

With my new driving skills in place, I left some luggage with Mandy and Elroy and made a small, fast loop in the southeastern areas of Africa, returning to Johannesburg via Mozambique and Swaziland to prepare for the twelve-month long road north to Russia. A stack of maps and a pot of tea were all I needed to spend the day planning routes, one of my favourite parts of travelling. The majority of the planet's land mass is north of the equator, and this curious twist of geography presents some challenges for choosing a course that will avoid snowy winters and rainy seasons. I wanted to miss



Bad planning forces me to use the local gas station in Mozambique.

East Africa's rainy November and December, but I also wanted to stay well away from the scorching heat of summer in the Arabic Peninsula. Ideally, I would arrive in Russia and Mongolia sometime between the river-swelling snowmelt of spring and the freezing temperatures of winter.

As I prepared to leave Mandy and Elroy's home for the final time, I finished replying to emails that were piling up. A few people I had met at the motorcycle shows in Canada were contacting me and asking for advice regarding trips to South America. I was happy to give my two cents' worth and included the following tip: spend more time in the places that will be hardest to get back to again. As I hit the send button on the email, I realized I was about to ignore the same advice that I was giving out. Here I was in Africa – completely across the globe from my home – and I was anxious get through it in a few months. What was my hurry?



Some of the 10,000 virgins dancing for Swaziland's King Mswati III in the 2006 Umhlanga festival, where he will choose his 15th wife.

My initial plan had been to take four months to cross Africa from south to north. With a fresh pot of tea, I decided that it would be wiser to tour southern Africa while I waited for the weather to improve in the north. That increased my time in Africa from four months to at least nine. I did not know where the time or money for the extra travel was going to come from, but I didn't have to answer that question right away. Once I was on the Arabian Peninsula, I would have spring on my side, and from Iran I could ride the warm coattails of spring as it swept north, bringing me to the territories of Russia and Mongolia during the long days of the northern summer.

I set my immediate sights on Botswana and left for a final coffee with Elroy and his riding group.

At the coffee shop, I befriended a German man who was very interested in the motorcycle and the trip. As we finished our drinks and conversation, Klaus called his fiancée in Botswana's capital city of Gaborone where he lived, and asked if he could bring a guest home. She apparently said yes, because a few minutes later I had directions to the house.

Gaborone was on my way north and I welcomed the chance to see a new city with a local resident. I crossed the border in the afternoon, and after a lazy two-hour ride to get to the house, I arrived at a quaint wooden home in a quiet rural setting outside the noise and busyness of the city. The sliding gate opened and I entered along a short driveway past well-tended gardens of flowers and vegetables; the scene reminded me of the Swiss countryside.

I was introduced to the fiancée and a few minutes later they left for a previously arranged function, apologizing to me for the bad timing. Before they left, they told me that there was a pizza in the oven and beer in the refrigerator for me. A scalding hot shower and a cold beer had me good as new and I fell asleep on the couch waiting for my hosts to return. The next morning over strong coffee I discovered that my lady host was Unity Dow, Botswana's first female judge of the High Court and acclaimed novelist. We talked casually about Botswana and she gave me suggestions on what to see while I was there. When I explained the

upcoming day's route, I asked her advice on where to camp that evening.

"Mopipi," she replied. "It's a nice little town, and the people there are very friendly."

If the place was good enough for a Botswana High Court judge, it was certainly good enough for me.

It was a day of road construction and watery Kalahari desert horizons until the road sign advised me that Mopipi was ahead. On the left was a considerable saltpan and on the right was the upcoming mud brick town and its dusty roads. It was not a place I would normally choose for a night's rest. The highway ran alongside the town, and I was able to drive by the entire place before realizing there was no more to it, and turned around to find a place to camp. I needed that morning's encouragement from Justice Dow to stop and ask for a place to stay for the night.

I tried my luck at the gasoline station where I saw a potential place to put my tent. I went in to ask if it was possible for me to camp beside a nearby wooden fence.



Mopipi, Botswana.



Fundraising draw for the local school.

“Sure, why not?” they replied.

“That was easy,” I thought, and after setting up the tent went into the attached restaurant for a warm beer and a cold piece of fried chicken.

Four young women kept the place running smoothly; one to help fill gas, one on the cash register, and two in the kitchen. They had questions about Canada, I had questions about Botswana, and the customers coming in to buy fuel questioned why nobody was working the pump.

This kind of interchange is why motorcycle travel is so unique: it allows you to get to where the tourists are not, to places where the locals are as interested in you as you are in them. This cultural exchange of the most basic kind is harder to find and less authentic in places that have a heavy

influx of transient tourists.

The motorcycle provides an easy starting point for questioning from the locals, usually starting with “How much does it cost?” This question can be embarrassing to answer in areas where the imbalance of wealth is so obvious. If the question is asked quickly at a red light or the gas station, I will joke that “This is not a motorcycle, it is my wife, and she is not for sale.” Most often that dissolves the question, but not for the man who suggested that we should trade wives because he liked mine better.

Before heading south to my eventual destination of Cape Town, South Africa, I continued northwest in northern Namibia to the border with Angola and the much talked about Epupa Falls.

I was disappointed with the falls because crocodiles prevented me from sinking my hot and dirty bones for hours in the Kunene River. There was little point in my sticking around a dusty campground if the river was off-limits. I left after one night and headed south on the well-graded roads. Namibia’s dirt roads are maintained by graders who are paid for



Himba girls of Northern Namibia.

each kilometre they complete, and tow a trailer behind the grader which they use for sleeping in whenever their work for the day ends.

A wide, dry riverbed thirty minutes south of the falls made me sweat as the bike powered and plowed its way through the thick river sand. The sarcastically named Good Road Bar was on the south side of the dry riverbed and became my temporary home as I waited out the heat of the day and watched the 4x4s crawling north to visit where I had just come from.

Unbelievably, this area is known as grazing country, and the nomadic pastoralist Himba people walk here with herds of drought-resistant cattle, sheep and goats. From the goats, they make leather for their loincloths, and they colour their skins with red ochre and fat to help protect them from the sun. Water is reserved for the cattle and rarely used for personal hygiene. The colour of their skin is striking, and shines beautifully in the afternoon sun.

At a campsite one night, I met Sidney from Cape Town who was riding a KTM. Sidney was a computer guy and quite comfortable sleeping in lodges on his tours. Since we were both heading towards the coast the next day, I convinced him that it would be fun to bush camp in the wild the next night. First thing in the morning, we stocked up on meat and alcohol for the evening's meal.

We bumbled along a seldom-used but well-maintained dirt road towards the coast, keeping our eyes open for a nice sheltered spot to set up camp. Sidney's eagerness to sleep in the desert waned as the day went on, and he was much fussier about the location of our camp than I, so by 4 p.m. we still had not come to any agreement as to where would be a good place to spend the night. We were about 60 kilometres from the Namibian coast and Sidney now felt we should push on into dusk and camp at the seaside.

I reluctantly agreed, and we sped closer to the coast, leaving our warm blue desert sky and sliding into a cold, evil, grey coastal air system. The current along this coast comes up from Antarctica and although it's awful for swimming, the fishing is great.

We arrived at the Mile 108 fishing camp at dusk and inquired at the

small office for a campsite and a couple of Cokes.

"No problem with the campsite, but I'm afraid we are out of Coke," the office guy replied.

"How is that possible?" I asked, incredulous. "Africa runs on Coke! Nobody is ever out of Coke."

"We had some, but those South Africans in the big tent took them all." He motioned toward the shore, where a monster canvas tent like they used to have on M\*A\*S\*H was set up.

I glared towards at the tent, and thought to myself, "Those bloody South Africans!"

My grumpy thoughts were interrupted by a man introducing himself. "Hi guys, I'm BJ. Get settled and then come to the tent for a beer."

"Hey," I changed my mind. "These South Africans are all right!"

We took the bikes and started toward a spot down the beach, but a red-moustached man with a huge smile stopped Sidney in front of the canvas tent. He came out with beers and introduced himself as Henk. He was with a large group from Cape Town on an annual fishing trip and within two minutes of the beers being opened, it was decided that we were their guests for the night and there was to be no arguing about it.

I stayed for another day and learned how to surf cast while Sidney drove back to South Africa. Before I said goodbye to my new camping friends, Henk gave me the GPS coordinates for his farm near Cape Town and insisted I stop by and visit if I made it down. It was nice to have a friendly contact in a new place and it gave me a slight feeling of coming home, even though I had never been there.

South of Mile 108, the coastal road is a salt road, which is made by mixing compacted sand with gypsum and salt water. When the road is dry, the traction is very good and the surface is hard as asphalt.

I plodded along the coast until the road ran into Swakopmund, a town now centred on the tourist experience and re-branding itself from a stodgy turn-of-the-last-century German port to a modern adventure capital. Skydiving, sand-dune sledding, and quad biking outfits littered every corner.



Namibia's most dramatic geographic features are the sand dunes at Sossusvlei.

Like the Patagonian area of South America, Namibia's population density is among the world's lowest. This has superb consequences if one enjoys camping in the wild and discovering quiet back roads. In fact, the drive from the northern river border with Angola to the southern river border with South Africa can be completed almost entirely on gravel roads. Early colonization by Germany and subsequent administration by South Africa helped to develop a country with a strong infrastructure, which in turn attracted tourists who wanted an authentic African desert and wildlife experience, but who also placed value in safety, sausages, and good beer.

I arrived in beautiful Cape Town at the end of September. It's a liberal city that was easy for me to enjoy, reminding me of Vancouver in both lifestyle and natural environment. My first task upon arriving was to look

for a job for the upcoming six months while the rains ran their course in eastern Africa. I had no idea what to do and since I had only a tourist visa, any work I could get would be technically illegal.

My stay was made easier after visiting Henk, when he offered me the chance to stay in one of the little wooden houses a hundred metres from the main house on his apple farm. If there was ever a perfect place to



Natural hazards of Namibian roads.

spend time, it was there, 80 kilometres east of Cape Town. A one-room wooden cottage with a toilet, shower, double bed and electricity made up the living area, and another wooden cottage of a similar size had a two-burner gas range, a compact refrigerator and a kitchen sink. The small patio faced southwest over acres of rolling hills, apple trees and vineyards in the distance.

Henk kept busy with farm details and new or existing tourism projects. A veteran of hundreds of trips to Namibia, he would drop all the daily farm jobs for a chance to get up there to deliver a part to one of the Zulu Overland tourist trucks that he owned, preferring his motorcycle as his delivery vehicle. His wife Maryke is a woman of infinite patience who has

seen hundreds of Henk's ideas come and go over the years. With a catering business that was running at full steam, she had no time to worry about Henk, but she didn't really need to anyway.

On occasion, I went with Henk and Maryke to cater events. Henk was clever enough not to get in Maryke's way with any of the details of the catering, with the exception of making the fire and tending to the spit roasting – two activities which come naturally to all South African men.

While Henk watched the meat, my role was to keep his double brandy and Coke topped up. Admittedly, I was not an exemplary employee, as I often got sidetracked talking to guests about South Africa or motorcycles.

At a neighbour's 40th birthday party, Maryke, Henk and I attended to the catering. In between trips to the bar for Henk, I got involved in a heated debate with an attractive brunette about the old wives' tale regarding "things happening for a reason." Colette said things certainly do happen for a reason, and I argued that they most certainly do not. In my view, things just happen, yet humans are very good at making connections and plopping cause-and-effect relationships where there shouldn't be any.

Before I could get any deeper into the argument, I was pulled away by the sight of Henk staring at me and meaningfully tipping his glass upside-down. But I had managed to find out where Colette worked and I told her I would stop by and visit the following week. As the night wound down, I got another contact, this time on the travelling side. The neighbours had a niece who had travelled through Africa on a BMW with her husband; the pair were now stationed in Dubai, taking a break from their travels to earn some money. I took down their email address and made a note to ask them for any advice for the way up Africa or across the Arabian Peninsula.

Four days later, I arrived at Colette's work. I met her with a friendly handshake and told her I had a full day planned for us on the motorcycle. It became clear that she hadn't been awaiting my arrival with breathless anticipation when she asked, "What was your name again?"

I was startled but managed to stammer out, "Rene."

"Oh, that's right. I should have remembered that, since it's the same name as my brother," she said with a laugh.

"Yes," I thought. "You should have."

I was tempted to throw out a snotty "Everything happens for a reason," but I resisted the urge, and soon we were both on the BMW taking a slow coastal breakfast run in search of calving southern right whales. It was hard to not have an impressive day when the morning ride by the ocean transitioned into an afternoon of gorgeous vineyards and a picnic of local wine and cheese on a nearby mountain pass. This was certainly the television commercial version of adventure travel by motorcycle. The idyllic commercial would not go on to show the moment when, after two dates, you get a raised eyebrow and the question "Didn't you wear that last time we went out?"

The courting period available to a travelling motorcyclist with only two sets of clothing can be quite short.

By January of 2007, Colette and I were spending most of our days together, choosing to remain blissfully ignorant about what was going to happen in a few months when I left. January also meant calendar selling season in Canada, so my sister and brother contacted the motorcycle shows in Calgary and Edmonton and were allowed to sell the 2007 version of the calendars on my behalf. I needed them to sell \$3500 worth in order for me to break even on the printing and expenses of selling the calendars. I was extremely grateful when the email came advising me that they had taken in \$2200. I had lost a little bit of money on the calendar exercise, but I had enjoyed writing and putting it together, and I started thinking about another one for 2008. I was determined to be able to break even on a project like this and tell my story in a fun way at the same time. Having this plan forced me to take more photos from the road and take more detailed notes about the places I went.

By April, I had ridden countless miles with the hardcore local motorcycle clubs and toured the very best roads that South Africa had to offer. April was also the time for me to leave. Colette and I spent our final weekend together visiting small towns on South Africa's sparsely populat-



The infamous Sani pass from foggy South Africa to the mountaintop kingdom of Lesotho.

ed west coast. We had no concrete plans for what to do with our relationship moving forward. She did not ask to join the trip and I did not invite her. This was a solo trip, a truth confirmed for me in South America. We simply agreed to stay in touch and see what happened next.

I hurried back through Namibia, Botswana, and into Zambia, where I was anxious to see Victoria Falls by the light of a full moon. At the falls the Zambezi River drops 100 metres into the gorge below, sending up spray as high as 400 metres. When the moon is full and the skies are



clear, the light from the moon creates a rainbow in the rising mist, and I added moon rainbows as another entry into my journal of things that I have experienced that I didn't even know existed before the trip started.

I started to use the appearance of a full moon to give me an excuse to

go somewhere or do something that I would not normally do, as I felt the celebration of the full moon was a noble one. Since my travelling schedule was slower than most, the full moon was also a convenient gauge of passing time, and rarely was I able to spend two of them in one country.



This 30-second exposure catches the moon-powered rainbow over Victoria Falls.



Using a back way to Zambia's South Luangwa National Park, I underestimated (again) how long it would take me to complete the 120 kilometres of trail. I was still 80 kilometres short of my destination village when the sun set at 6 p.m., and I didn't want to bush camp in the national park, so when I stumbled into an anti-poacher ranger camp, I asked to spend the night. Two groups of five rangers take turns doing a 10-day, 110-kilometre tour of the park to try to combat poachers of ivory and bush meat. The poachers often use wire leg snares to disable their prey for days until they can kill it. Ironically, electric wires donated by well-meaning NGOs to protect villages from elephants are stolen by the killers to make these snares. The 120-kilometre distance I had to cover would eventually take me 10 hours.

After a quick tour of southern Malawi, I set up camp on the southern end of Lake Malawi. I fell into a groove that had me quite content to relax on the beach and send text messages to Colette telling her of my experiences in short, misspelled sentences.

Near my tent were Guy and Marleen, an extensively-travelled Belgian couple whom I had met briefly in Cape Town and who were heading north with their camperized 4x4 truck. To pass time, we speculated on upcoming roads and talked through what we thought routes to the north would be like. All roads appeared fun when you looked at them on a map with a cold beer in your hand.

However, there was one road that did not get any better-looking, no matter how much I drank, and that was the Lake Turkana route from Kenya to Ethiopia.

Traditionally, travellers going from Kenya to Ethiopia had two options: the main (bad) dirt road north from Nairobi, or a little-used (really bad) road through the remote northwest section of the country near Lake Turkana. It was little used because it was 900 kilometres between fuel stops through remote desert country on bad doubletrack. Guy had his sights set on this route and suggested that it would be fun if I came along. I told him I would consider it and went back to my other current favourite pastime, which was making bread.

For three weeks, I experimented with yeast and flour and finding the



Elephant speed bumps.



Rural Malawi shops.



Boys on the side of the road hold up skewered field mice as a delicacy to passing cars. The mice are boiled, and after the bitter intestines are removed, toasted in the fire. Ten for \$0.70.



Campfire banana bread.

correct time that the dough needed to rise. My oven was a narrow rock-lined hole in the sand. On the bottom went hot coals from my fire, then a few spacer rocks, and then a CD-sized piece of wire mesh that I had found in a ditch. My titanium pot was terrible at dissipating heat, so the temperature below it needed to be low but consistent; I found that small embers placed alongside the pot helped to keep a steady heat, and coals heaped on the closed lid helped to cook the bread from the top. After thirty minutes, I occasionally had a spectacularly golden-brown fluffy loaf of bread that I proudly doled out to my neighbours. More often than not, I had a failed experiment that I ate alone.

On the way north through Malawi, my South African motorcycle friends advised me by email that movie stars/motorcycle adventurers Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman were coming my way as they completed a drive from Scotland to South Africa for their documentary *The Long Way Down*. I was hoping

to pilfer their parts car, but never did come across their sizeable entourage on the road.

I stopped to visit some hot springs along the shore, and the host of the campsite there confirmed the passing of the television crew and that

I had missed them by a day. Unbothered by missing my chance to pick up free tires, I headed off to the hot springs, but African hot springs are working hot springs, and a lineup of women with laundry took up most of the room near the waters' source. There was no room for a quick skinny-dip in these pools.

**leua kt**  
1. kutoa gesi mdomoni kutoka tumboni baada ya au wakati wa kula chakula: Mara nyingi watoto wadogo hucheua baada ya kunyonya.  
2. tafunatafuna chakula kutoka tumboni kama wafanyavyo wanyama aina ya ng'ombe na mbuzi: Mbuzi, ng'ombe na sungura ni baadhi ya wanyama wanaocheua. **cheulia; cheuka; cheusha**

**eza kt**  
irahisha nafsi kwa vitendo vya furaha na usisimua: Mdogo wangu anacheza wenyewe. **chezea; chezwa**

**ifu nm ma-**  
itawala au mfalme wa jadi; kiongozi: lakabila mengi ya Afrika yalikuwa na iachifu wao.

**ikichi nm ma-**  
inda la mchikichi lenye kokwa inazotumiwa kutengeneza mafuta ya nawese: Mawese ni mafuta yanayotokana a machikichi.

**imba kt**  
ukua udongo kwa jembe, mtaimbo au hepe: Kila kaya lazima ichimbe choo. **himbia; chimbwa**  
Kinyume: fukia

**chini kt**  
kwenye sakafu, ardhini au ndani ya bahari: Simba alimsubiri Joni chini ya mti. (mt) Aliye juu mngoje chini. Kinyume: juu

**chinja kt**  
kata shingo aghalabu kwa wanyama: Rasi na Joni wanachinja mbuzi. **chinjia; chinjana; chinjwa**

An illustrated children's dictionary shows Swahili words and pictures not normally found in English children's books.

I finished the border formalities to exit Malawi and drove the short distance to the entry post of Tanzania, where I greeted the customs officer with the polite greeting in Chichewa, Malawi's language. The officer



returned the greeting in Swahili and then in English.

The number of times the language changed in Africa was one of the conditions that made it more difficult to sink my tires deeper into the local culture. As soon as I learned how to say hello, goodbye, please, thank you, and beer in the local dialect, another week of travel brought me to an area where the dialect or language changed and the language lessons started all over again. My thirteen-country route through southern and eastern Africa exposed me to twenty official languages, eighteen recognized non-official languages, and hundreds of indigenous dialects. Fortunately for me, English was spoken at least a bit in most places. Between my handy traveller's sign language, the locals' broken English, and my ten hastily-acquired words in the local language, I could make my basic needs understood. As easy as the day-to-day living was, however, I longed for the gradual progression of comprehension that I had developed in South America by practising Spanish daily over the course of months, and the quality of conversations that came along with that.



LEFT: Wataturu family, western Tanzania.

ABOVE TOP: Signage reminding locals not to take the law into their own hands.

ABOVE BOTTOM: My regular breakfast restaurant featuring chapaties, a delicious unleavened bread cooked on a skillet.

By the time I made it to Uganda, it rained almost every day. Nobody could say whether the long rains were late or the short rains were early, but it didn't matter. The worst rains in 30 years created havoc with roads, crops, food aid delivery, and killed 20,000 wildebeest at the tail end of their annual migration in the nearby Serengeti and Masai Mara parks.

I was missing Colette and not enjoying the constant wet life that surrounded me. One Belgian aid worker brightened my stay in Uganda when she gave me a bag of cotton swabs made with a real wooden stick between the cotton ends. They proved a little dangerous for everyday use, and I tucked them deep into my clothing bag for special occasions only.

I ran into Guy and Marleen again at a campground in Kampala, Uganda's capital city. They were quick to suggest the obvious cure for my depression: "Hop on a plane and visit Colette, and get some sun while you're there."

Before leaving for Kenya to investigate flights, I had one last chore to do in Kampala. A month earlier, a friend from the USA had let me know she was coming to Uganda for work. Was there any way we could meet up? I was still in Malawi at the time, so the logistics made a reunion impractical. She asked if there was anything from her side that she could bring over with her, since she was coming with very little luggage.

"How about a set of tires?" I asked, since the tire selection in Africa was meagre and expensive.

She may have not expected this request, but she agreed to help, so I ordered a set of tires online. I arranged for them to be tightly wrapped for air cargo and shipped to her house in the States. She brought them as part of her luggage and left them with a friend in Kampala, who kindly stored them for me until I arrived. It was a comforting feeling knowing that new parts (that I knew would fit and for which I had paid a reasonable price) were waiting for me down the road. This style of forward supply worked so well that I emailed an old roommate from Germany and asked him to buy a set of tires and put them in the slow mail to Kazakhstan, where another friend had agreed to accept the package and hold it for me until my arrival.

With my new tires strapped to the back of the bike, I drove to Nairobi and bought a cheap flight to Cape Town on the internet. Then I spent a few days taking apart the motorcycle to see what replacement parts I could buy while in South Africa, which has a far greater selection of BMW parts than anywhere else in Africa. Everything looked to be in relatively good shape until I removed the fancy Ohlins rear shock that I had installed the previous year in Canada. The lower mount that bolted the shock to the motorcycle was cracked in half. In a frantic internet session, I discovered that the spring on my shock was too light for the amount of gear and fuel that I carried; I needed a stiffer spring along with the new mount.

With boxes of broken shock parts, my luggage, and my guitar, I flew from Nairobi to Johannesburg and onto my connecting flight to Cape Town. Unfortunately, my guitar only made it as far as Johannesburg, where somebody in the baggage handling area of Nationwide Airlines decided to make it their own. The most interesting aspect of this theft was the fact that I had travelled for two years through mostly impoverished rural areas with the guitar fastened to the back of my motorcycle by two thin, non-secure bungee cords. Not once had anyone ever tried to take it.

Once in Cape Town, the motorcycle maintenance was put on hold while Colette and I escaped from the farm for a romantic weekend on the coast. In my limited experience long distance relationships do not work, yet everything was going so well, it seemed ludicrous to end ours.

On the internet I found a used spring for the rear shock in England and had it couriered to Cape Town, but a replacement mount was not to be found anywhere. My only other option was to have a replica of the needed part made at a local metal working shop. As an extra precaution, I had the old one welded together to bring as a spare.

With my spirits revived I emailed Guy and told him that I would like to join him and Marleen on the Lake Turkana route. My regular dual sport tires would not be aggressive enough for the off-road riding that this would entail, so I went to Hamman BMW to buy spare parts and new tires, but when I got there I balked at the price. Instead of buying

new tires, I went behind the building and scratched through the pile of discarded ones. I found two knobbies that had some tread left on them and wrapped them up to take north.

Having access to Colette's internet connection meant that I could start the daunting task of sorting out the visa requirements for the next dozen countries. Gone were the easy South American days of arriving at a border, showing my passport, and receiving my visa. With the exception of the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), all the countries from Kenya to South Korea required a visa obtained in advance, and several countries also required a "letter of invitation," a piece of paper normally bought on the internet from a tourist agency within the country itself.

I returned to Kenya with a rebuilt shock, tires, parts, regular Q-tips, and a renewed vigour for getting on the road. With the repairs done to the bike, I met Guy and Marleen in Maralal, a town with a busy market that supplied us with our last chance to buy fruits and vegetables to eat and tobacco to trade or to leave as a gift. This was also the last official fuel stop heading north.

Guy filled the Toyota with diesel, and I topped up the BMW with 36 litres of gasoline and filled jerry cans with another 10 litres that I wedged in the back of Guy and Marleen's already overloaded truck.

At most fuel stops in Africa, locals tried to get a glimpse of the speedometer to find out how fast the motorcycle could go. I tried to explain that although the dial shows a maximum speed of 160 kilometres per hour, I have never taken the bike that fast. Nobody believed me. Apparently a sure way to improve the resell value of any African vehicle is to install a speedometer dial that goes to 500 kilometres per hour.

As we left the fuel station, the road immediately shrank to a wide rocky track and we said good-bye to the tarmac. We did not expect to see another one until Ethiopia the following week. The road was in reasonable shape, but I remained in first and second gear as I negotiated up and down short, steep hills and dry riverbeds. After every winding climb to the top of a small pass, we spent an equal amount of time winding slowly down the other side, relishing the cool air of the shadowy bottoms before

climbing up again to repeat the scene.

By day two, the road no longer looked like a road, although it was still marked as one on most of our maps. It was now a hump of scratchy dry grass growing between two well-worn dirt tracks.



The first campsite en route to Turkana.

At our bush camp that night, the tents were barely up before a wall of black clouds tumbled quickly towards us from the southern mountains. We scrambled to throw anything that needed to stay dry under the truck, and then raced to grab soap and shampoo. The ensuing downpour provided a much-needed desert shower for us, and I hoped the moisture would also help pack down the road for the following day; over the last twenty kilometres, it had become noticeably sandier.

A brief touch with mud earlier in the day and now this shower made us wonder how things were shaping up further north. Rumour had it that there was a river near the Ethiopian border that always had water in it,

and to cross it we would need a few days of dry weather so the water level would drop to a manageable level. We had no way of telling whether we could cross in advance; the only thing to do was to show up and hope for the best.

The sun was high in the sky when we crested a rocky hill and Lake Turkana finally came into view. The largest desert lake in the world, it is home to some massive Nile perch, and, perhaps not surprisingly, the largest Nile crocodile population in the world as well.

From my new vantage point I saw the lake (formerly called Lake Rudolf and also known as the Jade Sea) stretch off into the horizon. Its



Guy waits for me to grind my way to the lake.

northern shore ended in Ethiopia. But what struck me more was the area around the lake. No trees, no grass, no shrubs. The wind whipped up little dust devils, which baffled me, as I couldn't see where the dust would have come from. No wonder the crocs inherited this place – nobody else

wanted it.

Underneath my motorcycle were rocks. Big rocks, small rocks, rocks on rocks on rocks. Like many African roads, this one was made with whatever material was closest by. At the southern end of Lake Turkana, that's rocks. For Guy and Marleen's four-wheeled vehicle, the going was slow and bumpy, but steady. My two wheels got nastily kicked and bounced from one bad line to another and the sloshing momentum of my fuel tanks added to my balance problems.

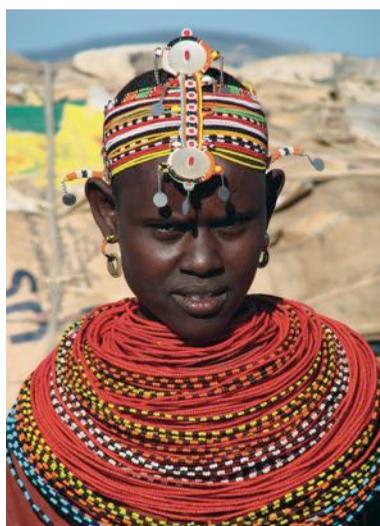
A bumpy, kilometre-long descent got me to the shoreline, where I removed my jacket and took a well-deserved break for my cramping arms. A look back up the hill showed only the slightest hint of where the road was. A bit of dust from previous tires snaked up the hill and crested the top. At night, or during a bad rainstorm, the road would appear to be swallowed up by the massive rock field and one would only be left with the thought that there had been a road here at one time that must recently have been buried by this rock slide.

The Toyota pulled up and a relaxed Guy rolled down the windows to offer me a drink. I heard music from the CD player and I spotted a bag of snacks between the seats. What a completely different experience this road was for us! As the sun fell into the lake, we carried on, and within an hour we rolled into the very small village of Loiyangalani, which was featured in the movie *The Constant Gardener*. Loiyangalani was built 500 metres from the lakeshore at an oasis that allowed feathery doum palm trees and green grasses to flourish in this hostile desert environment. The presence of the oasis also allowed me to sit underneath one of the palm trees, recovering from the day with a warm beer, while Guy and Marleen scouted around for a place to put up the tents. They found a little run-down campsite with a spring-fed pool and plenty of shade, so we settled in for a few days of washing and resting.

I spent my days avoiding the powerful noontime sun and chatting with the locals. The Turkana people believe that eating (or catching or even touching) fish is forbidden. It is a ridiculous food taboo, seeing as they live on the edge of a desert lake surrounded by volcanic crust that makes



Friendly Lake Turkana faces.



it nearly impossible to grow any food. I noted in my journal that I would be more impressed with the wisdom of their culinary superstitions if they allowed fish and made apples taboo.

I also stopped in at the small Kenyan Wildlife Service office and asked for road information to our next destination of the Sibiloi National Park, a day's drive to the north. I knew that in the rainy season it was impossible to drive there and the only access was by plane or boat. This I regarded as a potential problem because most afternoons treated us to massive downpours. The wildlife service sent a Land Rover truck every week to the park and one was scheduled to leave the next day. I returned the next evening to radio the Sibiloi camp and got confirmation that the road was mostly dry with no unusually bad sections. Coming from strangers, the description "not unusually bad" wasn't particularly reassuring – road terminology can be horribly discretionary – and Guy, Marleen

and I hung onto the only qualitative word: dry. We packed and left at the next day's first light.

Forty kilometres north of Loiyangalani, we arrived at an intersection marked by a three-metre-wide circle of rocks. This was our last possible exit before committing to the road north on to Ethiopia. If we followed the tracks east, we would cross the Chalbi desert and eventually intersect the main all-weather and corrugated north-south highway.

After a quick re-confirmation that everybody was game to try our route, we were off, enjoying large flats of compact sand lengthy enough to get the motorcycle into fourth and fifth gears, a treat after days of crawling slowly over rocks.

The fast flats ended as quickly as they started, and the next three hours passed slowly as



One of the fast sections to Sibiloi.

we continued north, stopping only occasionally to check the maps and the GPS. Herds of camels stood uninterested as we passed by, and I wondered where their owners were. The road settled into decent tracks for dozens of kilometres, but if the tracks got too corrugated I would slide up onto the ground beside the road. I smiled as my tires made fresh tracks in between well-spaced bushes. This was Africa off-road riding done the safe way. Standing on the foot pegs, I could see the curve of the road, and I stayed within five metres of it. The soft ground allowed me to lean the bike between the bushes and carve wide, lazy turns as if I was skiing.

And like skiing, I was pooped after four hours of doing it in the sun. I was very happy to see the park gates and wardens' hut. The 154 kilometres had taken seven and a half hours to do, so I was not thrilled to find out that the lakeside camp was another 20 kilometres down a dead-end road. The guard told me that the road to the campsite was good. As I was to discover, he lied to me. Either that, or he simply did not know that

long stretches of sandy riverbed, followed by a deep-water crossing in a croc-infested lake, do not qualify as a good road for a loaded motorcycle.

We arrived to find that our "deluxe campsite" consisted of a big tree and a small outhouse. On the upside, we had the place to ourselves. Almost on cue, a cool breeze drifted in from the east, bringing dark clouds.

Within a few minutes the rain came, accompanied by great blasts of thunder and flashes of lightning. Out with the shampoo and off with the clothes for another desert shower courtesy of Mother Nature. I expected a brief shower like our previous bush camp shower, but after 45 minutes the rain continued to pour.

I squatted in the grass with nowhere to hide and watched the horizon for any sign of clearing skies. Like a kettle never boiling if you watch it, rainy skies will never clear if you are sitting in cold wet grass on the shore of Lake Turkana. After an hour, the skies grudgingly rolled over to a pale grey, but it continued to spit as we set up the tents. The lightning



The day's last water crossing in Lake Turkana.

show continued from across the lake, but our eyes were on the land to the north as we wondered what the rain had done to the roads.

The following morning greeted us with blue skies. Our breakfast meeting mapped out the route and destination for the day, the Koobi Fora Museum (and campsite) famous for the ancient hominid fossils that abound there. The map of the park that I had bought from the guard the previous day was the worst map I had ever used. In four hours of driving within the park, we still were unable to recognize a road. It was helpful in that it gave a vague idea on the terrain, breaking up the sections of the park into different-coloured patches of Lava Fields, Open Bush or Sand/Mud; those were the only three choices. I thought wryly that those three categories could also be used to describe all the terrain we had covered in the last week as well.

From the park gate it was only 52 kilometres to the Koobi Fora campsite, but as usual we had slow going with the rocky road. We stumbled onto an airstrip and an adjacent sign pointed us down a westward track and advised us that we were only ten kilometres from the site. But what a ten kilometres it was. The road ducked out of view of the airstrip into a clump of acacia bushes and quickly became deep sand. My only chance of getting through was to drive the motorcycle in one of the two deep sand grooves, as the middle rounded hump was too high. On both sides of the road, the acacia trees spilled over into the road to get at the sunlight. Acacia branches are insanely prickly and the massive thorns ripped at my gloves, jacket and the bags on the bike. If I drove in the right-hand groove, the branches stuck into my right arm, which controlled the throttle on the bike. While I could usually shake the branch loose, sometimes this action ripped my hand from the throttle, and the bike would lose its momentum and wobble to a stop in its sandy gutter.

Halfway down the track, I noticed on the bike's clock that it was 11:45 a.m., and I figured there was no way I wanted to be out here at high noon. Crawling in first gear through the deep sand, the bike ran hot and caused the radiator fan to be on all the time. The hot wind that was sucked through the radiator was being directed onto my right knee, bak-

ing me as much from below as the sun was from above.

I looked at the dashboard again. My gaze rested on the low fuel light, which was now on, indicating that I had less than four litres left in the main tank. Surely this was impossible. Wasn't it?

I charged on, not pausing to admire the view as I exited the thick acacia brush to the lakeside plain. I spotted the offices in the distance. I parked the bike in the shade and stripped off my soaking-wet pants and jacket, laying them in the sun beside my stinking boots. The stone-walled offices of the museum were thick and the air was sweet and cool under the thatched roof. I said hello to the staff working there, and inquired about fuel – could I buy any there?

“No,” they answered, matter-of-factly.

That, I thought to myself, may be a problem.

I put up the tent under the veranda of one of the buildings, beside tables stacked high with bones and skulls of who knows what. Guy and Marleen took a nap in the shade while I sat down with my notebook and did fuel calculations. I had originally brought 36 litres on the bike and Guy had taken ten for me on the truck. That morning I had put the ten litres from the jerry cans into the motorcycle. I kept three or four litres in reserve in my each of my side tanks, but even so that meant I only had at most nine litres of fuel with me. On a quality tarred road, my consumption was 26 kilometres for every one litre of fuel. In the last few days, my consumption had been an underwhelming 16 kilometres for every litre. I was using some of the gasoline for the cooking stove, which I could always put back into the bike, but that was 500 millilitres at most, and not able to take me far.

With only nine litres of fuel, I couldn't drive more than 144 kilometres. That would get me 80 kilometres north to the next village of Illeret, the last village in Kenya. But it wouldn't stretch to the next fuel station in Ethiopia. There was a slim possibility that I could buy fuel from the police or perhaps at one of the religious missions in Illeret, or from a similar place on the Ethiopian side. But we did not have any Ethiopian money, and nobody there would take Kenyan shillings for payment.

During my calculations, our old friend the rain came barrelling down upon us again. If we attempted to run to the border and found the roads impassable, we would have to wait until the rivers subsided. With all the maps out, we had a quiet and solemn discussion about the northern section of this trip. One of the museum workers came by to tell us that a group of Belgians had been stranded at this campsite for nine days the previous year, waiting for the roads to dry out. We had heard the story earlier, but had thought they were stranded at the border river crossing that everyone talked about.

We couldn't decide if this was good or bad news for us. It also proved that information from previous travellers is not that reliable and gets old quickly. One good thundershower changes everything.

I also concluded that I did not have enough fuel to make it back to Loiyangalani. From the point of view of my fuel situation, I could only go north, but the black clouds that were pounding down in that direction made that option unpalatable, at least for the immediate future.

The daylight dropped away and my head torch lit up my journal as I wrote down what my options were for getting fuel. I could ask the park to radio Loiyangalani and send some up with the truck that was coming the following week, or I could wait and hope that a visitor pitched up with extra fuel to sell. I knew this was unlikely to happen. We had not seen another vehicle on the road in days.

I walked to the staff quarters to talk to the manager about the situation I was in. I asked if he could radio the park station in Loiyangalani and get them to send fuel up for me the next time the truck came up. He did not know when that would be, so we hashed out a few more ideas. He suggested I could get some to come over on the boat. The boat!

"When is the boat coming next?" I asked.

I could get the boat to bring me fuel the next time it made its trip across the lake for the weekly staff change.

"It's on the water now; should be arriving any minute." There suddenly went that idea.

But a little lightbulb went on in my head. "Doesn't the boat use gaso-

line?" I asked.

"Yes," he admitted.

"So there is actually gasoline here?"

"Yes, it's brought over in a 200-litre barrel on the boat and kept up on the hill."

I wanted to shout, "Why didn't you mention that earlier?" But I bit my tongue and asked again if it would be possible to buy just a little bit for the motorcycle.

"Only ten litres? I don't need a receipt..." I said persuasively.

"I can help you with that," he said.

Now I wondered what exorbitant price he would charge me. In the last village, the price had been double the market price.

"The regular price is 90 shillings a litre (\$1.35). But we buy it across the lake for 100 shillings a litre (\$1.50) and you want 10 litres..." I waited for him to do the math in his head. I was prepared to offer him whatever he wanted. Even if it was \$5 a litre, I was in no position to argue.

He continued, "...so 100 shillings at 10 litres means 1000 shillings." I gave him the money before he could change his mind and made plans to buy another ten litres the next morning.

I dropped the fuel into the bike, and went back to Guy and Marleen with my good news. While they were happy I had solved my problem, they were not confident about the road north. They had taken a short reconnaissance drive on one of two roads to the north of the park and found it under a sea of water. They had decided to return south and re-join the regular, miserable highway north, and I couldn't argue. North of us, the rain had been pouring all evening.

We were so close! Less than a day away, if only the weather had cooperated. Now we had a torturous two-day drive back to the highway, and then north for another day just to get to the border with Ethiopia. I mentally groaned as I played back the nasty rock climbs and sandy washes I had endured on the way here. How many times had I told myself that this route was only enjoyable because I knew I would not have to return the same way? Now I was going to have to do it all again. And we were not

in the clear yet, either. We still had the Chalbi Desert to cross before we intersected the highway. If that area received any of the rain that we had here, the desert road would be non-driveable as well, and we would have to wait until it dried out before crossing.

With morning's light we trudged our way back up the ten kilometres of sand track to the airstrip. The motorcycle lumbered again with the extra weight of the fuel. I rarely filled the motorcycle's gas tanks completely because the extra weight made for cumbersome handling, but it was a Catch-22. Good roads were easier for the heavy motorcycle to handle, but the good roads were also where most of the fuel stops were, so the



Buffed African double track.

extra fuel was not needed. The rarely used off-road tracks and trails were where the longer fuel range was needed, but they were also the most difficult places to ride a heavy motorcycle.

At the airstrip, we decided that since the sun was shining, we would continue to the higher of the two roads that transect the park to see how

the park looked from the higher elevation. When the roads became impassable, we would turn south and head for the Chalbi.

To everyone's amazement, the terrain got drier as we left the lake. Sixty kilometres brought us to the northeastern border of the park, and from here it was 28 kilometres to the village of Illeret. The sky was blue, with no hints of incoming bad weather, so we decided that we had to at least try to get to the border. The river we all feared was probably swollen with the rain, but we were now less than fifty kilometres from there. Once we were in Ethiopia, we could worry about being stuck there waiting for roads to dry out. Over a cold spaghetti breakfast, we all agreed that we would rather wait on the side of a rushing river for three days than drive three days back.

If someone who has never been to Africa daydreams about driving a motorcycle through the East African plains, they probably envision something like the thirty minutes I enjoyed from this stop on towards Illeret. The road was rolling doubletrack, just banked enough to carry a nice amount of speed through corners. The bushes and trees were well back from the road, and antelopes and zebras nervously trotted away from me when the noise of the bike approached. The temperature was perfectly cool; the morning air was not yet warmed by the sun and the speed of the bike allowed plenty of it to rush through the vents of my jacket. My grip on the hard-packed soil was perfect, and the sun was at our backs. Even if we were turned around at the river, I would be happy to do this section again.

We pulled into Illeret and signed the exit book at the police station. The very friendly police officers told us that the rains had only been light here and the track was good to the border.

We asked about the big river that we must cross. "The one that is somewhere near the border between the two countries? There is water in it and maybe it is too full to pass?" Marleen asked.

"If the river is too full," I promptly followed, "perhaps we can camp in the police compound?"

They replied that all the rivers in this part of Kenya were seasonal, and

now they were all mostly dry. They assured us that the rivers should not pose any problem for us. This meant one of two things: either they were telling us what we wanted to hear (quite common) or their information was wrong (also quite common). We were dubious. Had we worried for over a week about a river that was non-existent? Our minds had created a raging, motorcycle- and Belgian-swallowing river. Now it looked like we wouldn't even get our tires wet.

After we deciphered the maze of tracks that headed north through the spread-out trees from the Illeret police station, we ended up at the small metal shack of the Ethiopian police at the border. A man with bloodshot eyes introduced himself and explained that this was the police post and we must go to Omorate, sixty kilometres north, to get the immigration office stamp in our passports. From our research we knew this to be correct, and we agreed with him. Another man with a beach towel wrapped around his waist, wearing a t-shirt and carrying a transistor radio, walked slowly over. He was introduced as the boss, and insisted on seeing our passports. I gave him a photocopy of mine that I kept in my jacket pocket instead of the real passport. He looked on the back of the paper where I had scribbled my medical insurance details.

"We have a problem, me and you," he said.

"What's that?"

"This passport, it's written in pen. It's not real."

I turned the paper over to show the photocopied side. He grunted and walked over to ask the same of Guy and Marleen.

After seeing their passports, he returned to me and explained that Ethiopian law insisted that a guard escort us (for "security reasons") to the immigration offices in Omorate. When we explained there was no room on the motorcycle or in the truck, the boss smiled and inquired, "How, then, are we going to work this out?"

I suggested that they radio the immigration office and tell them we were on the way. He said no, so I said we would radio him when we got to Omorate and let him know that we arrived safely. He said that was not possible either and wondered aloud again, "How can we solve the situa-

tion? You cannot leave until this is solved."

Before he could ask blatantly for a bribe, I told him to talk to Guy, as I knew how that would turn out. Guy and Marleen have been travelling for the better part of thirteen years, and have been through many more dodgy border posts than I have, so I looked for the sign from Marleen.

I could hear Guy screaming at the boss that there was no way that this law was true. "We're leaving," he said.

I heard the man with the bloodshot eyes screaming back, "No, you cannot leave!"

Marleen looked at me and shouted, "GO!"

I had the bike in first gear but not started, so when I hit the starter, the noise startled the crowd of curious onlookers around it. I got onto the throttle and saw Guy and Marleen's truck beside me as we made a break for it. We drove like hell for fifty metres, until I realized I had no idea where I was going. Tracks left the dusty compound in every direction and we were surrounded by spread out scrub bush on all sides. A glance at the GPS showed me that we were going due west, not north.

"Shit!" I thought.

I slowed down, and Guy pulled up beside me.

"Is this the way?" Marleen shouted over the noise of the bike.

"I don't think so!" I shouted back.

We turned ninety degrees to the right. A hundred metres in the distance was a tall wooden pole stuck into the ground which we hoped indicated the exit to the compound. Guy pushed the Toyota towards it, hoping that the track would become more visible as we got closer. I glanced to my right, towards the metal shack. The boss was chasing us with his towel flapping and his radio still in one hand. Somebody else with an obviously heavy AK-47 was trying to beat us to the pole in order to stop us there. He was running while trying to put the strap of the gun on his shoulder. With our head start, there was no way they could catch us on foot, and we made it to the makeshift gate well before them. Guy drove the truck hard and it bucked wildly through every small stream crossing, but I was not going to let him and Marleen get ahead of me



Southern Ethiopia blew away many geographic misconceptions of mine.

for an instant. I stayed right behind them, even though that meant I was directly in the clouds of dust.

“Free tires, don’t fail me now,” I thought to myself.

I spent a considerable amount of time looking in my mirrors for signs of a chase, but none ever came. This encounter had shaken me up and it took another hour of riding before I started to settle down and begin to

appreciate the desert around me.

In Omorate, the official immigration man showed no sign of knowing anything about our earlier border skirmish. He was very helpful and gracious and put the reputed warmth of the Ethiopian people back into our minds. We cleared immigration in the early afternoon, which allowed us a few more hours to get further into Ethiopia. After travelling in the bush



for so long, we had trouble adjusting to the oncoming traffic. Not only because we were used to having the whole track to ourselves, but also because in Ethiopia they drive on the right-hand side of the road – my first African country to do so. Our first camp in Ethiopia was heavily laced with cold beer from a local bar. We happily sat in the shade and revelled in the fact that we had finally made it to the Omo Valley, laughing about

how our worry about the big, raging river had caused us so much grief in the last two weeks.

Coming from the glorious, empty vastness of Lake Turkana I was surprised to see tourists in such great numbers visiting Ethiopia. We shared the observation that the Ethiopia under our feet was not the Ethiopia that we had expected to see. We had been braced to see drought-stricken

deserts and starving babies surrounded by masses of flies. Instead we saw lush, green valleys, mountains of respectable height, and beautiful, colourful locals with strong physiques who were proud of their tribal customs and history. I also had not expected to see the quantity of new Toyota Land Cruisers belonging to every possible non-governmental organization under the sun. Ethiopia was NGO central, and out of all the recipients of good fortune here, Toyota surely topped the list.

The next day we crossed one of the rivers that could have been our river of misinformation, but it was nowhere near where we thought it would be. Across the 15-metre riverbed, the damp sand only held a trickle of water. In the end, we barely got our tires wet.

Two days later, an overnight rainstorm filled the riverbed one metre deep. Tourists trapped on the other side had no choice but to wait it out until the water level dropped and then a road construction grader could pull their Land Cruisers through. This was indeed the river of ill repute.

Not being in any rush to get to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, we lingered in as many towns as we could before getting there, including Arba Minch, where I took a dirty hotel room in the middle of town while Guy and Marleen stayed on the outskirts in their truck. My hotel apparently came with Bart, my new English-speaking friend. Bart was a

local teenager who was always ready to show me the local restaurants and creatively ordered my meals so they would arrive on two plates. Despite the obvious gastronomic reasons for Bart's friendship with me, I was happy to have him around, as he was able to answer many of my questions about local culture and in particular about the qat tradition.



The river we had worried about.

Qat is a leaf that is chewed in large quantities for its amphetamine-like buzz and the energy and loss of hunger that come from chewing it. Unlike the coca leaves of Bolivia, which permit harder work with less fatigue, qat makes people far less productive. Any energy and euphoria derived from the leaves isn't squandered on work; instead, it is put completely into relaxing and socializing with other qat chewers. The leaves are most potent when fresh, so qat-chewing areas grind to a halt every afternoon when the newly picked leaves arrive in town.

When I told Bart I wanted to try some qat, he took me by the hand up a dusty side road to the concrete block house where his sister lived. We said hello to the girls working out front and parted the Rasta-coloured bead curtain covering the entrance to a dark sitting room. After my eyes adjusted to the low light, I could see walls lined with cushions. We sat in a corner where I could watch the door and the methods of the girls. We had joined a group of three other young men who were content to accept my hello with a lazy, wordless handshake. My foreigner status was impossible to hide and I did not bother to try.

Bart's sister, who I was beginning to gather was not really his sister, presented me with a bag of leaves at my feet, as well as a bowl of peanuts and a bowl of sugar. Her job was to keep a steady supply of leaves and accessories in front of all of the chewers. If all the men were happily chewing and chatting, she would come over and sit in front of me on her knees, choosing the best leaves to place in my mouth. Occasionally she made a large leaf into a scoop and gathered up sugar with it, pushing the whole thing into my mouth, the sugar doing wonders to balance the sharp taste of the plain leaf. A bottle of Coke was brought in – the sweetness of the drink was also used to make the leaves more palatable.

We stayed for hours, consuming endless cups of tea and a forest's worth of leaves while Britney Spears looked down on me from her poster on one wall and Ronaldo and his soccer ball looked down on me from the other. My hands shook as I talked and talked. I got back to the hotel after midnight. I remember lying on the bed shivering and wondering why I couldn't fall asleep. I eventually did and woke up tired, with a headache

that could be attributed to the litres of Coke and sweet tea that I had drunk the night before, let alone the qat.

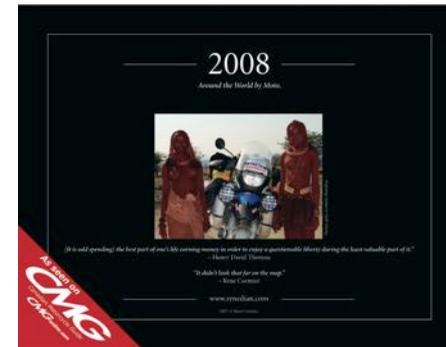
I arrived in Addis Ababa in December. I found a guesthouse that let me put my tent up in the courtyard, and got to work on finishing the details of the 2008 version of the calendar. I emailed the organizers of the Calgary and Edmonton motorcycle shows and asked permission again for my family to sell the calendars there on my behalf, which was kindly given.

I picked up from the internet that the Iranian foreign embassies located in the countries close to Iran were not giving visas out as freely as travellers would expect. Betting that the Iranian embassy in Addis Ababa was far enough away to be isolated from these prob-

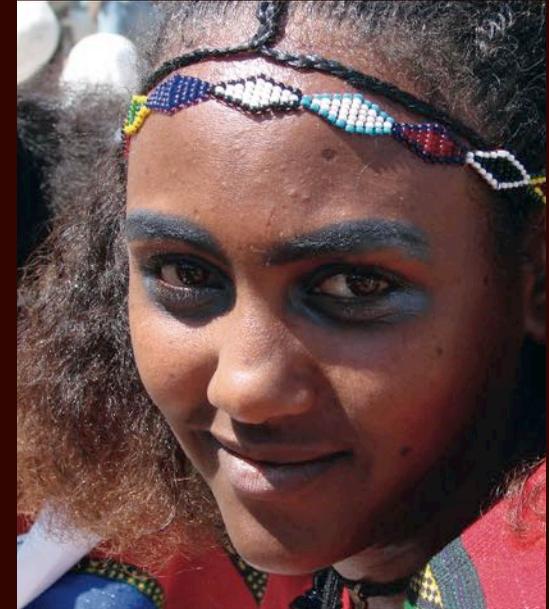
lems, I went there to apply for my Iranian visa. In addition to the normal application details such as name, address and passport number, I also had to write a paragraph on why I wanted to visit the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the waiting room where I sat were several pamphlets on the benefits of Islam and I pulled a few mighty impressive quotes out of them to bolster my argument.

When I submitted my application, I was informed that all visas must be approved by Tehran and to return in a month. That was fine by me, as it allowed me to take a tour of the northern half of Ethiopia and return for New Year's Eve in the city. I returned to the Iranian embassy on my scheduled date and was asked to fill out all of the application forms again, as they could not find my papers from before. In fifteen minutes, my visa was ready, making me suspicious about the story of Tehran needing to approve each individual application.

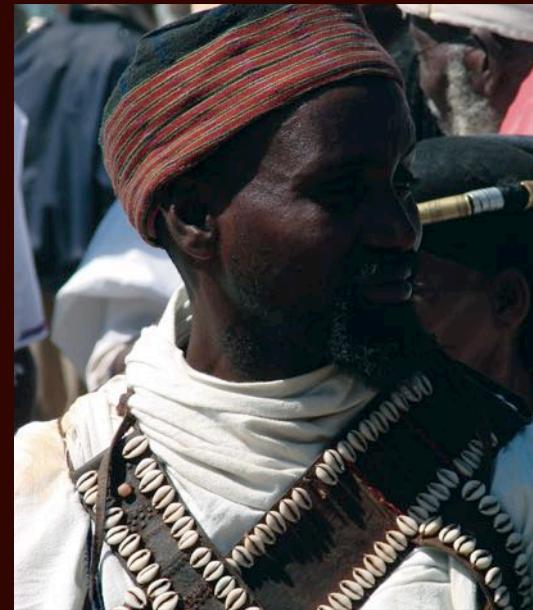
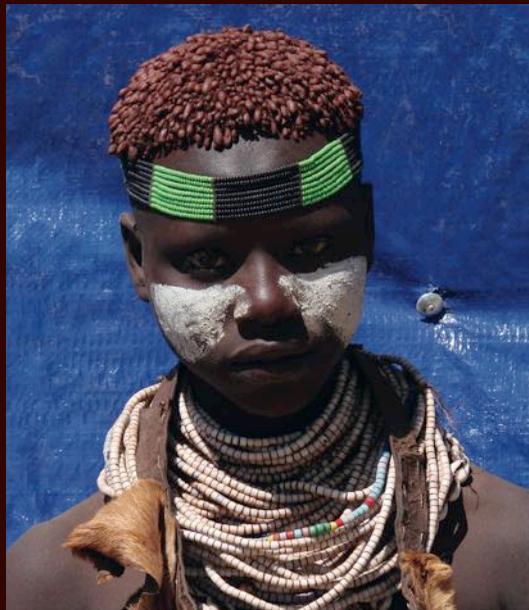
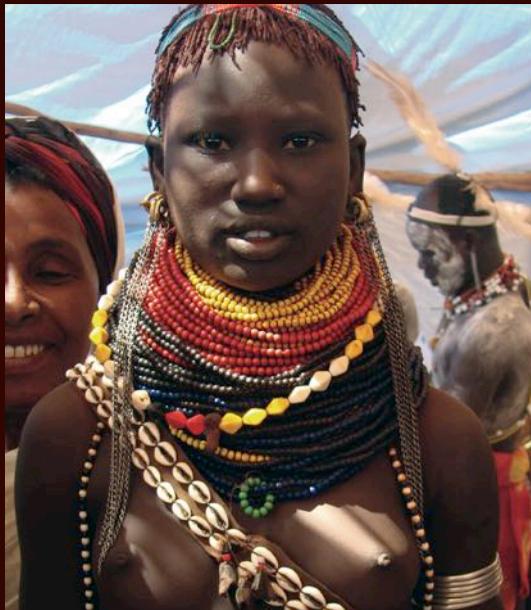
Shortly before I planned to leave Addis Ababa, I met Robbo and his



2008 Calendar.



Faces of Ethiopia.



Honda Africa Twin. He had started in London the previous year, travelling down the west coast of Africa and then up the east coast on the long way back to Australia. We were both going east through Djibouti, Yemen and Oman and decided that it would be wise to do this part together as we would need to hire a boat to take us across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen, something neither of us had any idea how to do.

Our exit from Ethiopia was delayed a few days when Robbo came down with malaria. Treatment was a three-day course of pills, and on the third day he felt well enough to make a run for Djibouti, an all-day ride parallel to the Somalia border. Every smouldering garbage pile we passed caused Robbo to mutter, "Get me the hell out of Africa and give me the Middle East!" Little did we know that it would not be long before he was yearning for Africa again.

The former French colony of Djibouti is now a predominately Muslim country known primarily for its French and American military bases and its deep sea port (run by Dubai) that acts as the entry point of goods for both Eritrea to the north and Ethiopia to the west. With the notable exception of salt, practically all consumer goods have to be imported and taxes kick the price of everything through the roof, forcing foreigners to grit their teeth and fork over \$8 if they want a bottle of Heineken beer.

Perhaps dragged down by being home to the lowest point on the African continent (nearby Lake Assal is 156 metres below sea level), Djibouti City displayed the most depressing daily life that I saw in Africa. The outskirts of the city were a collection of squatters' camps, massive dirt parking lots for waiting transport trucks, and smoking rubbish heaps.

Inside the city, men chewed qat, dragging productivity to a standstill whenever a fresh batch of leaves arrived. In the shade of trees and walls everywhere, men reclined and socialized, stopping their conversations only long enough to stuff a few more leaves into their cheeks.

Robbo's and my plan was to go directly to the Yemeni embassy and apply for our visas, then find a cheap hotel. If the best we could do was \$50 a night for an awful budget hotel, we decided we would prefer to drive back into the desert and camp in the wild. We easily found the city



ABOVE: Robbo cruises past relics of the 1977 Ogaden war between Ethiopia and Somalia.

BELOW: The restless border with Somalia is just behind the mountains, but we saw little traffic in the area and the roads were in very good condition.



centre, which was strangely quiet for 3 p.m. on a Thursday. At the Yemeni embassy we met Riad, the general-purpose helper guy. He was all smiles and could jump back and forth between five languages, depending on who he was talking to.

He told us that the embassy was now closed and would be closed the



ABOVE: Robbo and I stopping for lunch on Lake Assal, the lowest point in Africa.

BELOW: Buying qat.



next day too, so to come back on Saturday at 7 a.m. He added that there would also be an Indian captain there on Saturday and we could sort out a boat ride with him – Insha’Allah. (Insha’Allah is a staple word in Arabic that’s frequently used in Middle Eastern English as well. The literal translation is “If God wills it,” and it is used before, during, or after most future-tense sentences to remind the listener that, regardless of human planning or desire, God gets the final say.)

Robbo and I couldn’t believe our luck at finding a boat and a captain so easily. That task had intimidated both of us, as we had imagined it would involve days of sweating and wandering around a strange port while trying to negotiate passage for two people and two motorcycles in French or Arabic, both of which we were useless at.

With the visa formality out of the way, we moved onto the problem of finding accommodation. There was a rumour floating around the Yemeni embassy that sometimes camping was permitted at the British Consulate, so we decided to go for broke and ask there. We found the consul’s house, but he was taking a siesta. We peeked through the gate and saw a big pool and plenty of green grass. We were so close to paradise!

We waited at a small corner store for our audience with the consul, laughing about the stereotypical images in our heads of what a consul would be like. Would he be more like a crusty old World War I veteran, or a snotty young diplomat? We hoped for the vet.

An hour went by before the house guard signalled us to come over. We entered the compound and met Alain, a trim, middle-aged man wearing a freshly pressed white t-shirt with the wrap-around sarong that men commonly wear in Djibouti. He explained that he was a French lawyer and acted as the British Consul as well. The property that we were on contained his house, his law office, and a guesthouse on the far side of the pool that housed the British Commission on its second floor. We sheepishly asked if it would be possible for us to camp on the grounds.

He said, “I’m sure we can come to some agreement,” and took us around to the wide entrance gate so we could bring the motorcycles in and decide on the best grassy spot. He introduced his wife, Marie-Paule,

and after some quiet discussion between them they instead offered the guesthouse to us! Air conditioning, kitchen, bath, and television with satellite – all given freely to two stinky motorcyclists.

Our dirty laundry was collected by the maid and thrown into the washing machine and we laughed again at the ridiculousness of our situation. That evening the poolside table was set for dinner, and the maid brought out a simple meal of spaghetti, with tomato sauce, and real cheese as well as grated Parmesan.

Friday is the holy day in the Muslim world and we had a lazy day drying our laundry in the strong sun and doing a tour of the city's bank machines to find one that worked with our cards. Robbo sat on the back of my bike with his camera, taking pictures of all the things that looked interesting to him as we drove around. This earned us a stern warning from the police who chased us down, apparently unnerved by our actions. On Saturday, we arrived at the Yemeni embassy at 6:59 a.m., but despite Riad's optimism, the visas were not ready for us. Nor were they ready on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. The problem seemed to be that they had run out of the actual visa stickers to place into our passports.

By then, our luck with our guesthouse had run out. Alain and Marie-Paule were leaving town and they asked us to leave as well. We briefly entertained the thought of offering to house sit for them, but decided

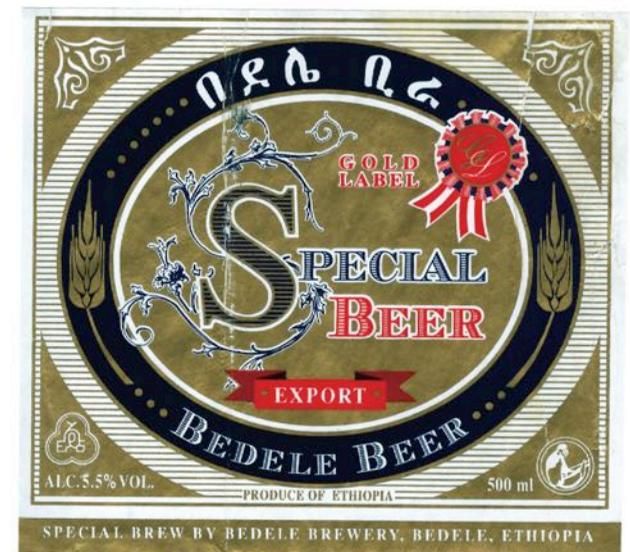
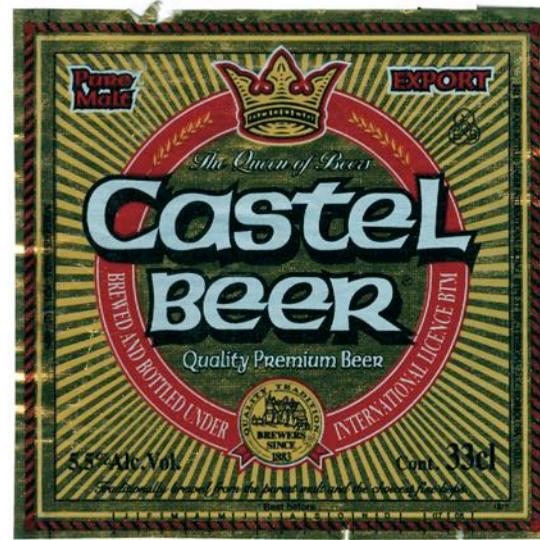
against it. We retreated to our usual afternoon hideaway to escape the afternoon heat: the frosty, air-conditioned comfort of the nearby Cold Spot DVD Club and Internet Café. For \$2.50 an hour we updated photos, emailed old friends, and did homework on the countries and routes coming up for the next few months. By Wednesday afternoon, the entire staff knew our story and also that we had to leave the guesthouse. Robbo used his Aussie charm on the owners and they agreed to let us put our tents behind their building. That worked out perfectly for us, as the building also housed a shower and small kitchen in addition to the internet place.

Sunday we showed up at the Yemeni embassy for the tenth time. Standing outside was another Honda Africa Twin motorcycle like Robbo's but with German plates. Its owner, Michael, was inside and the three of us joined forces to try to get the visas pushed through. Then we could start on finding a boat.

We waited an hour before Riad grabbed us all and took us outside.

"We are going to the Consul's place to get the stickers!" he said.

With Riad on the back of Robbo's bike, we all went downtown to the flat of the Yemeni Consul. He lived on the second floor of a well-used three-storey walkup brick building. With handshakes all around, he invited us in and sat us on the floor of the living room, where an old television played Gilligan's Island with Arabic subtitles.



With the sticker formality and payment done with, the mood lightened considerably and the Consul insisted that we stay for lunch.

We sat cross-legged around a large tablecloth laid on the floor filled with pots of lentil soups, fresh breads, eggplant dishes and fragrant, spicy sauces. We ate with the right hand (the left hand is reserved for bathroom hygienic needs) with little regard for the food that did not make it from the bowl to our mouths, and we created a proper mess. At the end of the meal, as we rose to leave, the kitchen girls grabbed the tablecloth by the four corners, removing our culinary clutter with one easy movement. Another quick round of handshakes, and we headed to the Cold Spot to finalize the boat details.

In recent visits to the port, both Michael and we had come across the name of AbdulKarim, the only agent who dealt with independent ships going to Yemen. The ship was leaving for Yemen on Sunday night and we booked our spots. Apart from the twice-daily fresh baguettes, there was precious little else to keep us lingering in Djibouti City. We spent our last night behind the internet café discussing the latest news from Yemen: “Two Belgian Tourists and Two Yemeni Guides killed by Al-Qaeda.”

The news on the internet told of a convoy of five Land Cruisers in a remote but well-known tourist valley. The gunmen hid behind a parked car on the side of the road and as the convoy approached, the gunmen

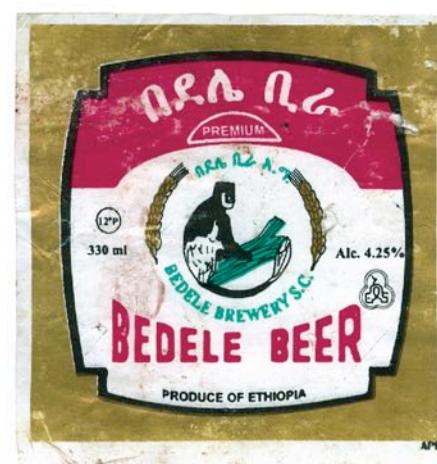
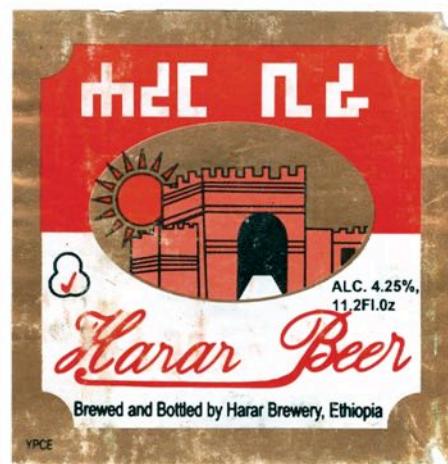
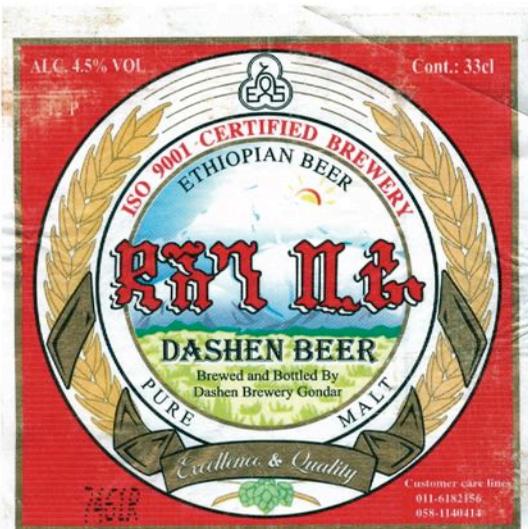
jumped out, spraying the first vehicle with automatic gunfire. The other four tourist vehicles fled the scene, as did the gunmen.

This story was unsettling, but not without precedent. In 2007, a suicide car bomber killed a group of eight Spanish tourists and two Yemenis; in 2008, an attack on the US Embassy killed 16, and most recently four South Korean tourists and their Yemeni guide were killed by a bomb beside the UNESCO World Heritage site of Shibam. On a larger scale, the USS *Cole* was attacked there in 2000 and the French supertanker *Limberg* was bombed two years later.

We tried applying western reason to help make the decision of whether or not to continue to Yemen. We each put a numerical value to the amount of risk we thought we would be facing by going there. Michael, the most nervous of us, estimated our odds at getting shot at 50 per cent.

“That’s ridiculous,” I argued. “That means half of all the tourists that go there are getting shot and that’s simply not the case.”

We did agree that now could be the safest time to go, as there would be a heightened sense of security. Later that night it came out that the killings had been done not by Al-Qaeda but by a local tribe in the area who were upset with the way that the Yemeni government was handling domestic issues with them. They wanted to show that they were serious about their position, hence the killings.



It is very important to stay hydrated in Ethiopia.



Understanding why the murders had occurred was somewhat helpful to us, but it did not bring a wave of relief.

I told Michael and Robbo that I was by no means trying to be a hero or do anything that would end up putting my safety in jeopardy, but I was 95 percent convinced that we would be able to get across Yemen quickly and into Oman with low risk. We also agreed that each man needed to make his own decision to go or not. An hour later, we all independently decided to continue our trips, but not to linger long within Yemen.

ABOVE: Loading Michael's bike onto the boat.

LEFT: Settling in for the trip through the Gulf of Aden to Yemen. The infamous toilet is visible hanging off the side of the boat.

On Sunday afternoon, AbdulKarim got us through the port's security gates and we checked in with the port police on our way to the boat. I was expecting our boat to be somewhat less...wooden, but she looked sturdy and worn enough to have survived the crossing many times.

Once the ramps were laid against the hull to load the bikes, the action started up. The lingering dockworkers knew that as long as they laid a hand on the bikes coming onto the boat, they could claim payment for helping to load our cargo. Fights broke out among them as we tried to get the bikes on without anybody ending up in the water.

Once the three bikes and our luggage were on board, the leader of the dockworkers came up to me demanding payment for his guys having loading the boat. I told him plainly that our price included getting the bikes onto the boat and that he should take his complaint to AbdulKarim. Then his men started to pipe up, getting involved in the argument. I walked 500 metres with the group of workers to the office where AbdulKarim was. His eyes popped when the mass of dockworkers



ABOVE: Our cook and his kitchen.

came into the room and began loudly voicing their complaints all at once. I yelled over the group that we had paid in full and any extra charges were the responsibility of AbdulKarim. The dockworkers started at me again, and I kept saying, "AbdulKarim..."

"AbdulKarim," as I backed out of the office, closing the door and leaving behind a beehive of squawking men.

The sun lingered long enough to give us a final African sunset, and by 7

p.m. we were underway: twenty-four people, three motorcycles, and two goats. Robbo and I had both spent about 17 months in Africa and were both anxious to get into the Middle East with its lure of Arabian legends, incense, frankincense, and ancient Muslim culture. The full moon was coming up and I asked the cook on board when we would be arriving in Yemen.

"Tomorrow," he replied, "Insha'Allah."

Mursi woman from the Omo Valley in Ethiopia with her distinctive lower lip clay disk.

