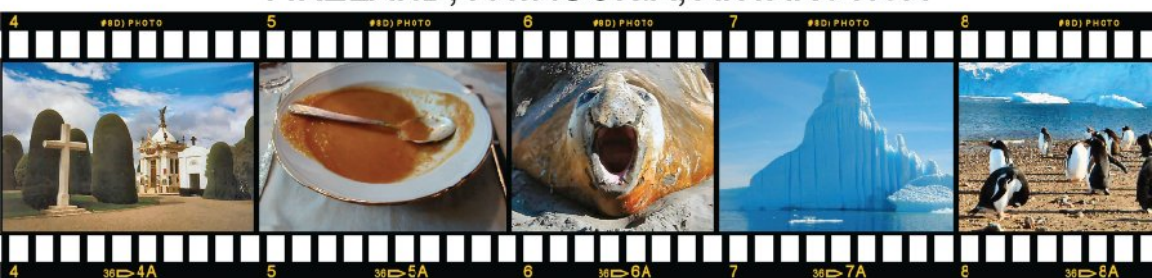


# B.C. TØRRISSEN

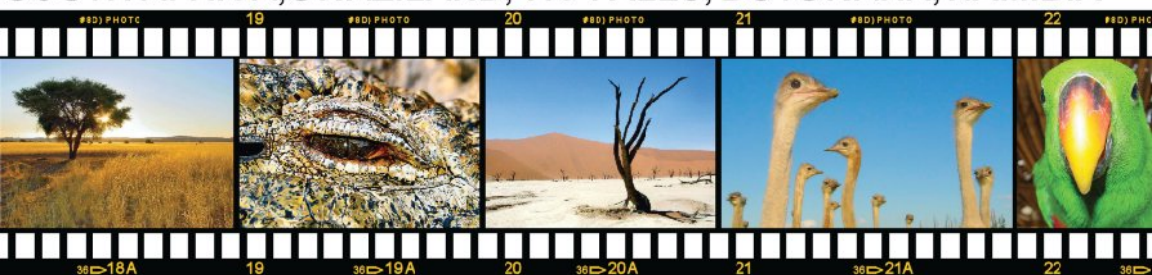


Stories only I can tell  
Journeys you can make as well

## FIRELAND, PATAGONIA, ANTARCTICA



## SOUTH AFRICA, SWAZILAND, VIC FALLS, BOTSWANA, NAMIBIA



## RUSSIAN FAR EAST, SIBERIA, URAL, VOLGA, MOSCOW





# One for the Road

Stories only I can tell.  
Journeys you can make as well.

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Bjørn Christian Tørrissen

*Translated from Norwegian by a Babel fish*



URSINE SELF-PUBLISHING NOMADS

**One for the Road** – Stories only I can tell. Journeys you can make as well.

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## Preface (sort of)

Hello there! Whether you've already bought the book or you're just considering it, I'd like to start off by explaining what sort of book this is. Or rather, I'd better explain what this book is *not*, as that's a whole lot easier to do.

- It's *not* a travel guide. Fair enough, I have included some well-meant advice for travellers, but that doesn't give you the right to complain to me if something horrible happens because you tried to do something I've written about. In this book there are no actual recommendations of any particular place or activity. All you will find is a sober and neutral description of my own experiences.
- Neither is it a factual, profound account from an expert. I'm not someone who knows a region extremely well after having spent years working and struggling my way through every alley and high street in it. I don't know the full historical background of these places. And I certainly don't know any local, influential celebrities, much less have I shaken hands and dined with them.
- This is not one of those books where the author says "Come! Let me take you on a wonderful journey through Somewheria!", and then proceeds to not take you on a journey at all, but instead just lists the most picturesque attractions there. What I offer is a tale about real journeys, not just imagined trips to places that probably no longer exist, if they ever did.

Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with traditional travel guides and thorough, historical works. They can be useful and inspiring, sometimes even entertaining. Particularly for those who prefer to "travel" from the comfort of a good armchair at home, being presented to one spectacular scene after the other without risking anything. Or for those who already know where they will go on their next trip, and what they will see there.

This book is something else. My intention is to describe what it actually feels like to travel with a backpack to destinations slightly off the beaten path. Sure, it's a book about travelling *I* have done, but it is also about something *you* can do. I have written this so that you, a normal, informed and fairly anonymous person (no offence!) can recognize it all when you take off on your own to seek out the alternative reality of Elsewheria. Any place, large or small, is different from any other. Yet all of them have something in common; nowhere will you find only harmony and climaxes, sunny weather and fascinating people waiting for you to come by so that they can provide you with some local, universal wisdom.

So here follows an honest travel journal, full of both pleasing and disappointing experiences. Although intended to be truthful, it is of course coloured by my background. So let me introduce myself. It's necessary for you to understand how I perceive the world, so that you can judge for yourself how my opinions are of relevance to you.

- You could say I'm the kind of guy who always finishes his vegetables and never forgets to brush his teeth. If I ever get in trouble, it's just because there was absolutely nothing I could have done differently to avoid it.
- I'm in good shape, and I'm quite likely to spend my day exploring on foot, whether it's in a city, a jungle or a desert. When I travel, I often find myself exhausted and dehydrated in the evenings. The next morning I'll be fine again.
- I'm fond of reading, but I'm not an intellectual. I don't even drink wine. Not because I dislike alcohol or anything, I just haven't started drinking yet.
- The journeys described here took place in 2001 (South America and Antarctica), 2002 (Southern Africa) and 2003 (Russia). At the time I was 29, 30 and 31 years old. During the previous 4-5 years I had travelled extensively through some thirty countries, making me a fairly seasoned traveller.

- I hold a Master's degree in computer science. After having struggled with a great diversity of computers and programming languages for a number of years, I have found that I prefer writing for people rather than for computers.
- One reason I have been able to travel so much is my employer. As long as I deliver as promised, I'm free to come and go as I like, even when that means I sometimes "disappear" for months. When I work, I work *a lot*.
- I'm good at saving my money, or maybe I'm just really bad at spending it. I have no commitments apart from my flexible job. I've chosen to live a modest life with just basic facilities in the tiniest of flats. This leaves enough money for me to do a lot of travelling.
- In my world a smile can solve just about any problem. For those few exceptions where it can't, I always carry an extra roll of toilet paper.

That's all you need to know before we set off. We'll save the rest for when we get on the road.

**Oslo, January 2008**

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## **Swimming to the Airport — 1997**

In which a cyclone gives this book and a number of roofs in Fiji a flying start. There's a lot of screaming, but in the end everything turns out just fine.

### **The Doorstep Mile — In my past**

In which the author is surprised by how he ends up travelling the world despite a childhood in which travel was no joy. Before we take off, we discuss whether travelling in itself really serves any purpose.

### **The Utterly Deep South — 2001**

In which the author backpacks aimlessly through Patagonia. Suddenly he discovers a way to get to Antarctica without running the risk of being put forward in the media as a polar explorer. Of course he leaps at the opportunity.





### **In and Out of Africa — 2002**

In which the author goes to Southern Africa because it is on his list of things to do before turning thirty. Elke the Brute, the howling skunkbutt cockroach and a fearless pilot apprentice also enliven the tale.

### **Summer in the Pity — 2003**

In which the author spends a month getting home from Vladivostok. Most of that month is spent isolated in the company of 147 million Russians. Ten thousand kilometres turn out to be an even longer distance than you'd think.

### **Dare, travellers! — In your future**

In which the author convinces the reader that the journeys in this book can be done by all who think they are able to do so and most of those who don't. A collection of useful, mostly legal tips and tricks encourages the reader to get going sooner rather than later.





## Swimming to the Airport

The evening outside was turning dark and stormy, like it often does in the beginning of a book. I was on the second floor of the Nadi Motel & Hostel. It was more of the latter, as none of its guests owned a car. Nadi is Fiji's third largest city, and the inn was in the middle of its main street. It's always a busy place, but this evening it was particularly hectic.

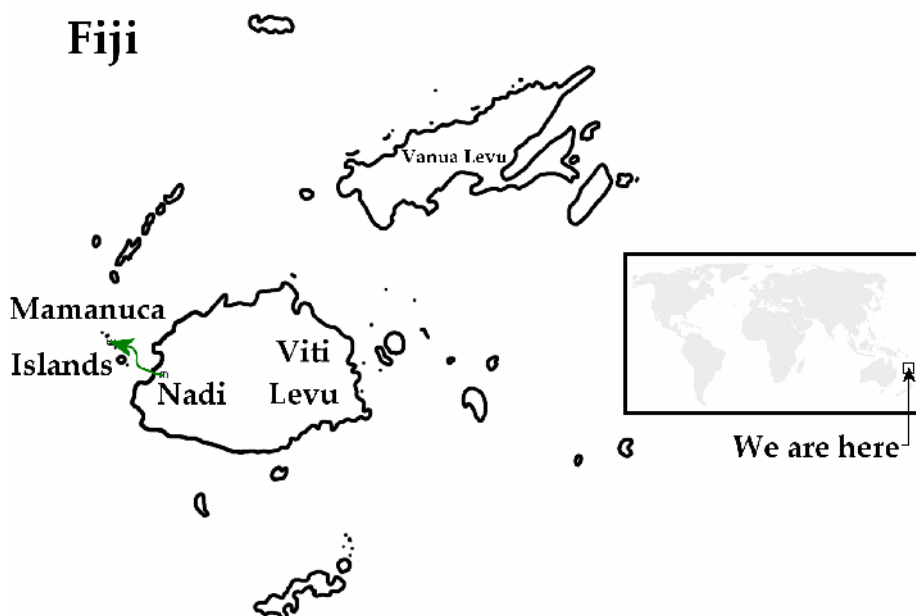
The electricity had just gone out completely, having wavered to and fro for a couple of hours, like a candle unwilling to die, but which in the end has to give up anyway. Heartrending screams broke through the howling wind in the streets. The rain drummed ever harder on a thousand tin roofs. A cleaning lady sat crying in a corner. She wasn't grieving for the washing line and a row of sheets that had just taken off and disappeared in the general direction of Mexico, like a band of ghosts going on a package holiday. No, she cried because she was scared, scared of the storm that without mercy ravaged the island. Frankly, I was a little bit scared too. This side to Fiji was different from my first impression from two weeks earlier.

After having spent some time almost at home in Norway, meaning in the chilly fjords in the south of New Zealand, I looked forward to warmer days in the Pacific paradise called Fiji. My arrival there was promising. As soon as I got off the plane, I was called over to a booth by Natalie, a young Fiji woman with hair like Michael Jackson's before he turned white. For a handful of Fiji dollars she sold me one night at a hotel on the main island, Viti Levu, and transportation by boat to a smaller island the next day. There, she promised, I would be accommodated by a tribe of genuine Fijians, locals who made a living from letting not too demanding tourists temporarily share their supposedly authentic Fiji lives. If I had arrived 150 years earlier, Natalie would probably instead have knocked me down with a club and introduced me to her family as dinner. We are lucky to be alive today instead of back then.

The link between its inviting name, The Coconut Inn, and the actual hotel wasn't obvious. The simple cabins they called hotel rooms were located in the middle of the city, with neither palms nor a beach or even an ocean nearby. I left my backpack in the room and went for a walk to learn more about the place. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that I was in a remote corner of India! Bollywood music thundered from semi-broken loudspeakers wherever I walked. Small and large gods were everywhere, most of them outfitted with either an elephant's trunk or at least four arms. A large Hindu temple dominated one end of the main street, and the market in the outskirts of the city centre was of an undoubtedly Asian origin. The range of goods on sale was being loudly announced by men and women whose hair had nothing to do with Michael Jackson. Instead they wore saris and the Hindu sign of blessing, a red spot stamped right in the middle of the forehead.

That a small, Melanesian archipelago in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean contains a virtual island of Indian culture, is of course a consequence of the once mighty British Empire. Before the Fijians in the late 1800s graciously were allowed to become part of the Commonwealth, they had to promise to pay for their administration with their own money. So the Fijians had to start making money. British investors quickly arrived to assist them. Their plan was to do what they had done elsewhere in the tropics; to generate income through sugar plantations.

It soon became evident to the British that the Fijian lifestyle was more laid-back and inefficient than any other they had encountered. Even today this characteristic holds true. The Fijian language has 138 ways to express the activity of slowly enjoying a snack while dozing in a hammock. Another interesting Fijian concept is the "jam karet". It roughly translates to "rubber time", in a most innocent interpretation. It simply means a flexible attitude towards when something that must be done actually *is* done. In other words, the mentality of the locals was less than ideal for hard, disciplined plantation work.



*Mana Island is part of the Mamanuca archipelago*

The natives were happy to do just enough to stay alive, and their lives demanded little from them. Thanks to the archipelago's location, a perfect distance away from the Equator, the Fijians enjoyed a comfortable climate throughout the year. There was enough space for everyone, and if you got hungry, all you had to do was to stretch out an arm and pick some fruit. If you were in the mood for seafood you could go down to the beach, throw a fishing net into the sea and pull in a surprise dinner. A sweaty struggle

in the fields just to produce more than they could use there and then didn't make much sense to them.

Since the newcomers from Europe didn't wish to disturb the peace secured by the lifestyle and the tribal village system of the islanders, they came up with a solution that didn't involve teaching the locals European work ethics. The British, of course, never considered doing actual physical labour themselves. Like today, five minutes under the tropical sun would burn them into a state of uselessness. Instead it was decided to introduce diligent contract workers from India, a solution the British already had used with success elsewhere.

Slavery had formally been abolished by the British half a century earlier. In practice it had just been replaced by contract work. With the contracts they used, it still *was* slavery. The only difference was that the workers were no longer kidnapped or bought. Instead they voluntarily signed up after having been subjected to a most creative advertising campaign. In short, Fiji was presented to young, healthy and strong Indians as a pleasant island located just a few swimming strokes off the coast of India. Becoming part of this paradise, and even be paid to do so, was easy. Amazingly, the boat ride to Fiji was free! Large numbers of Indians swallowed the bait. As the days at sea turned into weeks and months, they realized that they were probably in for a longer period away from home than they had planned on. When they came to Fiji, few managed to save up enough money to buy tickets to return home. Time passed, and suddenly one day their descendants were still there when I arrived in Fiji.

I believe it is fair to say that on average, the Indians are more industrious people than the Fijians. Because of this, most businesses in Fiji are on Indian hands today. To the great concern of the Melanesian Fijians, well over a third of the island nation's citizens are now of Indian descent. So the Indians have become both numerous and influential. This has led not only to my temporary confusion about where I was, but also to some sad attempts, including coup d'états, at keeping the country fully under the control of native Fijians.

I had not come to Fiji to experience India, so the next morning I was happy when a "rubber time" incident resulted in me being picked up from the hotel two hours *before* the appointed time. The guy who came for me had no idea what time he was supposed to have come, and he was happy to hang around for half an hour while I took a shower and packed my stuff. Then he took me to the beach, where a small boat was waiting.

The captain, if that's the correct term for someone who manages a vessel in which it would be a really bad idea if more than one person stood up at the same time, seemed to think he was conducting a submarine. The sea was quite busy moving up and down, and long before we reached the small archipelago called the Mamanuca Islands, northwest of Viti Levu, sea spray had soaked both me and my luggage completely. For two hours we passed a number of sand banks with tourist castles built on top of them. Finally we reached my destination, Mana. It had no castle, just a basic backpacker camp.

I paid an agreeable price for a mattress and two square metres of floor space in a dorm, three meals per day, free access to palm trees to rest under and a warm Pacific Ocean to snorkel in. Rasta-Fijians on the island could get me anything, especially if that "anything" happened to be something to smoke that didn't contain nicotine. Although that wasn't on my agenda, it was a sign that this was a place where life passed by ever so slowly, where much fun and many interesting people could be found, and where it quite simply was nice to just be.

Mana Island was easy to like. I read on the beach. I snorkelled the reefs. I slept under the palm trees. Being a seasoned traveller, I did the palm thing only after I had checked for the presence of ripe coconuts above me. With its weight of just about a kilogram, the coconut is the second largest seed on the planet. The palm tree way to conquer the world is by dropping its nuts straight down, hoping that they'll find their way to a river or the sea, so that the offspring can float away to an exciting life somewhere. Sometimes the palm trees stand quite a distance from the water. They still drop their nuts, but they will aim for slightly angled objects, such as a human head, so that their nuts can bounce off them and continue in the general direction of a river or the sea. The terrorist palm trees couldn't have cared less about the innocent tourists

they kill to secure the reproduction of palm tree genes. Hence, about 150 times per year a family somewhere must face the tragicomic message that their beloved relative has been murdered by a coconut.

These are unfortunate accidents, but nothing is so bad that it's not good for anything. "Death by coconut" is used by dive instructors worldwide to illustrate that statistically it is safer to be underwater surrounded by sharks, barracudas and whatnot, than to enjoy a lazy day in the shade of a palm tree on the beach. But if you're just a little bit careful, even the beach can be a safe place!

On Mana I did nothing and everything, day after day. My only schedule was the limitations for when I could snorkel, set by the tide and the daylight. As promised, the people living on the island were true Melanesians, and their chieftain doubly so. He *could* have built a luxurious holiday resort for rich tourists. Just the thought of all the hustle and bustle and hard work that would have involved was more than he could bear. So instead he had his men build a few simple cabins, which with their lack of any unnecessary comfort were rented cheaply to a constant flux of coming and going backpackers. All they were offered were lovely, cold showers, some slightly colder drinks, hot meals and lots of fun, with the optional abracadabric herbs. All this would have been there anyway, so this kind of tourist industry only slightly disturbed the everyday life on the island.

My trip around the world was sponsored by the Norwegian State Education Loan Fund. Strictly speaking, they didn't know that. Norwegian students are granted a loan and a scholarship from the government as long as they pass their annual exams. It's just enough money to survive on in Norway, but you can live comfortably if you take the money on a low-budget round-the-world trip through a selection of countries. So that's what I did, under the motto "Travelling is the most important class in the School of Life".

Only a couple of months remained before I had to show my prowess at exams back home. This meant I had to spend my days on the beach reading an abridged history of philosophy. To be honest, and one should be, it was actually a comic strip version. The exam went very well, thank



you for asking, although on a few questions I had to resort to answers like "The man with the curly beard said that all he knew was that he knew nothing". Anyway, I happily prepared for my exams while on the island, and if I got a little bit bored, the cure was a short expedition with snorkel and flippers to the reef just off the beach. There I could float above the underwater world and ponder upon my own philosophy. Life is good, I concluded.

After a long day of studying philosophy and tropical fish on the other side of the island, I was surprised to discover that I was almost alone in the camp. The people I had lunched with earlier in the day were nowhere to be seen. First I checked (you never know) that they weren't lying dismembered in a pile in the kitchen. I asked a group of fishermen sitting on the beach what had happened. All I could gather was that apparently many had left for the main island "because bad weather come", as the fishermen said. The sun shone from a brilliant blue sky, and the men were smoking something that made their eyes turn bleary, so I wasn't sure what to think.



*Mostly harmless*

A Japanese came to my rescue. He stood in the water a short distance from the beach, looking up something in a phrase book. Maybe he was trying to ask the fish if they knew the way to the nearest sushi bar. Japanese are always interesting anthropological studies, but in this case I was only interested in his electronics.

When a Japanese travels on his own, he usually compensates for the lack of compatriots around him by equipping himself with unbelievable personal effects. "Whale meat good! Japanese number one!" I said, trying to make him understand that I was a friendly foreigner. "Hai, hai!", he replied and smiled, letting me go ahead and search his pockets.

My hunt first resulted in just a small pocket PC, a set of chopsticks, four bags of green tea, a packet of gauze masks and a tube containing all-in-one soap, detergent, shampoo and tooth paste. In the end I found something useful. A short wave radio, disguised as a bright yellow Pacman. I turned it on and started searching the airwaves.

Finally I found an English voice talking about the weather. There had been all the reason for the fishermen to say "Bad weather come". Using more complicated words, the forecast repeated their message. A severe cyclone was rapidly approaching Fiji, and it was estimated to make landfall within the next 24 hours.

I tried to explain to the Japanese what was brewing, and that it probably would be a good idea to leave the island. He nodded and smiled and was evidently very much in agreement with me, whatever I was trying to tell him. It is difficult to mime a cyclone without appearing clinically mad. In the end I shook his hand and wished him good luck. I never saw him again.

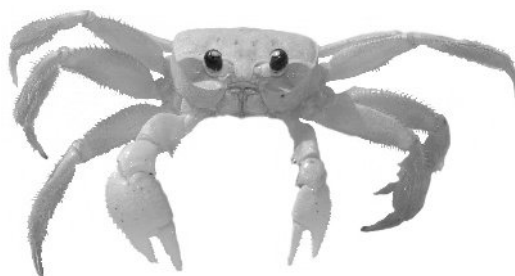
Night would soon fall. The remaining boat owners were unwilling to be out on the water in the dark. I had seen a cyclone in action a few months earlier, in Australia. The experience had taught me that whenever a cyclone is on the march, you want to be in the vicinity of as much civilization and as many hospitals and rescue teams as possible.

The sunset painted the sky in devilish colours, an omen of what was to come. Such wildly flaming shades of red had probably not been seen in Fiji since the first British ship came to the islands, and the sailors in their enthusiasm over having found land forgot to stay in the shade. It was obvious that the sky demanded our attention.

The weather situation put a strain on the mood in the camp. To cheer ourselves up a bit we arranged a crab race. The Fijians captured a number

of tiny crabs from the beach and sold them for anything from three to twenty-five Fiji dollars. It wasn't clear to me exactly how the crabs were priced. They all looked the same, but I will not *completely* rule out that the expensive ones had been specially trained.

When we all had bought a crab, a large circle was drawn on the floor and the crabs were put down in the middle of it. The crustaceans immediately started running towards the ocean and safety, which on a small island like Mana means in every direction. Every now and then they would stop, as if orienting themselves. Then they continued, with or without a change of direction. It wasn't long before a crab won the race by crossing the perimeter of the circle. The owner of the winning crab won the total cost of all the crabs, minus a considerable fee for the local crab catchers. A stupid rule against crushing other people's crabs resulted in my crab finishing last. Still, the crab race helped us forget about the cyclone for a while, so we all won a little bit.



*My very own race crab, "Oiled Lightning"*

The next morning I was up before sunrise to secure a seat on the first boat back to Viti Levu. A strong wind was blowing, but in the right direction, so the trip was quick and comfortable. It was like riding on a wave the whole way in.

A taxi took me to the city centre, where the Nadi Motel & Hostel was the first lodge I found. With two rowdy-looking bars at ground level it was the sort of place I usually avoid. When I pay for a single bed, I prefer the room to be good for sleeping in. Yet I checked in. It was cheap, and besides, wherever I chose to stay, chances were that soon it would be anything but a quiet place anyway.

In that sort of place you never know what is the "right" price. Still, when a little bit later and two blocks away I paid for a haircut almost half the asking price for a bed at the hostel, I concluded that I must have found a cheap bed. Or maybe it was an expensive haircut. After all, it took less than four minutes to complete.

Serious low-budget backpackers can sometimes go for weeks without seeing an actual mirror. The most important quality of a haircut is therefore not necessarily how you look afterwards. The goal is principally just to be able to see again. Given that, I have to say I got good value for my money from the hairdresser in Nadi.

The man was obviously used to have his customers leave looking like giant microphones, which seemed to be the most popular hairdo among native Fijians. Only rarely did he get to work on European hair, hair that actually obeys the law of gravitation by hanging relatively straight down from where it surfaces. I modestly made my way into his crowded shack. Some fifty people were waiting to have their hair cut, or trimmed, rather. In something I assume was pure curiosity, he waved me past the queue.

Fifty broad, white smiles assured me that nobody minded me skipping the line like that, so I accepted the offer and sat down in a chair in the middle of the room. There was no mirror, which felt slightly wrong as I was about to grant access to my head to a complete stranger equipped with an object often figuring as evidence in homicide cases worldwide. I decided to risk it. As it turned out, so did the hairdresser.

He spent a couple of minutes walking around me, examining the fresh meat in his chair as he lectured his audience on his plan. The speech was given in a language unknown to me, but it must have been highly entertaining. Everyone but I laughed heartily after each sentence he uttered.

Then he started working. Not with scissors, but with a razor. "Swish-swoosh-swish", was all I heard next to my left ear before it fell to the ground. Or, more accurately, just before I *thought* my ear would fall to the ground. Instead just lots and lots of hair fell down. For a split second I heard him think, "Oh! So *that's* how foreign hair behaves!?"

He took a couple of steps back to assess the damage, quickly deciding on a new strategy for the rest of the job. Completely unconcerned he proceeded to show the world that he knew exactly what he was doing. I wasn't convinced, but I had no time to find a way to express my feelings before suddenly the swishing and swooshing happened around my other ear as well. He was on a roll! With sound effects like in a karate movie my ex-hair filled the air around me.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun. Slightly stunned, I got up, put some money on the table and staggered out of there. Never had I lost so much weight so quickly! My hair was definitely not blocking my view any more.

Outside the hairdresser's shed the wind had grown so strong that a small sandstorm harried the streets. I cancelled my hunt for interesting sights and let the wind blow me back to the hostel instead. I was tired after the short night's sleep on Mana. When I lay down to read, I fell asleep almost instantly.

Four hours later I regained consciousness. The dormitory had received five new guests. They were Swedish and they all looked like they could really use a smorgasbord. Like me, they had just arrived on a boat from a smaller island, and they were also uncertain about what the immediate future would bring. The many nervous Fijian faces in the streets did not inspire much optimism.

The good news was that the Swedes had brought some biscuits, and they willingly shared them with me. The bad news was that the cyclone had hit land. After some warning flickers from the ceiling lamp, the power disappeared completely. The darkness made it impossible to see what went on in the streets, which made the soundscape all the more intense.

People were screaming, but the wind howled louder. Initially people had seemed more fascinated than scared by how tin roofs and street signs were ripped off the buildings and flew through the streets before they disappeared straight up into the air. Now the fascination had turned into pure fear.

When the electricity died, an employee at the lodge wanted to go home and check on his family. I gave him my flashlight to help him find his way, and with it he walked into the havoc outside. He was back before five minutes had passed, not even having gotten around the first corner. It was impossible to move around safely outside in the strong winds and the pounding rain.

Not really having any options, dinner for me and the Swedes turned out to be the rest of their biscuits. Despite being candlelit, the dinner wasn't romantic. The conversation limped. No big discussions got on their way, we just stuck to the standard talk that constantly takes place between travellers everywhere along the backpacker trails all over the world. On their first journey around the globe, most backpackers follow pretty much the same route, only slightly altered temporarily by terror attacks, natural disasters and political instability. Starting in Europe there's a big leap to Thailand, with or without a stop in India or Nepal on the way. South-East Asia is to most backpackers the cheapest, easiest and culturally most rewarding part of the trip, hence it is also where the lion's share of the trip's total duration is spent. When people grow tired of temples, full moon parties and insanely busy streets, they move on to Australia and New Zealand, where they spend almost all their money on action adventures. Short on money, they cross the Pacific with a break in Fiji, Tahiti or Hawaii, before they rush through North America, seeing little more than Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York City. That's the way it is, and it's okay. Those who are content with this are then done travelling. Those who crave more will travel again later.

The more people who follow exactly this route, the more lodges and activities for backpackers are established along it. This leads to even more people going there, and the cause-and-effect circle spins ever faster. Where it will end is anybody's guess, but it's getting increasingly more difficult to find the fabled "non-touristy spots", and avoid the "spoiled" ones. You know, the ones we all feel we should criticise, although we're often not quite sure why.

Another result of the "floodlit track", is that when you meet other backpackers, which of course you do constantly, and you ask each other what you've seen and what you've done, you get the same answers pretty

much every time. Few travellers think it strange that they constantly meet others who have visited not only the same countries as themselves, often they have also visited the exact same towns, gone to the same beaches and maybe even been bit by the same bugs in the same beds. Everyone share the same opinion about Germans ("They're always whining and complaining!") and Americans ("They think they own the world!", even though they actually just own about seventy percent of it). Most travellers seem to be nurses, students or between jobs, and they have all seen the biggest cockroach ever in their room somewhere.

After a while you get extremely fed up with having this conversation, even though you have it with someone new every time. It's just a ritual, something you have to endure. It's the backpackers' handshake. There's nothing wrong with the questions, it's just the answers that usually are too predictable.

That night we didn't talk for long before we discovered that we all just sat there and worried about what was happening in the darkness outside. There was nothing we could do, so we put out the candles and lay down to sleep. Hopefully sunrise would bring some optimism.

When dawn finally arrived and I looked out the second floor windows, it didn't inspire much optimism, but at least it triggered an incredulous laugh. Where the main street of Nadi should have been, there was instead a swift stream of water reaching a couple of metres up on the walls. The electricity was still out, and neither the toilets nor the taps carried water any more. Among the employees at the hotel the mood was sombre. They probably realized that to bring the situation back to normal again, much hard work was unavoidable. That's a scary thought for a true Melanesian, I suspect.

The only way to get hold of any potable water and edible food was by going out to look for it in the streets of the now rather Venice-like city. I went with Niklas, one of the Swedes. He may have been of sound mind, maybe not. His business card read "Salesman" with small print in a corner, while capital letters in the middle of the card shouted "Work sux! I'm going skydiving". Together we swam into the wet disaster area.

I had not experienced water that cold since leaving Norway. It had come just about straight from the upper levels of the sky. Yet it wasn't the temperature that worried me. I was all too busy reacting with slight panic to frequent, unseen collisions with soft and slimy otherwise indefinable objects below the surface of the flood water. Dead or alive they caressed my arms and legs with slow, downy moves. The water was brown and definitely not meant for drinking, but the current was so strong that moving around in the water inevitably led to swallowing some of the grey soup. It tasted the way it looked, of dirt and mud. Worrying about the bacterial soup that literally surrounded me would have to wait. Right then the most important thing was to find a way out of the chaos.

After having swum, walked and drunk our way through the city centre, we came to a place where just the day before a decorative bridge had stood. It had carried people across a small and friendly brook with water whispering its happiness about being on its way to the ocean. Now a distant relative of the brook, a mighty river, was paying a visit, putting both the brook and the bridge out of sight. Crowds had gathered on each side of the fifty metre wide violent stream. Crossing the rapids seemed impossible, but that didn't keep several men from trying. They made it five metres or so into the stream before they lost their balance and were swiftly carried away to a destiny that I would prefer never to know anything about.

A man in the crowd on our side of the flood appeared to be part of a rescue team. He wore his uniform in violation of all rules for buttoning, mending of holes and general hygiene. I never understood where he got his information from in the absence of a working telephone network. It may have been just wild rumours or from an efficient island grapevine, but he maintained that the airport on the island would soon reopen. Not that it made much difference. The airport was somewhere on the other side of the new river that had split the city in two.

I was in a place that lacked food, drinking water, electricity and any promising future to speak of. There was not much to do other than stay alive. Rumours had it that this was something several people had already failed in. I didn't know this for certain until I read about the casualties in the news a few days later, but there and then, in the middle of it all, I saw



no reason to doubt that people were dying around me. I decided to try to get to the airport sooner rather than later. This was *not* the place to be, and unlike most people there, *I* could leave the whole disaster area behind, if only I could get to the airport.

Back at the hostel I packed all my stuff in plastic bags. Using adhesive tape I tried to make the bags watertight. Then I put the plastic bags into my backpack, which I put inside yet another big plastic bag. I tried to make everything watertight, using generous amounts of tape. The elaborately taped backpack made an excellent raft. On it I paddled and swam together with my Swedish friends and their similar rafts through the streets back to the flooded bridge. The crowds had grown on both sides, and with them all yelling at each other in Melanesian over the wet gap it was rather noisy. “Hoy-oyoy!” somebody shouted. “Hae-ai-teai moo-yay te-eay-aya!” came the answer. Some of that may have been swearing, in which case I sincerely apologize to my Melanesian readers.

After much shouting finally someone came up with a solid rope long enough to span the river. One end was thrown across, and the rope was fastened to sturdy lamp posts on both sides. A couple of locals were only too eager to get over, and they made it painfully evident that even supported by the rope, it was difficult for a man to cross over on his own.



*Troubled water over bridge*

Three Scandinavians holding on to both the rope and each other worked much better. One of us carried a backpack over his head supported by the two others. Soon we had crossed with all of our luggage. We also helped two old men getting across, although I couldn't see how they were any better off on one side of the water than the other. Maybe they just enjoyed the thrill of being carried over by foreigners risking their lives. Anyway, they were happy, and we were almost as happy as we were tired. We had made it that far, and with some luck we would soon be at the airport.

A few kilometres of wading, walking and hitch-hiking in the back of a lorry brought us there. I was all muddy and wet, and my backpack was dripping. Water will always find a way to get where it wants to go. But I was lucky. My money, passport, camera and rolls of film were still dry.

The airport terminal was of course almost empty. On the runway, however, several large passenger planes were lined up for a short stop-over, drinking the fuel they needed to cross the rest of the Pacific Ocean. The outside world was evidently unaffected by the cyclone. Even though my ticket said I had to wait four days for my departure, the many planes and the few passengers gave me hope that I would be able to leave before that.

A good piece of advice when you want to achieve something at an international airport is to look neat and tidy, be as polite as possible and never answer "Yes, I have a bomb in my luggage, ha-ha-ha" when the stupid question is asked. If you instead look as if you've just been dragged out of the sewers, you smell of dirt and you're carrying a backpack that looks like a huge cow pat, now that is a less than ideal approach.

So before I began working the airport bureaucracy, I made my way to a large and comfortable bathroom for disabled people and had a shower in the sink there. I found the least wet clothes in my backpack and dried them under the hand drier. Until then I had never seen much use in those devices. All they're usually good for is to turn moist hands into warm, moist hands. In an emergency like this, however, I have to say that the hand drier stood out as an ingenious contraption.

It took a while, but in the end both my backpack and I looked almost presentable. Which is more than could be said about the bathroom. Guilt-ridden I left the rest of my Fiji dollars in a place where only the person responsible for cleaning the toilets would find them. I put on a smile and got ready to try my luck.

We are fortunate to live in an age where it can be ridiculously cheap to travel the world. The only drawback is that the absolutely cheapest tickets available are full of words like "Non-refundable", "Non-endorsable" and all the other words airlines use to convey the message that the owner of the ticket must not under any circumstances be offered any service whatsoever. If you try to change a ticket like that without offering heavy bribes to your travel agent, you're unlikely to succeed.

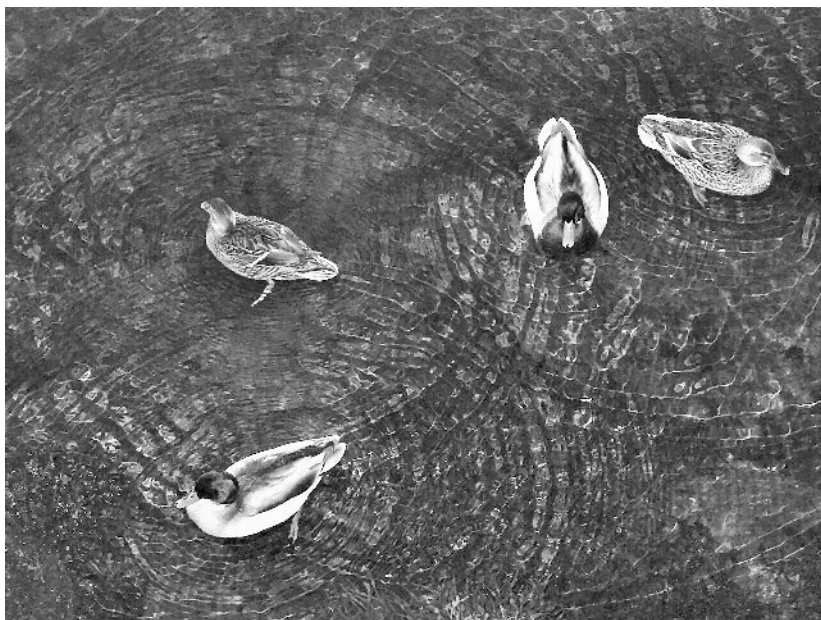
My ticket was very cheap. It was for Los Angeles with Qantas on a later date, and the only carrier going there from Fiji on that day was Air New Zealand. So the clerk in the ticket office just told me that it was impossible to change my ticket. The Swedes had more expensive tickets on a different airline, so they were allowed to change planes immediately.

After briefly considering hijacking a plane, I decided that sticking to my strategy of being polite was probably a better alternative. Luckily the airport had an office for complaints. I immediately authored a "To Whom It May Concern" letter regarding my misery, and delivered it there. Then I wrote another one. And another one. Before I could finish volume four of my collected complaints, someone must have changed his or her mind. A woman came running up to me and said that I had to come with her quickly if I wanted to go to Los Angeles.

During the next ninety seconds I checked in my luggage, explained that the abnormal weight of it was just flood water that would evaporate if they put it in a warm spot, paid the airport taxes, ran through the security check, had my passport stamped at emigration and received my boarding pass. It was probably a new record, because when I ran onto the plane the in-flight personnel applauded me. Behind my heels they slammed the door shut, and we were on our way. Inside the huge aircraft there were less than a hundred passengers. No wonder they had accepted my request in the end.

A full row of seats and four thick, woollen blankets were mine to use. Under them I slept exhausted, comfortably warm and smiling on my way out of the capricious South Pacific world of islands. The contrast was huge between first having been part of a suffering crowd in the aftermath of a natural disaster in a developing country, and then a few hours later to be waited on by two stewardesses on row 36 in a jumbo jet.

I was travelling, and I was happy. That's how it usually ends wherever I go, even though, or maybe *because*, the world is certainly full of unexpected events of many kinds.



## The Doorstep Mile

Becoming a traveller was never my destiny. The powers that be brought me into the world in a small and beautiful fishing village midway up the Norwegian coast. It was, and is, the sort of place where people are born, live and die, a place there's hardly any reason to leave.

I grew up in a family committed to only one kind of travel. Every summer we set out on a strenuous journey towards what might as well have been the North Pole. In an old Fiat we drove a thousand kilometres while my brothers and I fought in the back seat, forming new alliances and changing our strategies continuously. The purpose was to visit my grandparents. My grandfather was a baker and my grandmother a grandmother, so when we got there they filled our days with sweets, pastries and family fun.

The cookies gave us energy to resume the war in the car on our way back home. Strangely, when we were driving, the sun always shone, making the car's interior an excellent place to keep your coffee hot,

whereas while we walked around in shorts and t-shirts on the North Pole, which we did because by the calendar's definition it was summer, icy winds blew hail and sleet around our shivering bodies.

"Foreign countries" was to me typified by a three-day rest stop we always made by the sea in the Gulf of Bothnia in Northern Sweden to rescue the last bits of my parents' sanity. There they sold sausages that had a suspicious, red colour and an even more mystic taste. The only tinge of exoticism there was the fact that in Sweden they had an amazing total of *two* TV channels, twice as many as we had in Norway, despite the Swedes having only one set of eyes, just like us. I was also impressed by how the roads in Sweden just went on and on, straight ahead, and you could legally drive them at 110 kilometres per hour. Roads back home never had more than fifty metres between the curves, so trying to do 110 on them would soon bring an end to your driving, in jail or in soil.

Our Fiat could never do 110 anyway, except down a really long hill. In foreign countries there were no hills. Only endless, flat stretches through thick spruce forests and desolate, vast, grey moors. It could have been worse. It could have been someone else who was the big brother and lord of the back seat. Still, all in all I doubt that these expeditions could have triggered an urge to travel even in a young Columbus.

At home the only reliable proof of there being a world outside my own were the Coastal Steamers. Combined freight and cruise ships, twice a day they passed by our kitchen window faithfully all year long, northbound in the afternoon, southbound at midnight. We always waved at them. The passengers waved back, and probably said to each other that the natives seemed awfully friendly.

When they docked, we saw that the tourists were delightfully strange people wearing golden shoes, quilted anoraks and woollen caps, even in the middle of the summer. Foreigners were obviously crazy people.

The passengers came down the gangway, looked around and started pointing at perfectly normal things and laughed. They took photos and babbled nonsense. Even though we couldn't understand a word of what they said, we just knew that they were excited about being allowed into this most beautiful of villages in the finest country in the world. The local

newspaper regularly claimed the first, and the latter was often implied in the news on TV, so there was no reason to believe anything else.

True, the climate could have been better. The sun never shone except in the memories from last summer. Through large parts of the year not only did I wear mittens, I also clenched my fists inside them, hoping in vain to avoid the pain of frozen nails. The last thing I did before going out to play in the winter wasn't to say goodbye to my mother, but to the feeling in my toes.

Still, if anyone ever left my home town, it would usually be just to go somewhere to find a wife or to adopt a child from a less fortunate country. They didn't leave because they wanted to go somewhere else, I imagined, but to allow others to join our dream world.



*Home. It's nice, but there's more to the world*

I don't mean to say that there's anything wrong with living in rural Norway, or to spend vacations driving long distances through northern Scandinavia. On the contrary, it can be the nicest thing in the world to do. It can even be exotic, for instance to people from India or Mexico. But *maybe*, just maybe, can it also be a problem to live so comfortably somewhere, that it's hard to believe that anywhere else in some ways can be equally good, not to mention better. By living in such a place people lull themselves into an alternative reality, one that has little to do with life the way it is lived by a majority of the people on this planet.

The worst bit is that particularly for those of us who live in the sweet spots, it's all too easy to think that it's other people's faults and our own merits that made some places good and other places not so good. After having travelled a bit, I think one of the most important lessons I've learnt is this; nothing in the world is fair, and just because some of us have won the lottery, it doesn't mean we should be allowed to ignore all the problems we don't see at home.

A wish to understand the world wasn't what made me start travelling. I had more basic needs at first. It was nice to go somewhere warm, even just for a short while. It was even better if the warm place also made me feel sort of wealthy. It's always fascinating to pay with foreign money that have more zeroes on them than the bank notes at home. And to a Norwegian it's an incredible luxury to get servings so large that there is actually no shame in leaving something on your plate.

Later my travels gradually became a way to create some distance to my life at home, a space that let me think everyday problems through and put them up against *real* problems, problems on a scale that rarely is seen in my country. It's a wake-up call to see a boy using a skateboard not because he thinks it's fun, but because he lost his feet when he stepped on a land mine. You learn something from seeing a shop where loudspeakers are installed not because they want to play muzak that makes people shop more, but because they must be able to inform people that now the price of bread has risen again, for the third time that day. It is scary to visit a region where 35 percent is not how many who can't be bothered to vote, but the share of the population between 14 and 36 years of age who are infected by HIV. In surroundings like that you may discover that the large problems you thought you had, they're not really problems at all.

Many people ask me why I travel so much, and why I so often pick places that aren't exactly associated with amusement. I have wondered the same myself. Maybe my travelling can be compared to lying on the couch and watch others do the dishes. While I observe, I try to understand what I see. At first I may wonder why they do the dishes at all. If they had chosen a simpler meal and used less cutlery, they could have spent more time next to me, seeing the world go by and wondering about where it's heading. I realise that dirty dishes must be cleaned, but it



still leaves the mystery of why different people do it in different ways, when clearly the way I would do it must be the best one. Then again, preferring other techniques may have plausible explanations, and discovering them can be interesting and fascinating.

Observing others and trying to make sense of their actions is all well and good, but you have to be careful about criticizing what you see. It will typically just result in a lot of quarrelling and scolding, and you may end up having to do the dishes yourself. Instead you should wait until the work is finished. *Then* you can comment upon how strangely the dishes were done. If there's a good reason for why they were done that way, it doesn't necessarily damage your story. What you're about to read may at times seem like such stories. I want you to know that behind the words in this book there is no intended evil or unwillingness to understand from my side.

"What's the use in travelling around the world to see people do the dishes?", my mother would ask me. "We have more than enough of that to watch at home, and you would do well to visit your father and me more often instead!" But that's not true. Well, it *is* true that I probably should visit my parents more often, but in their house there is no washing-up to behold. They don't do their dishes. Instead they just put everything inside a machine and push a button. A little while later the dishes return, reborn, clean and innocent, and there was absolutely nothing to look at while the incredible transformation took place. At least not unless watching my parents doze off in a sofa counts.

It's the same with much around us today. Things just happen, often without us putting neither work nor soul into it. That's why going to a place where everything is done differently can be so refreshing and inspiring. Even though I agree that coming down from the trees was a splendid idea, I still find it rewarding to see with my own eyes what my culture has left behind, or what it for various reasons never has come to.

Whether it's the one or the other, it still means seeing a way of living with roots and customs that are foreign and strange to us. Therefore the actions we observe often have explanations we can only vaguely understand. In this book I will show you many examples of just that.

Maybe this is a travel journal, but I'm not sure. The age of the classical travel journal has passed. Marco Polo was free to amaze his contemporary Europeans with his tales from the Far East. He mentions a place that is "so far to the North that the Polar star shines from the south", and a forest he visits contains myriads of unicorns. Although many doubted him, no one could prove him wrong. Likewise, few questioned the slightly biased reports given by early jungle-bound Europeans who told of the pure, godless evil of cannibals and head-hunters hiding deep in the green wilderness. Even our own grandparents can brag about their inhuman odysseys just to get to school. Oh, the beauty of accounts that cannot be verified!

Today, however, a trip to remote regions is not so special any more, something only the reckless will put their lives at stake to experience. Pretty much anyone with four weeks to spend can with their own eyes find out what life is like at the Mount Everest Base Camp. On any given day in January there are almost as many American and European retirees on the beaches of Antarctica as there are penguins. Even Outer Space receives flabby, filthy rich tourists these days.

Hence, a travel journal today must do something more than astound, glorify and mystify. It has to inform and to entertain, and just as much take the reader on a journey through the author's mind as through the places he visits. If it leads to a more wide-spread understanding of the world being large and diverse, that's excellent. To achieve this understanding requires travelling at a slow pace, much like young, well-off Europeans used to do one or two centuries ago. They ventured upon familiarizing themselves with the foundations of their culture by going to Italy, Greece and Egypt. The difference between then and now is that *we* can do better. It is no longer enough to visit the places that shaped our civilisation, where the old Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, French, British and Germans performed their arts and fought their wars. To see what we *could* have become, if everything was different, *that* is our new challenge.

Another factor to consider when choosing to travel now rather than later, is that humans have become so good at exploiting the natural resources of the planet, that we're well on our way to depleting them. Substantial parts of the natural wonders and the abundance of species of

birds and animals that exist today may be gone tomorrow. They must be experienced now or never. Another fast disappearing resource is the cheap plane fuel. When it's gone, we're not yet sure how else we can travel far and cheap, unless we're willing to walk a lot. Maybe we live in a special time in history. Maybe it will be a long time before we again can move so quickly, so far, so cheap and see so many different sights.

Compared to even just one generation ago, a staggering number of people now leave their jobs or studies for a few months or a year to travel the world. However, many of them typically spend most of their time just going to a number of beaches, bars and pubs. They get a diver's licence, they parachute from planes and bungee-jump off bridges. They raft the mightiest rivers on the planet, and they meet a lot of American and European neighbours, people with the same mindset and running the same errand as themselves. Before they know it they have returned, thinking they have seen the world. And they have, except they have mainly seen just more of the world they already knew from home.

I have spent a *lot* of time travelling slowly. I hope that what I've learnt can be of use to others. This book is a tale about specific journeys, but also about how to travel in general. Many of the questions I asked myself before I started travelling, I have never found answers to in writing. By conducting many failed and successful travel experiments, I have found what I believe to be not *The Answer* to all questions, but at least I've found some good answers to some questions. I present them to you here. Yet the following is not a travel guide. It's a description of what it can be like for a curious and adventurous soul to travel independently through selected regions that I am confident that you too will enjoy and/or learn something from visiting. If the book makes you want to see the world with your own eyes, nothing would please me more. If you're satisfied with travelling the world from your own home through this text, a bit of chocolate and a few cups of tea, I'm fine with that as well.

We're going to Patagonia, Fireland, Antarctica, the Cape of Good Hope, the Victoria Falls, Okavango, Kalahari, Vladivostok, Siberia, Ural and the Volga. We bring a sturdy backpack and a positive attitude.

All aboard, *now!*





## The Utterly Deep South

– Wow! You've been to the South Pole?

I'm often asked this question when someone looks at a map of the world on which I have drawn the different routes I have travelled. But no, unfortunately I haven't been to the South Pole. To go there I would first have to give a travel agency all my money and then some, or I could have spent years on becoming an expert on polar mites or something like that, so that the US Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station would accept me as a visiting scientist. I'm not *that* patient.

What I *have* done, which surprisingly many are unable to distinguish from a polar expedition, is to visit the Antarctic Peninsula more or less on an impulse. Yes, you can do that. As an extension to the Andes mountain range, a thin finger of land stretches out from the massive, cold continent north towards South America. The two masses of land are only a centimetre or so apart. On a typical table globe, that is. In reality, that centimetre turns out to consist of an insane number of millimetres.

The prelude to my Antarctic experience was a typical backpacker tour of southern South America. After a long night on a bus through Patagonia I was dropped off in Punta Arenas, the southernmost town in mainland Chile. It's a beautiful, small port by the Strait of Magellan. The view is magnificent, not because of the sea, but because of what can be seen across the water; an island with one of the most alluring names in the world. Tierra del Fuego. Fireland.

While I waited for the town to wake up and offer me a place to stay, I sat down in a café and had breakfast. I was surrounded by a group of strange, bearded men wearing wellies and woollen sweaters, having heated arguments that I understood nothing of, even though it was the first decent English I had heard in South America. It was as if I had fallen through a hole in time and space and returned to my student life at university. Fortunately that was not the case, but the men *were* scientists, and they were excited. Later that day they were leaving on a ship bound for Antarctica, where they hoped to find out once and for all whether global warming was happening or not. I became just as excited, not for scientific reasons, but because this was the first time I had ever heard of a boat to Antarctica. And it was soon leaving from where I was! Since I had no other plans, I decided to go to Antarctica as well.

My newborn dream quickly experienced a serious setback. The mischievous expedition leader was happy to tell me that their ship had no empty berths. Besides, there wasn't enough time for me to grow the required tangly beard and fill it with old bread crumbs before the ship was leaving. I suffered my defeat with dignity, because I knew that when I make up my mind about something, I *will* find a way to get it done, sooner or later. This was that kind of something. But first I had to find a place to stay in Punta Arenas.

Accidentally I found a house with a familiar sign indicating the presence of Hostelling International lodging. I entered and requested a bed. A grandmother named Sonia demanded fifteen thousand pesos for the privilege, and gave me a key and a great number of do's and don't's to live by, presented in a rapidly flowing river of Spanish. "No penguins in the room after 10pm" was the only one I thought I caught.

The Chilean peso was new to me. I came straight from Argentina, where the largest note I had seen was a fifty. My breakfast had cost me thousands, and an ATM by the bus terminal had supplied me with a seemingly vast sum of money, so I figured that fifteen thousand probably was a fair price for a dorm bed.



*Our path through Patagonia, Fireland and the Antarctic Peninsula*

Strangely, the door that had a lock matching my key led into a room with only one bed in it. I had to reassess the hostel situation. Instead of a room full of snoring Germans and a floor covered by piles of clothes and leftovers, I had been given a sterile hotel room. This wasn't what I had expected. I went downstairs to the common area and my growing suspicion reached supersize. This was no hostel, this was a full service bed&breakfast in disguise!

The living room walls were lined with shelves, full of knick-knacks, bric-bracs, fancy ware and trinkets. South American painted masterpieces like "Llamas in the sunset" and "The Inca woman with the big boobies" on the walls watched me warily enter the room. The air carried evergreens performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Sonia stood in the doorway and smiled. I could sense that she was about to offer me tea and biscuits. It was like a scene from a really scary short story by Roald Dahl. I knew I had to leave at once, or at least as soon as I had taken a long, hot shower, with the door securely locked.

From the quiet B&B I went straight to the other end of the scale. In a worn-down shack I found a real hostel. For a fifth of the room price at Sonia's, an old, toothless man gave me half a promise that even though the place seemed chock-a-block right then, there would be a bed for me to sleep in by the evening. Now, don't get me wrong. I don't mind a bit of comfort. But right then I wanted to stay in a place where I was likely to meet other travellers, so I bought his promise. Leaving my backpack in the least crowded corner of a room, I went out to start my search for a way to get to Antarctica at a price I could pay.

The choice of tickets to Antarctica was unfortunately rather limited for those without wealthy sponsors or in possession of a doctorate and a long, unkempt beard. One option could have been to hitch a ride with the Chilean navy. Each year a few boats travel to the white continent to resupply the country's settlements there. These outposts are inhabited mainly by Chileans who sit around and look grumpy because they have been put there. Chile has a long-term plan, where the idea is that having people in Antarctica for long enough will eventually entitle them to claim the territory as part of Chile. Now, since Argentina is doing exactly the same thing literally next door, I'm not confident that the plan will work. In the meantime, their supply ships sometimes accept paying passengers on their two month tour of all the settlements. Provided you speak Spanish fluently, and that you show up at the right time, that is. When I showed up, the last boat that year had left several weeks ago.

The good news was that DAP, a Chilean airline, offered to fly me to Antarctica. The bad news was that they wanted 2,500 US dollars for the job, or 3,800 US dollars if I wanted to stay the night there with the



penguins and a few grumpy Chileans. Call me frugal, but the offer made me less optimistic about ever getting to Antarctica. If I were to get there, I clearly would have to do it from somewhere else. Ushuaia in Argentina was my best bet, and I decided to go there the next day.

To dampen the pain from the temporary setback, I set out to take a closer look at the town and maybe get something else to think about.

What first struck me about Punta Arenas was the large number of green spaces and small parks. Maybe it was particularly noticeable because I had arrived there by bus, passing through hundreds of kilometres of barren, Patagonian plains. There had been no trees along the road. They had all been cut down a long time ago and transformed into derelict fences, meant to keep cows and sheep from straying onto the road. In most cases it seemed the fences instead kept the domestic animals that had strayed onto the road from getting *off* it again, but I'm sure it was well-intended.

Anyway, in Punta Arenas the municipal gardeners prided themselves on making the trees look anything but natural. Especially in the town cemetery, where the trees formed long rows of enormous, rounded, chlorophyll-based obelisks. They had grown surprisingly tall in the harsh climate, probably thanks to the continuous supply of fresh nourishment that the purpose of a cemetery entails. The graves there were literally overshadowed by the trees, even though the largest mausoleums were anything but modest.

No one can walk those cemetery avenues and not find anything of interest. Like in any other place that is or has been important to the naval world trade, a number of Norwegian sailors had found their overgrown graves a long way from home there. Yet the most fascinating stories buried at the cemetery belonged to other graves.

The far end of the cemetery was dominated by the first human rulers of the region, the Yahgan people. It's just about the only place you can see them these days. No one knows exactly when they arrived, but they were definitely there in 1520, when the Portuguese Magellan arrived and discovered the southern tip of South America on his quest to complete the first circumnavigation of the globe.

Magellan may have given Fireland its name, but it was the Yahgan who were responsible for the fire. More than anything it was their clothes and their flames that distinguished the Yahgan. Their clothes were special in that they had none. Instead they wore seal blubber to stay warm. I strongly suspect that was a bad move, inspiring just a bare minimum of mating, which must have kept the population dangerously low. Their use of fire was also both a blessing and a danger. They carried open fire wherever they went. Apparently wearing blubber was only efficient to a certain degree. Even in their canoes they kept small fires burning, and when I say canoe, I really mean hollowed-out and eventually burnt-out tree trunks. The winds can be fierce there and you can ski in Fireland for several months of the year. Under those conditions, nudity and a dependence on portable fire doesn't exactly imply that the Yahgan were technologically advanced, about to leap forward and conquer the world. Nevertheless, they fared much better in the area than the first Europeans who arrived to Christianize the South American pagans.

The first wave of Europeans perished while attempting to establish a colony in the tough climate. But three hundred years after Magellan, when large groups of heavily armed shepherds, whalers with pneumonia and tuberculous gold diggers arrived, the natives were forced to succumb to the Europeans. One factor accelerating the process was that the Yahgan so loved the taste of the bleating, white, woollen and stupid llamas the newcomers brought, that the rightful owners of the sheep introduced hunting of natives as a recreational activity. However, the deathblow to the Yahgan didn't come until the Europeans started hunting seals. Valuable oil extracted from the blubber was sent away to illuminate city streets in Europe. Instead of ungodly animal fat, the natives were given heavy, damp clothes to wear. Sickness sent them in droves to the cemeteries soon thereafter, and that's where you'll find them today.

From the graves of the natives, as simple in their design as the lives the Yahgan lived, you can wander along literally heaps of final resting places of poor workers and sailors. They all came to Patagonia hoping to find more wealth than their native countries could offer them. Most of them ended up living the same lives they had lived in Europe, only in a much harsher climate.

Unless you became a Menendez or a Braun, that is. At the other end of the cemetery I found them, the wool aristocrats archived inside tombs the size of houses. These families controlled the vast grazing lands of Patagonia. There they kept sheep, and it was a lucrative business. Numerous military coups and a chaotic economy have by now almost eliminated the presence of the rich families, but their impressive houses, monuments and graves are still there.



*A section of the Punta Arenas cemetery*

More encouraging than the cemetery was a visit to the penguins in the Otway Sound. Just a short bus ride from town, a small colony of Magellan penguins had established themselves. Even though they weren't many, they still offered first-class entertainment.

It was mid-January, the time when the penguin chicks start moving around. Hence, a large part of the avian crowd consisted of birds who A) didn't know how to fly (and never will), and B) had not yet learnt how to walk (and never properly will). Walking penguins are always fun to watch, but watching them fall over and over again is even funnier. I easily spent two hours just observing them falling onto their beaks and backs while trying to conquer and descend small mounds. After each fall and subsequent tumble down to the bottom of the hill, the penguin in question quickly stood up and looked around, as if to make sure nobody had seen it fall. But I had.

Back in Punta Arenas it was getting dark, and it was time for me to rest. The old geezer at the hostel had of course forgotten all about me as soon as I had left. Now all the beds were taken. He generously offered me to sleep under half a Ping-Pong table in the lounge. It still cost five US dollars, which turned out to be about one dollar per hour I actually slept there.

Usually I don't mind sleeping on a hard floor. The problem with *this* hard floor was that it was located in the middle of a Jewish kibbutz. Twenty Israelis sat in a circle, most of them armed. Not with guns, but with something far worse: Guitars! With them they performed "Hevenu shalom a lechem", "Alleluja" and other lethal numbers. The congregation only took short breaks from the playing and singing to tell jokes, mostly the one about the annoyed Norwegian in the corner. Then they laughed loudly and lengthily, before they continued the concert. Good fun, for them.

I'm not saying that it necessarily is a bad thing to share a room with Israelis. In a time when their politicians work hard and successfully on making Israel unpopular and despised by most of the world, backpackers from the country have found some sort of a sanctuary in South America. Mainly because there are almost no Muslims around, but also because the low cost of travelling there appeals strongly to them.

Now, Israeli backpackers are not satisfied just because something is *cheap*. When they find something at a reasonably low price, they will go on to torment the seller of the item or service into an even lower price, through protracted and intense bargaining. Young Israelis usually pay for their travelling with money they receive when they complete two or three years of military service. Of course they try to make this money last for as long as possible, before they again have to return to the chaos at home.

After a few haggling sessions with aggressive ex-soldiers, the seller will not want to waste more of his time. He will instead put up a sign with fixed (low) prices for Israelis. So if you come to a hostel in South America and there's a price list written in Hebrew on the wall, and the majority of the guests make strange noises from the back of their throats when they speak, *and* they behave like a bunch of rowdy soldiers, then

you know that you've found the cheapest lodging in town. If you ask, you'll get the Israeli price for your bed. Just be prepared to pay the additional price of being subject to Israelis singing.

I was unable to fully appreciate the fact that I probably spent little money on accommodation. Instead, I pushed my ear plugs so far in that they met in the middle of my head. This allowed me eventually to mentally leave my surroundings behind, a room full of big noses and musical happiness around half a Ping-Pong table.

Five hours later I returned, celebrating the beautiful morning with a loud and elaborate repacking of my backpack and all the crackling plastic bags inside it. I also took the opportunity to render my personal interpretation of "Morning has broken" and a selection of old, Norwegian folk songs. Some of the songs may have come out in slightly altered, anti-Semitic versions, but fortunately I have completely forgotten about that. Anyway, my revenge was sweet, and I was going to Argentina on the morning bus.

Whichever way you approach Fireland, it is with a special feeling of being at the edge of the real world, in a twilight zone where nothing is certain and where anything can happen. Well, anything except the wind dying down and Argentina accepting that the Falkland Islands are British, that is. My first arrival, by bus and ferry from the north, is the one that sticks in my mind.

An hour or so after leaving Punta Arenas the road changed from an almost acceptable highway to being uncomfortably bumpy and winding. The woman in the ticket office had forced me to choose a seat number from her computer screen. Something had gone terribly wrong, and it *may* have been caused by a misunderstanding on my side. I didn't get a panorama view from the seat next to the driver. Instead, I had apparently picked the seat behind the toilet in the back of the bus, where it always smells so badly of disinfectants that soon after sitting down, you'll catch yourself dreaming about the smell of shit instead.

That far back in the bus, especially on a wet day with lots of mud and puddles on the road, it doesn't take long before all the windows are completely covered with dirt, so that all you see is what goes on *inside* the

bus. That's especially unfortunate when nothing at all happens inside the bus, while at the same time an enchanting landscape is rolling by outside. On that particular day, however, it turned out I had gotten an excellent seat after all.

Just as we entered a seriously bad and bendy stretch of the road, a middle-aged man, clearly dressed for doing business, swayed carefully towards the small bathroom. In addition to his business suit, he also wore the forced neutral look on his face that we all try to apply when we need to go to the bathroom in a bus, and we have to walk past a dozen sceptical co-passengers to get there. The man went inside and closed the door. I had just started thinking that maybe the smell of disinfectants actually was the lesser of two evils, when the road suddenly impressed us all with an unusually violent curve. For a second there, we were well on our way to a successful take-off. Only a second before the point of no return, the bus changed its mind and came crashing back down to Earth. That's when it happened.

Inside the toilet, the man did not perceive the decision of the bus to stop the ascent. So he kept flying, straight through the door and another four seat rows towards the front of the bus. There he made a brutal landing, with his pants below his knees and then a bit. It would be an understatement to say that he seemed surprised. His frame of mind was rapidly changing, though. He let loose a tirade of expletives, immediately doubling the size of my Spanish vocabulary. At the same time he fought to get his pants back on, all the while enjoying the undivided attention of his audience, which included all passengers from rows 11 through 16. A steady flow of new, athletic moves by the bus made his efforts rather fruitless, and the onlookers got a good look at his usually most private parts.

Finally he managed to cover up. Then he curled his back so much that he nearly turned into a ball. He rolled to the front, where he worked hard on disappearing into his seat. I have never felt more like applauding anyone. It had been the greatest show on Earth. Fortunately I managed to keep the cheering inside, as did the other people on the bus.

We had another six hours to go, so the full story about the lavatory gymnast in seat 4C spread to the whole bus before the ride was over. The infamous one sat crumpled up in his seat, staring with empty eyes into the floor in front of him. Life is truly full of surprises!

Choosing a highlight of the day would be hard. The flying man was outstanding, but the crossing of the Strait of Magellan, from the mainland to Fireland, was also quite the climax. When the road suddenly ended on a pebbly beach, I was convinced that the bus driver was lost. The only man-made object in sight was a picturesque lighthouse at the far end of the beach. We had reached Punta Delgada, meaning "The point where the strait is at its narrowest". And it was.

Even though I could see land on the other side of the water, it was as big a mystery to me how we would get there as it must have been to the first Europeans who came there in their small sailing boats, aeons ago. These waters had sunk *many* proud ships and ended the lives of more than a few foolhardy captains. Even though it usually is easier and safer to cross from the Atlantic to the Pacific through there than by rounding Cape Horn, it still isn't necessarily a trivial affair.

That day the conditions were typical. A strong current ran in the sea from west to east, accompanied by an equally forceful wind. A sudden gust almost sent me swimming when I left the bus to help the driver hunt down the ferry landing that I assumed had drifted off. I only managed to avoid becoming waterborne by grasping and holding on to a piece of rope fastened to a concrete block. While hanging there, I discovered the vessel that would take us across. It lay about midway between the two sides of the strait, and seemed to enjoy itself so much that it only moved slightly back and forth. After five minutes of intense studies I noticed that it was actually moving towards our beach, slowly, fighting a zigzag battle against the wind and the waves.

Crossing like that makes it hard to predict exactly where you will reach land. Hence they had not bothered with building a normal ferry landing, nor did they use a normal ferry. Instead they used Bahia Azul, more than anything reminding me of the landing crafts the Allies used in the Battle of Normandy in World War II. Barely a hundred metres from the shore,

the ship directed its bow towards land and pushed forward with full power. Soon the ship was stranded on the beach. A metal plate in the front was lowered and used as a landing stage for all the people and cars on the boat.

It was almost as if I could hear soldiers swearing, the thunder of anti-aircraft guns and machine gun bullets whispering around my ears. It was probably just the wind playing tricks on me.

Then it was our turn. We got on as fast as we could, and then we were on our slow, zigzagging way to Fireland. About the crossing there's not much to say, except that we could choose between languishing inside a smoke-filled room with a TV showing only vague, blurry pictures of a football match, or to stay out on the deck and watch penguins and dolphins play in the sea. Surprisingly few chose the latter.



*Bahia Azul docking, sort of*

The name of the landing point at the other side of the strait was even more fitting than the first one; Puerto Espora, "The Sporadic Harbour". The ferry had no schedule, it just offered continuous rides from one side to the other and back, from dawn till dusk as quickly as the weather and the tide allowed for.



Our crossing took a good forty minutes. Although the landing on the other side appeared slightly more controlled, it was still done by using the technique of running the boat onto the beach. Safely on land again the first thing that met me was something that *could* have been the result of a local farmer's charmingly lacking English skills, but unfortunately it wasn't. Along a massive fence covered with barbed wire, every few metres a sign exclaimed "Mine fields! DANGER". My feeling of being in a 1944 version of Normandy didn't exactly weaken.

The story behind the sinister placard was a narrowly avoided war between Chile and Argentina in 1978. At the time both countries had strong, nationalistic leaders, who constantly quarrelled about a number of unsettled border disputes. One of their disagreements concerned the three tiny islands Picton, Nueva and Lennox in the Beagle Channel, a water passageway in southern Fireland. An old agreement between the countries was not sufficiently precise when defining at what point the channel became open ocean. International naval law had gone from defining the national economic zone from reaching just three miles to a full two hundred nautical miles out from the coast. Now the ownership of important fishing grounds was at stake, and there were plenty of reasons to fight for it.

Various independent third parties had throughout the years tried to mediate in the matter. In 1977 Queen Elizabeth II of England had a go, concluding that the islands were most probably Chilean. Roused by great success in the football World Cup the next year, Argentina decided that there had been enough diplomacy, and began a military build-up in the area. They were clearly planning on invading the uninhabited islands. Chile showed no sign of intending to give the islands away just like that, and declared that an attack would be responded to forcefully.

Luckily, for once God stepped in and stopped the war, just as the battle cry was about to sound. The newly elected Pope John Paul II told the two parties to stop the silliness and instead come visit him in the Vatican so they all could talk it through. The good Catholics of both countries complied. Five years later a peaceful agreement between the countries was ready. In the meantime Argentina had become a democracy (*and lost the Falklands war*), so a referendum about the agreement was held in the

country. Not wanting to offend God's messenger to humanity, a large majority of the voters of course accepted the agreement. The three islands have been Chilean ever since, but with a reduced economic zone. That way the Argentinian fishermen of Fireland could continue doing what they do best, and everyone was happy.

Yet the scars from the military build-up are still there, in Fireland and in more than twenty other disputed areas along the world's longest border between two countries. There are several old mine fields, many of them not at all adequately fenced-off. Most of the landmine-infested areas are fortunately located well away from densely populated regions. Still, to someone who likes hiking in the mountains, it is important to know that there *are* landmines around, and the clearing efforts are performed by cows and sheep, very slowly.

Fireland is a massive island, almost half the size of Iceland. As we have learned, it is split between Chile and Argentina, and this they have managed to do in a most awkward way. If you're going by land from mainland Argentina to the Argentinian part of Fireland, you will have to go through Chile. And yes, there are also parts of Chilean Fireland that you have to go through Argentina to visit. That's what you get when you're too eager to use your brand new ruler to draw borders on a map.

This complexity has led to (mind you, this is my own rough estimate) about forty percent of the population on the island working either as border guards or as waitresses and cooks in the roadside cafeterias at the border posts, where people often have to wait for a long time. At least judging from my crossings of the border, when the border control was performed with more emphasis on thoroughness than on efficiency. It was late in the day before I reached Rio Grande, the largest Argentinian city on the island.

There I discovered that my ticket for Ushuaia, the "capital" of Fireland, wasn't for Ushuaia after all, but for Rio Grande. Which was lucky. Now I didn't have to wait three hours for the corresponding bus to Ushuaia after all. Instead I could pay a minibus driver ten dollars to take me to the end of the world, which Ushuaia for all practical purposes can be said to be.

I had been in South America for about two weeks, and fittingly my ride through the last bit of Fireland became my trial by fire, so to speak, when it came to having a conversation in Spanish. My satisfaction was enormous when it went well. We both jabbered away, the driver and I, and there was much laughter and smiling. I'm not quite sure what we talked about, but I think it had something to do with his children.

And thus it was that one midsummer night in January I arrived in Ushuaia. I can no longer recall exactly what my expectations for Ushuaia were, but if my confusion had been total when I arrived in Fiji and discovered that it was India, I was no less bewildered when Ushuaia turned out to be exactly like my home town in Northern Norway.

In the harbour lay trawlers and small fishing boats in front of a neat row of fishermen's shacks. Behind them a patchwork quilt of small and cosy-looking houses with a green forest background spread up a steep hill. Where the green ended, a layer of white snow took over and covered the ground all the way up to the mountain peaks that shone brightly against a deep blue sky. Outside the mouth of the Beagle Channel the mighty ocean rested temporarily. A more obvious sister city for the towns of Lofoten in Norway would be difficult to find. They could easily have sold the same postcards both places without anyone noticing. I really felt at home there.

But Ushuaia wasn't my goal, just a necessary stopover on my way further south. Finding the local hostel didn't take much wandering through the streets of the small town. Halfway up the hillside it had a great common area with a panorama view towards the harbour. It was the perfect place to sit and be on the look-out for a ship to Antarctica.

Like most hostels in remote corners of the world, this one was also full of familiar faces. Even though I had not travelled for long in South America, I still met several "old friends" in Ushuaia. They were people I had met or at least nodded and smiled to on buses or in hostels. When you meet again like that, common etiquette among backpackers is to update each other on all useful information you may have gathered since you last crossed paths.

The most interesting piece of information I received came from Daniel, a two metre tall Belgian. He told me the story of a ship that had left port just hours ago to go on a two week cruise to the Antarctic Peninsula. The most annoying part of the story was that up until the last minute they had offered berths at two thousand dollars a piece!

After a few minutes of banging my head against the wall, I realized that there had to be other similar offers around. I went out to look for them. In the marina I quickly found a southbound boat. Unfortunately it was a tiny sailing boat, containing a group of mad Dutch people. I'm sure that if I had read the terms of my travel insurance, I would have found their boat listed somewhere in the section "What the insurance does *not* cover".

I moved on to where the larger boats docked and asked around at the various shipping companies. A Russian sailor sent me to the offices of the travel agency Rumbo Sur, which is Spanish for "Direction South". It sounded promising. I was directed to Manuela. She had the lovely accent that can only emerge when someone speaking Spanish learns to speak English from Russian seamen. It was straight out of a low-budget spy movie.

Surprisingly, she offered me a round-trip ticket to Antarctica for just 50 dollars. If I wanted to, I could even sit in the front of the rowing boat, so that the others wouldn't see it if I skipped a few strokes. I would have to catch the food myself, as much seal and penguin as I wanted. Both were delicacies, she claimed. Especially after a couple of weeks at sea with nothing else to eat. She advised me to stay away from the whales, but when she heard that I was Norwegian she said I should decide for myself what to do.

At least that was what I half expected to hear. I was prepared for almost anything. Most trips to Antarctica are done by Russian ships and crews who have little to do at home as the winter storms rage in the northern hemisphere. Fortunately the conditions in the Antarctic cruise industry were decent. Manuela demanded only two things before she would begin to search for a ticket: 1) I had to sign a voluminous, official-looking document, in which on behalf of myself and possibly also all of

my current and future fellow countrymen I promised not to inflict any damage upon the fragile life and landscapes of Antarctica, and 2) I had to give her 1,600 dollars and a photocopy of my passport. Never before had I parted with so much money for a ticket, so I hesitated for a full two seconds. Then it was done. With a bit of luck I would have my ticket the very next day, she said.

I walked out from Rumbo Sur and wandered restlessly around Ushuaia, barely able to think about anything but Antarctica. My mind was distracted by a souvenir shop that apparently used a different advertising agency than the rest of the businesses in Ushuaia. While most of them called themselves something with "at the End of the World", this one simply said "Souvenirs from the Bottom of the World". It's not that stupid, of course. Many similar establishments in Norway will tell you that they are "Top of Europe" or something like that. But with some of the connotations of the word "bottom", I found it a bit funny anyway.

A couple of blocks further up the hillside I entered a neighbourhood where the line between the bottom of the world and the arse of the world was truly a thin one. A gardener caressed the greenery in the garden of a Swiss-style timber chalet. On the next lot there was no proper house, just a draughty shack. It was built from a pile of bricks, many of them broken, and it had a basic tin roof. Plastic bags acted as windows. Inside, behind the "door", a plastic curtain that was pulled to the side, I saw a woman with a screaming child on her back preparing dinner on a stove.

For being in a town in Northern Norway the contrast between rich and poor was rather noticeable.

Early the next morning I was on the doorstep of Rumbo Sur when they opened. B-movie Manuela was happy to tell me that I was going to Antarctica! She had received confirmation that a berth in a four-person cabin on the M/V Mariya Yermalova was mine. The ship had a strengthened hull, Manuela claimed, and would be able to handle any close encounters with icebergs without sinking. At least she had not sunk yet. Which was good, as Mariya was just the ship that had left for Antarctica the day before. So before I could begin my Antarctic adventure, I had to wait for two weeks for Mariya to return.

Beside myself with joy I bounced back to the hostel. Alix, a French girl I had met there, turned green and disappeared silently out the door when I showed her my ticket, so I had to find somebody else to share my happiness with. The previous evening I had asked Daniel, who was getting up early to go hiking in a nearby national park, to wake me up before he left. I had expected to be tired after the long day on the bus from Punta Arenas. Since he had now overslept by several hours, I felt it was okay for me to terminate his sleep.

I think I woke Daniel up simply by standing next to his bed and beam my happiness down at him. Since I don't speak Belgian I have to assume that the mumbling before he turned to the wall and fell asleep again were his most sincere congratulations. I took my ticket and my happy face back to the common area. Alix had returned. After two cigarettes outside she had decided to go to the land of penguins as well, and now she insisted on being taken to the ticket office. A little bit later, two Cheshire cat smiles floated through the streets of Ushuaia.

There's no doubt that Ushuaia is a fine town, and Fireland does offer great experiences for people fond of fly-fishing, hiking in the mountains and enjoying large, juicy steaks. Yet, after a splendid hike and a glacier walk on nearby El Glaciar Martial, I realized that it would be impossible for me to spend two weeks there and still be smiling. A long evening at the hostel in the company of an Argentinian who didn't hear voices talking in his head, but drumming, also contributed to making me come up with a plan B. Fortunately there is much amazing scenery to enjoy just north of Fireland, in Patagonia. So I left.

Due to its location at the end of the world, far away from most places, people usually travel to and from Ushuaia by plane. The lack of bus passengers had also led to a lack of scheduled buses, and the next available seat out of there was several days away. Next morning I got up early, trusting that surely someone would oversleep and miss the five o'clock bus. Yet when I came to the bus station all the seats were occupied, the driver said.

From what I could see, several of the passengers were invisible men. I went over and talked to one of them. Understanding my situation, he

immediately offered me his seat. He would be happy to stand, he said. I explained this to the driver, but apparently it was against the regulations. I had to wait for the next available seat.

I'm not one to turn down a challenge, so I walked up to the main road, straightened out a thumb and prepared myself for a long day of hitchhiking. After two minutes I got a ride with a taxi driver with probably not the best sense of business. He had just gone off duty and gave me a free ride all the way to the road police station in the outskirts of Ushuaia. All trucks with heavy loads had to stop by there to be weighed and to declare where they were taking what, before they were given a permit to drive on the flimsy road leading to the northern part of the island.

It was a strikingly beautiful morning, one of those you can only experience in Northern Norway. Hoping for some sympathy, I gave the road police my story while they enjoyed their breakfast coffee. The result was that they ordered the next truck driver who came by to take me as far as I desired. He complied without any complaints. The policemen had guns.

The ride provided me with a new opportunity to practice my Spanish, as the driver was very inquisitive about life in Norway. By leafing through my phrase book, I came up with a number of interesting facts about my country and about Norwegians. I concentrated on getting the sentences grammatically correct, and not so much on the actual meaning of what I said.

Four hours later the driver kicked me out in Rio Grande. Enough was enough, no matter what the police had told him. Before he drove off, he said that he would certainly never visit Norway. It may have been something I said. Should I ever want a new job, the Norwegian immigration authorities could probably find something for me to do.

My day had transformed into a very good one, as I arrived in Rio Grande half an hour *before* the bus I had been denied a seat on. The driver looked with disbelief at me as I stood smiling and waving at him when the bus arrived at the terminal. Half the group of invisible men got off in Rio Grande, and there was also a change of drivers. I was suddenly welcome to join the party for the rest of the ride to Punta Arenas. I guess

the first driver just had a bad day. I know his hair did. Anyway, I was well on my way back to Chile.

After a long day on the bus and a short five dollar night in Punta Arenas, I was back at the bus terminal. This time I managed to get the fabled seat number 1 on the morning service to Puerto Natales. Usually that's the best seat you can get, as it puts you just behind and above the driver. You get a panorama view of the landscape ahead and on both sides, from where you're likely to spot condors, foxes, the llama-lookalike guanaco and the South American ostrich, the ñandu. The bad news was that seat number 2 was annexed by an obese Chilean. The good news was that he had obtained most of his body fat while studying in the USA. Finally I could have Chile explained to me in a language I mastered.

Three cramped and sweaty hours and a long, tragic story about a Chilean's life later, the bus rolled into Puerto Natales, a seriously tiny town in the middle of the Magallanes region. It quietly lies next to a fjord that would have felt at home even if it had been bought by an eccentric zillionaire and moved piece by piece to the west coast of Norway.

Most travellers who go to Puerto Natales are really heading for the Torres del Paine National Park. It's a spectacular piece of wilderness a short distance inland. Due to its distinct differences from the rest of the Andes, it has been dubbed the Alaska of South America. Much smaller than the real thing, of course, but it still contains all the important bits, save for the grizzly bears. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

What they *do* have is a number of mighty mountains, frothing rivers, enormous glaciers and lots of wild, yet mostly harmless animals. Then there is of course the main attraction, the Towers of Paine, behemoths in hard granite, two thousand metres tall peaks pointing straight up from a land which otherwise has been lying completely flat all the way from the Argentinian coast, hundreds of kilometres to the east. It seemed like the perfect place to while away a few days while waiting for the boat to Antarctica.

I travel light. It's a virtue I learnt out of necessity when I ... when *someone* accidentally set a hotel in an undisclosed town somewhere in South-East Asia on fire and suddenly had to leave. But that's another



story, which may still be under investigation, so enough about that. In this context, the important thing is that I was in a haven for hikers, but I didn't have the equipment necessary to enter the wilderness. Fortunately, tiny Puerto Natales had several places where I could rent hiking gear.

I rented a tent and found a place where I could experiment with assembling it without being disturbed or observed. Halfway through my third unsuccessful attempt suddenly a bell rang. Not inside my head, unfortunately, but from a large building nearby. And voilà, immediately I was surrounded by a hundred curious school children, eager to make fun of me and my skills as an outdoorsman. Even though I always had thought that I perform best under pressure, it didn't feel that way now.

Luckily I didn't stab any of the tactless onlookers in their eyes with the tent poles, and after some time I had figured out both how to build a tent from the many parts I had rented and how to take it down again. Content with myself, I left the schoolyard and headed for the grocer's to fill my backpack with chocolate, potato chips, soft drinks and other stuff essential for a mountain hike.

Prepared for anything that can be accomplished with a tent, some snacks and lots of energy, I was taken by a minibus and a boat deep inside the national park. Without lifting a finger (just my backpack a short distance), I got all the way to a camping ground by Lake Pehoe. It was so far away from civilization that I couldn't even buy a cold Coke there, almost. The Point of No Coke is hard to find these days.

My plan was to do the "W", a two or three day hike that looks like a W on the map, going through the most scenic parts of the park. With more time and chocolate on my hands, I would have done the whole circuit of the park to see the surreal mountains from all angles. The Towers fit in with the rest of the landscape just as well as the Eiffel Tower would have done among African mud huts. It was an impressive view.

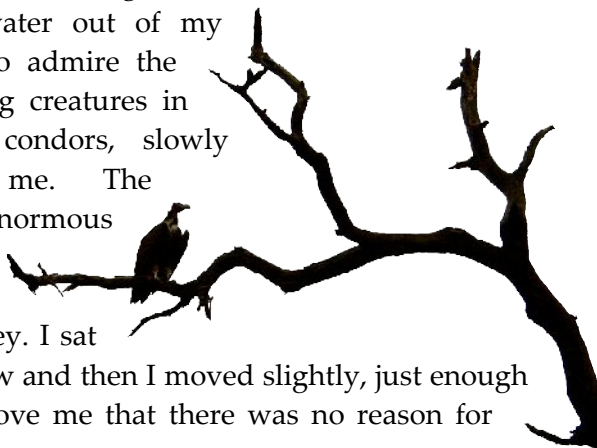
The peaks soon disappeared in heavy, low clouds, and rain started to pour down over the small town of tents. Most people stayed under canvas, but I had been doing too much sitting on my butt in buses lately, so I wanted to walk. After putting up my tent in record time (just under

an hour, meal break deducted), I found a path leading out of the camp and up a valley towards Lake Grey.

Seeing the dwarfish glaciers in the relatively mild, coastal climate of Fireland had not prepared me for the massive ice I met at the northern end of Lake Grey. I was stunned. As part of the third largest ice massif on the planet, after Antarctica and Greenland, even the lone arm stretching down the valley I walked through was the size of largest glacier in Norway. From there the ice stretched 300 kilometres to the north. The wall of ice crashing into the lake was a kilometre wide and rose up to thirty metres in height. Having something like that meet you around a bend in the path is enough to make you go silent, I tell you.

The glacier also froze when it saw me, but in the water I could see evidence of ongoing movements. Small icebergs floated in the lake in sizes and colours that only hinted at the age and the might of their mother.

It was only me and It there. The rest of the campers probably still sat in their tents and cursed the weather. I got some chocolate and drinking water out of my backpack and sat down to admire the view. The only other living creatures in sight were some large condors, slowly circling high above me. The atmosphere with the enormous glacier and the sound of silence was well worth the four hour walk up the valley. I sat quietly and just sensed. Now and then I moved slightly, just enough to tell the carrion birds above me that there was no reason for them to come any closer yet.



Ice in such abundance is an eternal play full of surprises for the patient spectator. Millennia of preparations for my visit had given the ice green and blue colours you normally have to consume questionable chemicals to experience. It made me even more enthusiastic about going to Antarctica.

On my way back to the camp the sun burnt a hole in the clouds. The grey day turned into a long and beautiful late summer evening. The sunlight stirred some mixed feelings in me. It's not just the clouds that can be perforated over Patagonia. Through much of the year there's a hole in the ozone layer there as well. Fortunately the area is blessed with many clouds and much cold weather, so any human skin around is usually found inside clothes, protected from any dangerous radiation from the sun. A few years back newspapers all over the world reported that sheep in southern Chile and Argentina went blind because of the radiation that should have been blocked by the ozone. Later it has been established that this was not the case after all. A local viral disease turned out to cause the blindness. It still is important, even where few people live, to give some thought to what we're doing to nature. Even when the sun shines and the world seems to be just wonderful.

In the camp everyone had come out of their tents. Socks and sleeping bags were hung up to dry in every bush and tree that could carry the weight. Exhausted by my expedition to the glacier I lay down in the opening of my tent by the lake and read a book in the evening sun. I fell asleep to the sound of a campfire encircled by an international crowd. They tried to find songs that everyone could join in on, failing miserably over and over again.

The weather was still marvellous in the morning. I felt good about the coming day, even though most of my clothes were cold and wet. My hiking boots had spent the night outside and were covered by a thin coating of frost. I changed into what was left of dry clothes at the bottom of my backpack. It wasn't much. The camp was luckily still void of life when I left it and walked along the lake towards the mountains.

Almost as strange as the granite spires that *are* the Torres del Paine, is the fact that the lake below them is called Lake Nordenskjöld. Nearby is Lake Skottsberg, and one of the glaciers there is the Glaciar Upsala. Despite their location these are all Nordic names, derived from the first scientific explorations of the area. Those expeditions, slightly like my own, were precursors for an invasion of the Antarctic continent in the name of science. These names cause great frustration for the Chileans, as they still have no idea how to pronounce them.

The day was young and I kept running into animals that had not yet had their morning coffee. Guanacos, foxes and hares were everywhere, seemingly indifferent to my presence. That's either a good or a bad sign. It's good if the animal isn't afraid of humans because it has not had any bad experiences with people yet. It's bad if it means that the animals only think of people as suppliers of edible rubbish. I don't know what they were thinking about me, but they had probably seldom seen a human move as fast as I did. The brisk walk was necessary in order to maintain my body temperature. It worked well until I discovered that even though it wasn't raining, my clothes were still soaking wet. Strange, since I generally don't sweat. Or maybe that's not entirely true. Either way, I stopped to let my clothes dry in the sun. As I waited I felt happy to be in such a beautiful place.

My joy abruptly came to an end when I removed my socks and discovered that half a toe was missing. It was simply gone, gnawed off by sock and shoe, without the least trace of the banquet they must have had. I covered the remnants with a plaster and walked on carefully, all the while telling myself and the vultures overhead that this was not a problem or at most just a very small one.

Campamiento Italiano was the next campsite, two hours anxious walking away. A small and dense forest there offered shelter from the wind. I left my backpack and made a detour up a steep valley, Valle del Frances. Through it the Frances river ran violently with the unmistakable colour of glacier water. An hour up the valley its source came into view. Rays from the sun found their way between the rocky towers and painted the glacier a sparkling, bluish white.

Every now and then a thunder-like sound was heard. At first I looked around for flying cows, as I had passed a number of signs warning of a nearby mine field. But there were no airborne, cloven-footed animals to be seen. A bit further on the source of the noise was revealed. The loud crashes were the delayed sounds of large chunks of ice falling off the glacier and down the steep mountainside deep inside the valley. I decided to not proceed any further in that direction and sat down to enjoy the show before I returned.

Until 1959 today's national park had been used as pastureland for sheep. There they enjoyed the grass, the greenery and possibly the view as well. Plants and trees in the park were still recovering after the ruminant ravage, but the land already seemed like real, peaceful wilderness. As long as you didn't step on a land mine, that is. If you did, the routine would of course be to jump twenty metres straight up and scatter yourself over an extended area. It serves as a definitive end to any hike, and is not recommended. As long as you stay on the trail, like you should in a national park anyway, everything will be fine.

During the next five hours I walked east along the lake. The clouds rested on top of a heavy drizzle. When I finally arrived at the campsite at Estancia de las Torres in the evening, I was extremely happy to find that they offered something similar to a hot shower there. Both my toe and the mountain peaks had now disappeared completely. I put up my tent (in less than half an hour) with the opening in the direction where the map insisted there were mountains. Then I lay down to grow a new toe.

The afternoon passed peacefully, until two Chilean families arrived with the mother of all tents. My view stayed undisturbed, so I didn't mind. Neither did I mind that they built a full asado, a giant barbecue and invited me over to taste a roasted lamb, a quarter-cow and a few other domestic animals. For a couple of hours I completely forgot the clouds above and my lacking toe below.

On my last morning in the park I was awoken by the view outside. Finally I was favoured with a magnificent postcard panorama of the majestic towers. Lacking a complete set of toes I was forced to stay put by my tent and just admire the mountains from there. They were so beautiful and impressive that I almost was relieved I couldn't go any closer to them.

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My hardships in the wet and wild mountains, and quite possibly a touch of gangrene in my stray toe, resulted in me smelling not exactly of roses when I returned to Puerto Natales. Some would probably even say that I stunk. I shared a dormitory with three Chilean ex-marines. They were probably trained to handle worse things than a mouldy European,

but I still chose to move on after only one night in their company. My next destination was El Calafate, just across the Argentinian border. It took a while to find a ticket seller with no sense of smell, but after a couple of failed attempts I succeeded.

The hostel in El Calafate was of such high standards that as an average backpacker I almost felt out of place there. They really had all the facilities a wanderer could wish for; hot water, a fireplace, a snack-bar, laundry machines and a drying room. I checked in and immediately carried out a thorough cleaning of both my body and my clothes. Afterwards I took the wet clothes outside. The brisk wind and the intense sun in the desert-like town quickly dried both me and my clothes in less than an hour.

When I finally was cleansed of all unpleasant odours, it suddenly struck me that I was the only person in the hostel in that condition. The others in the common area were mainly men wearing beards with twigs in them, dressed in well-used and not exactly washed out hiking clothes. They all wore the tormented expression of caged animals, a deep desire to be not *there*, but somewhere out in the nature, alone and as free as the wind blows. In this place, toe or no toe, everything was about hiking. And deodorant was just a long, meaningless word.

I was slightly worried that I would be bored in El Calafate, since the main activity there was walking and my toe wasn't quite, well, there. It turned out there was no reason to worry. I soon got sick and could put all my energy into getting well again. Careless consumption of unwashed fruit was one likely source of my discomfort, but there may well have been another explanation. To regain my membership in the smelly club, I spent my first afternoon in El Calafate conquering a peak just outside town. Even with only nine toes available it was an easy climb, or at least the ascent was straightforward. From the top there was a fantastic view towards the town and a deep blue lake surrounded by a brownish semi-desert. A powerful wind over the edge of the mountain only slightly diminished my pleasure. The Western movie mountains invited my imagination to dream up an adventure starring just Pocahontas and me. I was a bit disappointed when what I found at the top of the mountain was not the very last Mohican, but a communications tower.

The descent was more troublesome. The ground was part porous, red rock, part sand and loose pebbles. To avoid falling down the steep slope I often had to grab whatever vegetation that miraculously had managed to get a good root-hold there. All well and good, you may think, but this way of securing myself came with a major drawback. The vegetation consisted of cacti and other plants with sharp edges, spikes and prickles. Soon my hands were full of scratches and wounds, and it's likely that some kind of lugubrious poison found its way to my inner organs through them.

I returned to the hostel bleeding. No matter the reason, two hours later I experienced a heavy headache, and my stomach reported that in the immediate future it would very much like to empty itself simultaneously through as many exits as possible. The message was clear, but it was hard to follow up in an appropriate way. While I understood that the stomach situation was serious, the rest of my body insisted that it would not do anything right then but to lie down and rest. Somehow I managed, but I was happy to discover that I shared a room with two medical students from New York.

Well, at least that's what they said they were to their cute, new, female friends from Chile. It was almost impossible to drag the guys away from them, but I really wanted to know how long I had left to live, so I persisted until they came with me. I think I annoyed them. After all, they had only nine days to experience all of South America before they had to go back to the USA. Their schedule was tight and had priority high above the Hippocratic Oath. They both took caffeine pills to avoid having to sleep too much. Judging from their appearances I have to say that if you want really big eyes, that must be a good medicine to take.

After an extremely quick examination they told me I wasn't suffering from anything serious. It was probably just food poisoning or Dengue fever. Or maybe a brain tumour. Or something else. Their diagnostics didn't convince me of their medical prowess, so I let them return to their amigas. But first they had to promise to check on me in the morning. Then my eyes closed, as my body commanded me to fall asleep.

I don't know whether they checked on me or not. For all I know the medical students were merely products of my imagination. When I finally regained consciousness they were gone. Instead a German couple had taken their beds. They seemed a bit surprised that I was still in bed when they checked in late in the afternoon. For a while I sensed indulgence from them, but as the hours passed the tolerance and the pity changed into other feelings. At first they probably thought that I was just a seasoned drinker, recuperating after a very good evening. Later I became more of a pain in the butt and annoying. I didn't even confess to anything being out of the ordinary. Instead, when they asked if I needed any help, I just muttered that no, no, I wasn't sick, everything was fine.

I don't know what's with me. I *am* a man, and when a man is sick, he should want the whole world to feel sorry for him. Not so with me. Not at all. I have probably told others so many times that I never get sick, that eventually I have come to believe it myself.

Whatever the reason, for the rest of the day I was sick and in bed, barely able to move. The longer I stayed in bed, the less sympathy I received from my roommates. Every now and then they popped in to see if maybe I was getting up any time soon. They were recently engaged and I could sense that they wouldn't mind having some privacy.

Late in the afternoon I had gathered enough strength to crawl out to the common area and sit by the fireplace. When the Germans saw me, they jumped up and practically ran to our room. Being of an efficient breed it didn't take them more than half an hour to return, now a lot more enthusiastic and smiling than they had been earlier.

Through my personal fog, I conveyed my apologies and admitted to being slightly sick. I also told them that actually I had not even tasted alcohol in my entire life. They confessed to having suspected my illness the whole day, although they had a hard time believing my latter claim. Thus the ice was broken, and we soon discovered that we would break more ice together later. By a cosmic coincidence, we were all going on the same boat to Antarctica the following week! Knowing that we would soon be imprisoned together inside a Russian hull, a new friendship was instantly born.



The Germans spent the next day going to Perito Moreno, another section of the same Patagonian ice cap that I had seen in Torres del Paine. I was in no shape to go with them, or anywhere at all, but they let me borrow their Antarctica guidebook. My day was evenly split between reading on a small patch of grass in the sun, sitting on the toilet and running between those two activities. Considering my general condition, I had a great day.

The next day was even better. I woke up with three quarters of a toe back in place, and a pair of underpants that were practically as clean as they had been when I fell asleep the night before. Encouraged by this I walked down to Laguna Nimes, a wetland area nearby reputed to be an El Dorado for bird watchers. There I sat for a long time watching swans, flamingos and other beaked creatures whose names I don't know, all the while concentrating on not thinking about having to go to the bathroom.

Two Canadian bird watchers with big eyes and binoculars fit for studying mosquitos were so excited about the amazing birdlife that they came over to share their joy with me. I guess my concentrated stare and absolute stillness must have impressed them. They pointed and gesticulated, explaining that we were in fact looking at the only two-coloured swans in the world. "Hooray!", I grunted, giving them the most enthusiastic thumbs-up I could manage. Evidently happy with my response the Canadians smiled and left my life.

Back at the hostel the Germans had been replaced by a Swedish blonde and a Swiss girl whose parents must have been suckers for clichés. They had named her Heidi. This may very well have induced several traumas throughout her childhood, but the only one I know for a fact that she suffered from was a fear of flying. And yet she had managed to get to South America.

She had paid 1,300 US dollars, almost twice the price of a plane ticket, to travel for three weeks on a container ship from Italy to Buenos Aires. For her money she had gotten a two room apartment on the ship as well as free access to as much fresh air as she could take and to the video library on the ship. The selection of videos had obviously catered mainly for sailors spending long periods of time away from women, but she had

nevertheless been happy with the voyage. After some reckless flirting with the crew they had even built her a swimming pool in an empty container. I was fascinated by her strong desire to see the world in spite of her obvious handicap.

I learnt all this over dinner. Even though it was nice to hear about sea-level Atlantic crossings, I was more interested in finding out whether the chicken I carefully consumed would come out again in an at least somewhat controlled manner. It did, and through the right exit, just in time for me to return to Ushuaia.

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Lineas Aéreas Privadas Argentinas (LAPA) took me back to Fireland. The view from the plane was splendid; glaciers, dramatic mountains, plains and moors across the whole spectrum of colours. Just before we landed I even recognized the steep, peaky mountains of my home country outside the window. Beautiful!

To me there was an attraction inside the plane as well. No, not the bearded stewardess, but a new air sickness bag. New as in unused, of course, but also new as in different from any of the air sickness bags I already owned. I collect these useful and at times indispensable items, and the LAPA bag scored high on the scale for "How to say what the bag is for, without actually saying it", a most important quality for such an item. Writing "Barf bag!" just like that can be enough to trigger a bout of puking if someone's feeling a bit queasy, so you don't want to do that. This bag said "Para uso exclusivo a bordo en vuelos de LAPA", meaning "Only for use on LAPA flights". No mentioning of it having anything to do with nausea, just a most careful hint that it could be of theoretical use in a flying plane. Very classy. I helped myself to the bags from six seats before Miss Moustache, the stewardess, began looking more fierce than I liked.

For once I had actually booked my accommodation ahead, and that turned out to be a good thing. The hostel was swarming with low-budget, Antarctica-bound backpackers. It surprised me, since I had learned from

the Germans' guidebook that the average age for Antarctica passengers was about 60 years. It appeared that the clientèle on "my" ship would be unusually young.

Alix, my French friend, had realized that the trip would eat a large share of her total travel budget. To make up for that, at least a little bit, she had spent almost no money since I last saw her. She had taken her tent to the cold, wet forests outside Ushuaia and stayed there for a week. Just for the last couple of days had she been back in town, trying to get hold of returning tourists from Antarctica to ask them about the trip. Good for me, as now she let me in on her fresh knowledge.

Where I had anticipated having to buy new clothes and other stuff fit for a polar expedition, it turned out that I would be fine buying just a few basic items. My final acquisitions for the Antarctica trip were:

- Sunglasses covering the whole eye region (the light in the ice is bright)
- Rubber gloves (to pull over woollen gloves to make them water-proof)
- Sea sickness remedies (no further explanation needed)
- Chocolate biscuits (emergency rations in case of a castaway situation)
- 24 cans of Coke (cheaper than in the bar)
- 6 oranges (to avoid scurvy during long periods at sea)

I would also need a pair of tall, robust wellies. Someone had told Alix that if we went down to the ship early in the morning, just as it returned from the previous trip, we would most likely find a pair of fitting rubber boots in the heap of wellies left behind by the previous batch of tourists.

The reason we needed rubber boots was the way you get on land in Antarctica. Usually it's a "wet landing". Zodiacs, small yet sturdy rubber dinghies with outboard motors, are used to bring the passengers on shore. Due to the

lack of piers in Antarctica, the Zodiacs can only get so close to the beach, and usually you have to wade the last bit. As a young boy, my friends and I sometimes went sailing on small ice floes that formed on a small



inlet close to my home. Even though this was ages ago, the rule that requires ninety percent of floating ice to stay below the surface already applied. So we often got stuck on our frozen ships in the shallow water.

To avoid having our mothers find out about our sailing adventures, we had to strip off shoes and pants and walk half-naked through the icy water back to the beach. It wasn't pleasant, but then again, neither would we have enjoyed parental punishment for sailing on the ice floes. I didn't want to refresh my memories of "wading on the rocks", so to speak, so I had better get a pair of rubber boots. Since I didn't want to carry them for the rest of my trip through South America, I decided to try to find a sufficiently fitting pair on the boat.

My only worry on the day of departure was the discovery of another possible side effect of my unkind encounter with the evil mountain flora of El Calafate. Several mysterious, open wounds and blisters appeared on my fingers, in my armpits and various other more exotic locations on my body. I will spare you the details, but I'm guessing it was similar to what many middle-aged men returning home from wild trips to the dark alleys of Bangkok may experience upon returning home.

I couldn't let a minor plague or whatever it was get in the way of my trip to Antarctica. I cleaned and took care of the weird wounds, packed my stuff and got down to the ship early to find myself a pair of second-hand rubber boots.

I found a pair that fit perfectly, and being early I also got to choose freely among the four berths in my cabin. Not really knowing what criteria to use, I decided that it was probably a good idea to reduce the potential height of falling, so I picked one of the lower bunks. Later this turned out to be the right choice. Soon my new cabin mates arrived; a Japanese, a Swiss and an Israeli, all fairly young and all backpackers. They seemed almost disappointingly normal, considering the unusual journey we were embarking upon.

Only one practicality was left before I could leave. I went back on land and published my will and a few last words on my Web site. Of course, I had kissed the toe of the Patagon native on the Magellan monument in the town square in Punta Arenas, so this wasn't really necessary. It's an

old tradition among sailors to do so, as it is supposed to ensure that sooner or later you will return to Punta Arenas. But you never know, you know?

And then we were off, just over a hundred passengers on the Mariya Yermalova. It was a mixed crowd with an average age well below 60 years, possibly even below 40. This was probably a result of the relatively inexpensive tickets. The tour operator went bankrupt just a few months later. It wasn't the low prices that forced them to close down business. A certain event in New York City on September 11 later that year made rich Americans less eager to leave their homeland. This created a dramatic shortage of potential passengers for all cruises to Antarctica.

That the ship carried so few passengers was important to me. Tourism in Antarctica is regulated by a set of rules that the tour operators themselves have agreed on. The goal is to minimize the damage the tourist industry inflicts upon the extremely fragile eco-system. One rule is that no ship can have more than a hundred people on land at the same time. There were almost exactly a hundred passengers on Mariya, and some of them were decidedly more interested in buffets than in penguins. This meant that I was likely to spend a lot of time exploring Antarctica on foot.

All in all more than twenty nations were represented among the passengers, and we could very well have founded the Association of Travelling Eccentrics. There were retired Americans with blue hair, big bellies and the latest in expensive consumer electronics. We had a group of British mountain climbers, some with numerous Everest expeditions on their CVs. And then there were backpackers of all sorts, ranging from a relatively tidy me to the most deodorant-shunning, sandal-wearing and price-conscious hobos imaginable.

Some had hitch-hiked through South America to get to Ushuaia. The money they paid for two weeks of cold uncertainty in Antarctica, could have bought them many months of basic travelling elsewhere. A guy told me he had asked whether there was a discount if he was willing to sleep in the lifeboats instead of in a cabin. There wasn't. I, for one, was rather pleased that they had not told him it would cost extra. Anyway, we were

not your typical group of cruise passengers. In general I have always found that special destinations gather special people. In this case that was a good thing.

In addition to the passengers there was also a literally motley crew of fifty sturdy Russian men and women. Most of the time they were invisible, but they were far from inaudible. Then there was a group of people that we would both see and hear a lot from, a group of experts on polar matters. They knew everything about seals, whales, seabirds and ice, and they were there to tell us what we saw and what we shouldn't do. The ship's doctor was another Russian. I'm sure he spoke his own language fluently, but all he could say in English was "I hope no problem!" as he showed us his large bucket of seasickness tablets. His hope was in vain.

When we were done with the introductions, a lifeboat drill was held and some practical information was given. We were warned that strange things *would* happen on the ship. The sewage system was similar to the ones used in planes. Instead of flushing the waste down using water, a vacuum mechanism was used to suck it away. Unfortunately, sometimes the sucking might reverse, so we were strongly advised to quickly step away from the toilet after pushing the flushing button. "This is a Russian ship, so things that do not work, do not work differently from how they do not work at home", was the message. I spent some time analysing that sentence. Something must have worked, though. Dinner was ready.

It was a true feast, and the warnings about high seas ahead were instantly forgotten. The low-budget travellers were especially eager to get their money's worth. After all, they had burnt off a considerable part of their total travel funds on this singular excursion. Now, while a free buffet may be a good thing to take advantage of when on land, like in say Las Vegas, I'd like to inform future Antarctic travellers that the same does not necessarily apply on a ship in the South Seas. It is wise to leave some room for the food to move around in while it's being digested, since it's very likely that suddenly you will need that space. The lovely entrecôtes they served made it impossible for me to stop eating before I was more than full, so I should know.

A cosy and relaxed mood set in after dinner. People made small talk and played various card and board games to get to know each other. The seemingly most hard-boiled travellers gathered to swap stories from the road. The Japanese, of course, immediately started taking photos and writing postcards. Mysteriously all the Israelis had disappeared. I imagined them wandering the corridors below in search of their Promised Cabin. A more probable explanation for their disappearance was the rule that any alcohol enjoyed in the common areas had to be bought from the bar on the boat. I suspect that in one of the cabins, serious amounts of cheap, South American liquor was consumed, presumably accompanied by a lot of guitar playing and singing in Hebrew.

Those who didn't feel like getting to know a lot of people right away, could instead get acquainted with the library. It contained an excellent collection of books on polar topics, including a book about Titanic, I particularly noticed.

The cool and young fraction of the guides and experts immediately began working on making the passengers worship them. Groupies-to-be gathered around them and listened to their cock-and-bull stories. The more experienced guides knew all too well what the future would bring, so they went to bed early. When the captain suddenly appeared in the bar, wearing his uniform and an increasingly fuddled smile as he enjoyed a tall glass of vodka, I decided it was time for me to go to bed as well.

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About a thousand kilometres of open water separates the southern tip of America and the land stretching north from Antarctica. The wet gap is known as the Drake Passage, after the English captain Sir Francis Drake, the man everyone except for a few British school children have forgotten as the leader of the *second* successful circumnavigation of the planet. He was the first to actually round Cape Horn, thereby dismissing the myth that Fireland was part of a large continent to the south of America.

These waters come in two versions, like a maritime Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. One of them is calm and quiet and is called The Drake Lake. The other is not as peaceful and has aptly been named The Drake Shake. The latter is more often around and is part of the reason why the sea at

sixty degrees south is also known as the Screaming Sixties. They are the evil cousins of the Roaring Forties and the Furious Fifties. If you travel in these waters you learn this terminology soon enough. I know I did.

Even though we were about to be served a big helping of the Drake Shake, for now the sea was calm. Before I went to bed I took a walk on the upper deck. The night was beautiful, all dark except for the crystal clear sky dotted with stars. It may look like there are countless stars up there, and maybe there are, but the human eye can only distinguish some six thousand of them, both hemispheres combined. Supposedly you can see the most stars from the southern hemisphere, and on that night I could believe it. I could also vaguely see Fireland on the right, sorry, on the starboard side of the boat. I waved at it to remind it that we had agreed to meet again sometime soon.

Feeling happy, I went to my cabin and my bed. I lay awake for a long time, listening to the creaking from the walls of the ship and to the messages that went to the crew over the intercom, in Russian. It was a bit like being in a James Bond movie. Soon I was fast asleep, dreaming of critical and dangerous special missions, a mastermind to fight and a number of most friendly women playing various small parts.

At 4:04 in the morning I woke up when someone pushed me around in the bed rather violently. "Stop it, Nikita!", I mumbled, before I discovered that I was actually alone in my bed. More to the point, there were certainly no female supermodel in a bikini there. We had reached the open seas. Before I went to bed I had taken a couple of seasickness tablets, just in case. Now they helped me doze off again, into a restless sleep.

At 6:42 I woke up again. The Japanese in the top bunk had fallen to the floor like a kamikaze sleepwalker. He landed on everything that the previous evening had been on our bedside tables. "Prease excuse, I trouble!", he declared before he bravely climbed back up and regained his position.

At 7:30 I did *not* have breakfast. Others somehow fought their way up to the galley and initiated feeble attempts at eating. Most of them gave up and returned to their beds when after a while they started to get wet on their feet from all the coffee, milk, tea and cereal floating on the floor.



Some just gave up, but didn't have the energy to return to their cabins. They spent the next two days on wooden benches in the library.

At 9:30, still in the morning, five people attended a lecture about our big friends, the whales. I clung to my bed and tried to sleep, or at least to keep my eyes shut and think of something pleasant.

At 11:30, fifteen brave passengers turned up to learn about the albatross. There's no doubt that the albatross is an interesting creature, but the audience was still most impressed by the lecturer, who actually managed to stand upright most of the time. I still clung to my bed, on the verge of becoming a believer so that I would have someone to pray to.

At 12:30, two dozen people tried to have lunch. In the end they settled for tomato soup served in paper cups, after soup plates had proved unsuitable containers for the liquid meal. How the people in the kitchen even managed to *make* tomato soup, now that's a mystery I can only theorize about. Myself, I spent some of the time in bed, some of the time on the floor, and by then I had made my first, strenuous trip to the bathroom. There I had filled my water bottle while I with great fascination observed the water gushing out of the faucet at most unusual and variable angles.



*Tomato soup planning a spectacular escape*

At 14:00 a lecture about Antarctica's geography was the most exciting thing on the boat. "Bring your blanket, pillow and some barf bags!", a voice commanded from the loudspeaker. I slept on the floor, temporarily having given up on staying in bed.

The doctor reported that during the last six hours he had handed out extra strong seasickness tablets to more than thirty needy passengers, and that was a new record! We were all proud, and we became even prouder when we were informed that throughout the whole day waves of up to 10 metres had hit us straight on from the front. At no time had we moved faster than 8 knots. That's just about my average jogging speed. Doing the maths in my head, I calculated that if this continued, I would run out of seasickness tablets before we'd covered a quarter of the distance to Antarctica. On that depressing thought I decided to drastically cut back on my drug use.

The solution became to forget that I was being tormented by the ocean, and instead think of it as an incredibly long roller coaster ride. I discovered that I was the perfect size for my bed, or maybe it was the other way around. By lying down on my stomach with my hands extended, I had a good grip on the bedposts in the upper end while at the same time I could "stand" steadily with my legs pressed against the lower end of the bed. That way I could lock myself to the bed with relative comfort. I closed my eyes and visualized how the ship moved between and through the waves. By trying to predict the movements of the boat, I could counteract them by distributing my weight to this side or that. A huge amount of concentration was required to do this, and it helped me avoid spending too much time being thrown out of the bed. It also helped me forget to be seasick.

The only thing still bothering me was a Russian maid. Every now and then she came by to do a bit of dusting and tidying. She would say "Zorry to yoo!" and smile at me in the same way I imagine the Devil himself smiles at newcomers in Hell.

All in all it was nevertheless a pretty neat situation, being imprisoned in a bed in a boat in the middle of a storm, while the air was filled with Russians screaming on the intercom, messages I sometime almost could

decipher. I was especially fascinated by this one; "Zbigniew moshna machinistr \*something something\* schdawoodsch KAPUT!", with lots of loud and panicky yelling going on in the background. This was exciting stuff!

Little by little I learned to recognise the patterns in the behaviour of the sea. I knew exactly how long it would take from a wave hit us, making the hull boom loudly, until an invisible force would try to pull me out of bed, and I knew which arm and leg muscles I needed to tighten in order to stay put. When I finally tightened and loosened my muscles automatically, I could start thinking again. It felt like meditation, at times coming close to an out-of-body experience. Suddenly I realized that this was exactly what I always had imagined a trip to Antarctica to be like, ever since as a young boy I started reading about the hardships of the early polar explorers. Should I just have gotten on a plane? Bah! That way I would never understand the remoteness of the seventh continent.

Finally I also understood what Liv Arnesen, the first woman to ski alone to the South Pole, had meant when asked what she dreaded the most about her expedition. "The boat ride from Antarctica", she had answered.

In the evening something happened. The weather changed or the captain got a brilliant idea. Either way, we started going *with* the waves instead of against them. My intestines shouted with joy, almost forgetting to complain about the lack of food to process. I could relax again, feeling more tired than I had ever thought two days alone in bed could make a person feel.

The next morning I was even able to walk around a bit. I still refrained from eating. I wasn't sick, and I wished to stay that way, so I couldn't trust my body with food just yet. We were halfway to Antarctica. I had swallowed half my supply of seasickness tablets, and it felt as if I had lost a similar percentage of my body weight.

No one was allowed on deck yet. To at least get a change of air from the cabin, I walked up to the bridge. The air wasn't particularly fresh there either, but I was encouraged when I saw that we did 14 knots, almost the cruising speed of the vessel. The equipment on the bridge,

however, wasn't that comforting; lots of pipes and buttons and maps on which the navigator kept drawing new lines with a pencil. On the walls there were some small and cute signs full of charming spelling mistakes, like "Insinerator" and "Exhcaust pipe". I was reassured by the Russian crew who seemed to know what they were doing, steadily filling new ashtrays with cigarette butts while drinking strong coffee from large jugs with pictures of naked women with, well, large jugs on them. Everything was like I had expected it to be. It would have to be good enough to get us through the storm.

As I wasn't chained to the bed any more, I started attending lectures. First I was amused by a session on penguins and then fascinated by a first-hand account from an early expedition to Antarctica, the Ronne expedition of 1947. The latter presentation was held by expedition member Bob Dodson, who was now almost two hundred years old, but still equipped with a good set of sea legs. Even though what he talked about took place less than a lifetime ago, his tale left us with no doubt that the conditions back then were even tougher than what we experienced. On the other hand, they didn't have exploding toilets.

When the sea had calmed down enough for us all to be able to scramble to our feet and ascend the stairs up to the lecture room, the mandatory briefing for visitors to Antarctica was held. The topic was IAATO's rules for behaviour on the Antarctic continent. IAATO is the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators, an organization for all carriers of tourists to Antarctica.

The purpose of the rules is to prevent Antarctica's visitors from endangering themselves, others and Antarctica. If you're the kind of person who would choose to spend your vacation in Antarctica, you're likely to find the rules reasonable. It's only the tour operators themselves who enforce the rules, so you can look at them as guidelines for improving your personal safety rather than as limiting restrictions.

Typical rules are "Do not carry explosives", "Keep a safety distance of five metres between yourself and the penguins" (luckily they have been unable to teach the inquisitive penguins about the metric system), "Do not disturb any scientists you may encounter, unless they seem eager to sell

you strange items from their home countries", and "Do not walk into or under glaciers, as they are large and heavy and sometimes they collapse". My favourite rule by far is the one about no ship being allowed to have more than a hundred people on shore at any one time. This ensured that the penguins would always be in majority. That way everyone is guaranteed an unforgettable experience.

As we reached noticeably calmer waters, we saw that contrary to our suspicions we had in fact moved in the right direction. Icebergs appeared in the distance, sailing north, hopefully with a slimmer chance of survival than us. This resulted in a high-spirited mood among the passengers, with the notable exception of a seven year old with obscenely rich parents. He systematically worked his way through the common areas on board, aiming at puking into each and every coach on the boat before we reached land. Myself, I tried to rest as much as possible. After sixty hours half asleep on a roller coaster, I wanted to be ready for a few days with as much action and as little sleeping as possible.

In the middle of the night we reached the location where we would make our first landfall, Hannah Point. Even though this was Antarctica, a "place" where the year is rumoured to have only one day and one night lasting six months each, that island was no closer to the South Pole than Scotland is to the North Pole. So on that late summer night it was completely dark outside. But something happened just after five o'clock in the morning.

I stood in the darkness on the top deck of the boat and awaited my first good look at Antarctica. Suddenly I found myself in the middle of the kind of moment you know you're not going to have many of in your life. The sky above me had a thin veil of clouds on, so thin that the extremely bright stars could shine through it. The boat lay still in the water, but it had not anchored. It had to be ready to move on short notice, in case the water suddenly froze or a glacier dropped a serious chunk of ice into the sea, creating dangerous, tsunami-like waves.

We were in a bay surrounded both by mountains with jagged peaks and by some rounded hills. Everything on land was covered in a perfect, white film of ice, except for a narrow strip of bare and rocky land along

the shoreline. To the north-east a sunrise was ready to go, and the many photographers on the boat looked like they were about to burst with excitement. Antarctica was about to show off!

The sunrise was spectacular. The starry night was slowly replaced by an untameable play of red and orange colours sailing up from behind a mountain covered by ice. The light made the glacier on the other side of the bay blush, as if it had just been caught red-handed picking its nose, thinking itself alone in the ice paradise on that flawless morning. Seals and seabirds welcomed the day by singing, howling and screeching towards the sky, ever louder as daylight filled the world. It was a scene that made me feel warm inside, no matter how cold the tip of my nose was. I could only look forward to meeting the orchestra behind the symphony.

The expedition leaders, and now I really thought of it as an expedition, were used to dealing with American tourists. Since lunch was impossibly far away, they refused to put anyone on land before we all had eaten breakfast, even though the first-time visitors among us were desperate to get off the boat.

More than ever the James Bond feeling returned when I finally entered one of the Zodiacs. The plan had been to quickly find a place to land, but instead we were suddenly on a whale safari. Four humpback whales simply appeared out of the deep blue, each of them many times larger than the boat we sat in. Like us, they had chosen to enjoy their breakfast in the bay that day.

It seemed as if the whales had forgotten *and* forgiven the sins of my ancestors. They glided through the water next to us, slowly, smoothly and friendly. The whales knew that in the shallow bay, the sunlight on a morning like that would seduce their favourite food to move up to the surface en masse. A full-grown humpback whale can be fifteen metres long. A Zodiac can't.

We came close enough to the whales to make it *extremely* exciting to find out where they would surface next when they dived and temporarily disappeared. They are awe-inspiring creatures. The American woman

next to me had a religious moment, or possibly an orgasm. She uttered the incomplete sentence "Oh – My – God!" fifteen times over. I counted.

As a Norwegian I may have been the only one there to think that the whales looked good enough to eat. That said, I really hope the whale stock in the Southern Ocean will recover. Even though several species of whales still exist in large numbers both there and elsewhere, some other species, like the colossal blue whale, have gone right up to and possibly across the line leading to extinction. All because of short-sighted, profit-seeking humans. With the vast oceans and the few remaining whales, it will take them a long time to find each other and do what they have to do to multiply. I wished them good luck with that before Sergey Sailor steered Zodiac Six south, seeking shore.

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In spite of the thorough penguin lecture I had attended on the boat, I wasn't prepared for the tuxedo-clad welcome committee on the beach. Fair enough, they had not exactly cleaned the place for us, the whole shoreline was literally overflowing with shit, but I still felt welcome. Just around the corner from Big Damn Rock (you just have to love the simple logic behind placenames in Antarctica), during my first two minutes on the shore I was introduced to the chinstrap penguin, the Gentoo penguin, the albatross, the crab eater seal, several species of petrels, and a more than *slightly* enthusiastic expedition leader, Laurie Dexter.

Laurie is the kind of guy that runs a marathon before breakfast. He spends parts of the year making ski tracks from Russia to Canada. Manufacturers of expensive watches pay him to wear their products, to find out how robust the watches really are. A priest by education, on that day Hannah Point was his cathedral.

Laurie must have swum ahead of us, as he had already surveyed several kilometres of beach. He preached that just over the hill we would find a three-ton male elephant seal with his harem emitting various body fluids, gases and impressive sounds. "Isn't this glorrrious, everyone?", Laurie asked us in his thick, Scottish accent. It was most definitely glorious and magnificent. Among the screeching seabirds above there

were Arctic terns that had travelled an even longer distance than me to get there. Ready to be overwhelmed I gently walked up the hill Laurie had pointed out.

The view from the top I will never forget. Eternal ice in every shade of bright blue and green. A dark blue sky over almost painfully bright, snowy mountains and a beach almost as white, but from penguin guano. Minor spots here and there bore a green shimmer of moss and lichen. Every inch of land seemed to teem with animals and birds living their lives as they should.

At the top of the hill I met Albert. He had spent most of his day dragging himself up there because he wanted to go fishing. When Albert wants to go fishing, he must first waddle up to the top of a long, declining runway. Then he must run down the hill, fast, but not too fast, until he either becomes airborne or he crashes into the water and has to walk back up the hill to try one more time. When a take-off is successful, he may be gone for up to five years before he again returns to land. Funny bird, the albatross.

Of course, an even more entertaining bird is the penguin. You probably agree with me that they are among the most comical beings on our planet, right up there with the lemur, the orang-utan and any human who has just stepped into a pile of dog shit. So you know they're funny.

What you may *not* know is what extreme creatures of habit they are. Even though they obviously swim better than they walk, they still spend most of their time in the dry, doing next to nothing. They will stand on a piece of rock or ice, depending on whether they want to turn their body temperature up or down, or they will wander along the beach, performing an entertainingly clumsy silly walk. They can spend the whole day walking a distance they could have covered in three minutes had they swum it instead.

That's not mainly because they walk so slow or that they swim so fast. The main reason it takes them so long to walk is that when a penguin starts to walk, it knows two things; its destination, and the route it will follow to get there. Now, if the penguin encounters an unexpected obstacle on its planned path, it will not make a detour. Instead it will just



stop in front of the hindrance and look at it accusingly. This will happen whether the impediment to further progress is another penguin, a five-ton elephant seal or a stupid tourist. The penguin will simply wait for the obstacle to go away, and then continue its promenade.

You may have seen photos of large numbers of penguins just standing around like a frozen parade in monochrome. I don't think they're really just standing there. What has happened is that they were all on their way somewhere, and then, unfortunately, suddenly they all blocked the way for each other. Thus they just seem to do nothing, but they're really waiting for one of them to die and fall over, to decide to go fishing or to be abducted by a scientist. Then the penguins will all get on their way again, until a new deadlock occurs.

Coincidentally, this is exactly what happens inside your "multi-tasking" computer every now and then. Most of the time it moves along nicely, but sometimes it just seems to freeze up and do nothing. This happens when two shebangs inside your computer simultaneously try to access the same part of the computer's memory or something. The similarity between those two situations struck me from up there on the hill, where I could see the deadlocks form and go away, over and over again. Maybe Antarctica is just a large computer? Or maybe the whole planet is? If so, I think we're long overdue for an upgrade, maybe for the forty-second time. But without giving more thought to that, let's return to Hannah Point.

I moved leisurely between hilarious penguins until I reached an open-air museum in Walker Bay. A number of fossils were on display on top of some flat rocks at the foot of a steep mountainside. According to the rules in the game of visiting Antarctica, you're not really supposed to pick up or move any objects at all, not even a pebble.

In this case they had made an exception. As people have walked up and down the beach throughout the years, scientists and probably tourists as well have come upon stones that really are petrified trees or contain other visible fossils. While it would be a big no-no to remove them from Antarctica, it's a splendid idea to gather the most interesting artefacts in one place where they can be found easily. I saw more fossils in twenty

minutes there than I have seen anywhere else. The swarming life in the area was evidently not a new phenomenon.

After four overwhelming hours on the beaches near Hannah Point the sound of howling seals was for a few seconds drowned out by mighty outbursts from the fog horn on Mariya Yermalova. This told us that unless we were back on the ship within an hour, we could look forward to a long winter in solitude on the beach there. It seemed like most of us chose to return to the ship, although reluctantly. Back on the boat we all tried to outdo each other in describing the fantastic experience we had just had. So far, actually being in Antarctica was much more enjoyable than getting there.

Contradicting my expectations from icy Antarctica, at lunch I sat in a lifeboat chewing on a slice of pizza and drinking a cup of hot chocolate as I enjoyed the sunshine and a temperature of 10 degrees Celsius. We were on our way to another landing. All around us was the magnificent view of an eternal winterland. The air was exceptionally clear. On the horizon we saw the looming mountains of the actual continent. Islands of all sizes glided by. Even the smallest ones carried glaciers. The passage to our next stop was unhurried and steady. Only for a few, short moments did we have excitement. Whales, even worse at flying than penguins, broke the surface of the sea just to crash back into the water again a moment later.

Nobody knows why they do this. Maybe to shake off parasites, maybe they jump just for the fun of it. Whatever the reason behind the spectacle, it was a treat to witness. "BREACH!!!", the Americans shouted when it happened. Except for one of them, who had been pointing his camera on full zoom to the exact spot where a whale had surfaced. He just jumped up and down for several minutes, repeating a most versatile four letter word. I'm guessing that in this case the f-word must have meant "This photo will pay for my children's' education! I am so unbelievably lucky! Now, if I just had a double cheeseburger, life would be perfect!"

We sailed on to Deception Island. The name is unusually fitting, as it's not exactly an island. It's just the top of the cone of a collapsed volcano that barely sticks out of the water and becomes part of the South Shetlands archipelago. Another reason for the name is that from the

outside, the place seems impenetrable and without beaches. But actually the volcano's interior can be reached through a narrow, winding passage, the Neptune's Bellows. Many a treacherous rock lurk under the surface there, but if the mental condition of the captain allows it, the Bellows will let you through and into the safest natural harbour thinkable. Inside the crater lies Port Foster.

Captain Sviridov had a good day. He wormed the ship expertly inside the sleeping volcano and brought us to Whalers Bay. Once again we landed with the Zodiacs. The tourist thing to do on Deception Island is to dig out a bath tub on the beach, capture a suitable amount of sea water in it and let unseen underground activities prepare a suitably heated bath for you. It's unlikely that many people have taken voluntary baths in the sea any further south than this, but there *are* many who have done so in Whalers Bay. Since I had used a bath tub and bathed in sea water before, I chose to explore the island instead.

From its name it's easy to guess that the first bathers in the bay were whalers and seal hunters. This was one of the most important locations for the massacre of the aquatic mammals of the Southern Ocean. Before the arrival of the factory ships, whales were towed to beaches like this, to be processed safely away from the stormy ocean.

In 1911 about three thousand whale carcasses laid scattered about on the beach. The whalers harvested only the blubber from the whales, the part of the animal that was easiest to exploit and transport back to Europe. Meat and bones were left behind. As opposed to whales, the beach in Whalers Bay is small. It must have been a strange sight, not to mention the stench, of three thousand giant lumps of meat and entrails decomposing slowly in the open air.

Now all that was left were a few large bones and the remains of small, wooden boats half sunken into the volcanic sand. Behind the beach there was a small, run-down village, an old whaling station with wooden houses built in an unmistakably Norwegian poor man's style. Beyond the buildings I found the man who may well have put up many of the houses. There he would stay forever, carpenter Hans A. Gulliksen, dead 1928, remembered just by a simple, wooden cross in infertile and

overwhelming surroundings. While some people made large fortunes from the butchering of whales in Antarctica, others lost everything.

One thing you wouldn't expect to find inside a volcano in Antarctica is an airport. Yet that was exactly what I found, complete with a large, old hangar and the wreckage of an old plane. In 1928 the Australian Hubert Wilkins came to Deception Island. He was sponsored by a filthy rich newspaper tycoon, William Randolph Hearst, who wanted exciting stories from the edge of the known world, and by Norwegian whaling companies, who wanted to see how far into Antarctica it was possible to fly. Of course, what they *really* wanted was a more efficient way to locate whales, now that for some strange reason they had become harder to find than they used to be. The whalers may naively have figured that it was just because the whales had become better at hiding.

Seaplanes were shipped in, and on November 16, 1928 for the first time in history a plane took off from Antarctica. The hope was that the calm water embraced by the volcano crater could be used as a "runway". A couple of test runs revealed some unexpected issues. Hubert nearly lost a plane when, during a landing on ice, it skidded into the sea. Also, whenever he took off, several seabirds were killed by the propellers. The air was thick with scavenging birds, attracted by the irresistible fragrance of the butchery on the beach. Several times Hubert almost crashed and killed himself as well as the birds because of this. A land-based airstrip had to be built.

Everything Hubert needed to set up a simple airport was shipped to the island. Eventually a flat and even airstrip was ready for use. But it was different from other airstrips. It wasn't straight, but curvy, a result of the natural inclination of volcano craters to be circular. From that airport large tracts of the Antarctic Peninsula were discovered and charted.

Hearst got his stories and the Norwegians got even more whales to hunt. Everyone had reason to be satisfied, except for Wilkins. He was bored now that the most imminent hazards had been taken care of. His solution was to buy a World War I submarine from the US Navy, paying one dollar for the death trap. You get what you pay for, but he still gave it the name Nautilus, after Jules Verne's book about underwater travels

around the world. In 1931 he decided to take Nautilus to the North Pole. Luckily, someone in his crew treasured his life more than Hubert did. Vital parts of the submarine were sabotaged just as they were about to take the submarine under the Arctic ice north of Spitsbergen. The expedition was cancelled and all the men returned home alive. Wilkins probably possessed more than an inkling of stark, raving madness, but he is still the least well-known of all the important polar explorers. He certainly deserves more attention than the world has given him so far.

In his rush to become a submarine captain, Wilkins still had time to do one more idiotic thing before he left the island. He proclaimed Deception Island to be a territory of the British Crown. As a result, British and Argentinian navy ships regularly visited the island the following years, removing their adversary's flags and proclamation signs and putting up their own. In much the same way two cartoon characters would do it, I imagine. This went on back and forth for a long time, until Great Britain in 1943 established a permanent, manned weather observation post on the island. The intention was to effectively stop Argentina's plans for the area.

In 1948, Argentina also set up a weather station, next to the British one.

Tension gradually built through the years, until in 1953 a group of soldiers from the Royal Marines were stationed there for the summer, to "maintain the peace". Apparently the navy of Chile had little to do at home at the time, so in 1955 they decided to colonize the island as well. No less than three different nations now claimed the small, hot doughnut of an island. The penguins were silent spectators to the madness, but in the end the volcano itself decided to put an end to the lunacy. In the late 1960s, steam and lethal gases escaped from the volcano, forcing the representatives from all the three nations to scurry off the island. Since then it has been a peaceful place to visit, except for when the water in the bay every once in a while starts boiling.

Back on the ship the journey south continued. Icebergs grew in size and number around us, and the waves began to grow a little as well. After dinner I was fortunately so exhausted that I immediately entered a coma-like sleep. The sea had settled before I woke up again. The icebergs outside were now larger than our ship, so I repeated the lifeboat drill on

my own a couple of times. I didn't want this to be the last day of my life, especially since it was set up to be the day when for the first time I would set foot not just on Antarctic islands, but on the actual continent of Antarctica.

I acquired the continent in Neko Harbour. It's yet another place with a Norwegian history, named after a floating factory from Tønsberg in Norway. Neko Harbour was no more a harbour than Turkey lays eggs or you can put Birmingham on your toast, so it was another wet landing in a Zodiac.

A small, wooden hut on a knoll over a rocky beach was the only visible trace of any human activity there. The building was covered in painted and sprayed messages from enthusiastic and patriotic Argentinians. The ugly writing on the wall fortunately drowned in the brilliant scenery around it. Mountains rose more than a thousand metres straight up from the ice and the sea, and an equally impressive wall of ice met the ocean in a continuous collision spanning from one side of my view to the other. It was a great place to remember as my first encounter with the Antarctic mainland.

A large number of penguins stood on a narrow beach and up the side of an icy mountain. A fresh batch of penguin chicks worked hard on getting rid of their baby feathers to get started on their way to adulthood. They generally do that by, well, just standing there, waiting for the down to fall off. It obviously takes a while. To avoid mass starvation their parents constantly walked and stumbled to and from the water with fresh fish for their offspring.

Penguins are like people, they really just like their own kids. They want as little as possible to do with bringing up individuals equipped with other genes than their own. Unfortunately it also seems that by standing among thousands of penguins year after year, adult penguins gradually turn penguin-blind. They have no idea how to visually tell two baby penguins apart. As you can imagine, these two factors combined has potential to complicate the feeding process.

Nature has found a way to help penguin parents solve the feeding problem. Nature seldom disappoints. In this case it had come up with the

Fodder Race, a highly entertaining spectacle which will become an Olympic event as soon as another ring is added to the logo of the Olympic Games.

To the uninitiated, the Fodder Race may at first seem to make about as much sense as a game of cricket. The secret to understanding what goes on lies in knowing that while the parent penguin cannot tell which chicken it should feed, the chicks *do* recognize their own parents. But even though the chicks know who they are *supposed* to be fed by, they are greedy opportunists and will often try to trick the parents of others into feeding them.



*A fat penguin chicken awaiting more input*

When a proud penguin mama or papa comes stumbling out of the sea with its beak full of delicious sushi, he or she will at first appear somewhat bewildered. The poor bird is trying to remember where it last spent some quality time with its offspring. After deciding on a spot it waddles there and starts emitting sounds, telling the world in general that there is food up for grabs.

Hearing this, a large number of hungry chicks will run towards the parent in the only fashion they know, meaning devoid of any grace or dignity whatsoever. They fall. They slide. They crash into stationary objects such as rocks, other penguins and panicky tourists who try really hard to comply with the five metres rule. When the cloud of chirping and

squeaking beaks approaches the food-bringing parent, the parent will also start to run, away from the hungry mob. The race is on!

And that's why in Antarctica you will often see an adult penguin run around with a long tail of young penguin buffaloes behind it. They run and they scream, they fall and collide and then scream even louder. Some of them will grow tired and resign from the race, others will keep running. After a while, often several hundred metres away from where it all began, there will be only one chicken left in the race. A winner is declared. All research has so far concluded that in most cases the winner *is* the actual offspring of the running parent. Whether that's a fact or not, the winning chicken will receive its reward; lovely, fresh seafood served from the parent's beak. The prize is presented in a short and tender family moment, before the mother or father returns to the sea to prepare for a new race. Junior will stay put, signalling satisfaction through its lazy, semi-shut eyes.

For a long time I sat in the middle of a crowd of penguins and let myself be entertained by the never-ending show full of action, smash-ups, slapstick, clumsiness, pain, sorrow and happiness. I'd like to thank Mother Nature for the privilege.

The small rocky headland of Neko Harbour is on all sides except from the sea surrounded by a gigantic wall of ice that keeps moving in on it. Just as the ice is about to swallow the puny piece of beach and naked stone, having spent millennia carefully preparing for the attack, the sea gets in its way. The currents and the salt tear the ice mass apart, and the crushed pieces of ice are taken away to be rendered harmless by the ocean while Neko lives on. The calving of icebergs is also the cause of another great act that continuously takes place in Neko Harbour; The Wave.

When a glacier calves, when hundreds of tons of ice break off and fall into the sea, the result is often that a massive wave is formed. As soon as the wave recovers from the shock of having come into existence, it will identify and attack everything and everyone stupid enough to be dazzled by the unfolding event. With forces of this magnitude on the loose, it is typical for simple-minded creatures to think "Whoa! Look at the size of that thing!", and fascinated remain standing where they are, watching the



wave grow larger and larger as it comes closer. In other words: Waves hunt humans.

Penguins, on the other hand, in ways explained brilliantly by good, old Darwin, have learnt the following rule of thumb: When the sky is blue and you suddenly hear a loud thunder, it's a good idea to immediately run towards higher ground, no matter how stupid you look while doing so. There you must remain standing until you have forgotten what you're doing halfway up the mountain and you begin to feel a bit peckish.

My best ice experience ever occurred right after a particularly photogenic seal had wriggled its way out of the water and up to a suitable spot for some serious sunbathing. The photographers from the ship had with difficulty arranged their expensive equipment on the beach to perpetuate the flipper-flapping beach bum. Just as they started asking the poor seal to make love to their cameras, the glacier on the other side of the bay decided to drop a large chunk of ice into the sea. The glacier notified the world about this with a stomach-turning groan.



The seal got the message just fine, and it quickly returned to the sea, while the penguins followed their instincts and were soon on their way up the mountain. We humans, on the other hand, just turned around towards where the sound had come from, saw what was happening and thought “Whoa! Look at the size of that thing!”

The whole situation reminded me of a scene from *The Muppet Show*. The role of Kermit was played by the people, standing confused amidst an unruly chaos of strange creatures, played of course by the seals and the penguins, loudly and panicky scuttling around our feet. Anyway, there I was, hypnotized by the largest falling object I had ever seen. It dived from a considerable altitude and disappeared under the surface of the sea. Two seconds later it came flying up again and crashed against the glacier. Seriously annoyed now, the glacier hit back with all it had, and calved off an disturbingly large mass of ice. Soon a killer wave was rapidly approaching us.

That's when the veterans and guides from the boat, survivors from previous trips to Antarctica, started yelling at us to get the hell away from the beach. Most of us were pulled back to reality by this and followed the advice. The exception was the Japanese, experienced masters of ignoring warnings and messages they can never seem to make any sense of anyway. I ran up the mountainside while they eagerly photographed the incoming wave. Fortunately the wave was so worthy of being photographed that one of the Japanese ran out of film. As he turned around to get some more, he saw the rest of us standing together with the penguins high above the beach, screaming and waving at him. He managed to warn the others just in time, and they all escaped a cold bath and possibly death with a few seconds to spare. The only damage done were a few wet feet and some cases of rapid heartbeats. It was a powerful experience, a titillating sample of the kind of surprises Antarctica can provide.



*Panicky penguins running towards higher ground*

To take advantage of my sudden elevation, I decided to climb another couple of hundred metres up the mountain. I was rewarded with great views of a beautiful fjord, a scenery full of bright white and blue ice, sea and sky. Still, what struck me the most as I moved up and away from the beach was the increasingly noticeable fresh air. Or to be more blunt, the stench from the beach weakened.

In my joy over falling penguins, the Fodder Race and the new surroundings in general, there was one thing I hadn't paid much attention to until now. Penguin country is more or less covered in penguin guano, or as you may call it, bird shit. This makes the ground incredibly slippery. When you think about it, that explains a lot. For instance why the penguins have that silly walk. If we had to walk around barefoot in our own excrements, I'm pretty sure we would quickly develop a way of walking *very* similar to a penguin's, most of all characterized by small, fearful and careful steps. Actually, that *is* exactly the walking style people immediately adapt when they discover the slimy and slippery shit-covered beaches of Antarctica. So we don't really have any reason for making fun of the silly-looking penguins. We still do, of course.

Anyway, it *is* a rather smelly affair to visit the empire of the penguins. I'm not sure if it's just their faeces that causes the aroma surrounding them. Maybe the fatty liquid they excrete and rub their feathers with to protect themselves from the freezing temperatures also does something to the air. But they stink. They really, really stink.

The manner in which a penguin defecates is another of their many slightly eccentric traits. As you know, the birds like to just stand still as much as possible, so instead of walking around the corner when they have some business to do, they will just lean forward and give everyone around them a semi-hostile squint. It's their way of saying "There's nothing to see here, please keep moving along". And then they fire! The result is a metre-long, white, steaming line on the ground, sometimes with elements of red and yellow in it. Relieved, the penguin will shake its tail and get back to doing nothing. If you ever have to walk past a penguin, remember that literally going behind a penguin's back can quickly become an unpleasant experience.

Chances are that you'll never be lucky enough to meet and risk being squirted on by a penguin in the wild. I have, however, discovered another near-Antarctica experience you *can* have right in your own home. After the episode of the ice calving and the monster wave, one of the Russian crew members suggested that maybe it would be cool to take one of the ridiculously small Zodiacs and position ourselves below a huge, hanging wall of ice, so that we could get a close up view of what it looked like.

I figured that he probably knew what he was doing, maybe, and a little while later we were floating twenty metres away from a glacier that seemed to reach all the way up to the sky. It definitely looked like it was about to go sailing. To make the madness complete, Ivan the sailorman turned off the outboard motor, so that *if* something happened, we would really have no chance of escape.

When the engine stopped, all I could hear was wild techno music, which was strange, since this wasn't a disco, but Antarctica. I soon realized that it was the beating of my own heart I heard. When I managed to relax a bit, I discovered a new Antarctic quality. The sound of practically infinite amounts of ice melting in water, liberating air bubbles in the process, air that had been imprisoned in ice for thousands of years. The mere thought of the old air was fascinating, and the sound it triggered was an attractive, hushed ripple.

The greatest thing about the sound was that a few months later I managed to reproduce it at home. Certainly on a smaller scale, but still, it was very similar. Don't ask me how I came up with it. Just enjoy trying out my recipe for creating your own sound of Antarctica:

- Prepare *lots* of ice cubes from running or carbonated water.
- Get a large container ready, for instance a big casserole, a bucket or a bath tub.
- Place the container in a silent room. Fill it to the brim with cold water.
- Pour the ice cubes into the water. You should have enough ice to almost cover the whole surface of the water.
- Turn off the lights. Place your ear near the water. Listen.

That's it! I promise you that this is an authentic rendering of what life can be like when you're in a small boat in Antarctica, in water full of ice and you close your eyes because you're not that eager to look up at a mountain of frozen water likely to fall down on you. To me that's the sound of Antarctica on par with Russian swearing and seal farts. And you don't even have to take seasickness tablets to experience it!

Not all places in Antarctica look that interesting, but most of them have an interesting story to tell. One such place is the former Argentinian base in Bahia Paraíso, Paradise Bay. Something must have gone wrong in the translation from penguin speak, because there were barely a bird there when we arrived. The bay was nice, though. Plenty of icebergs floated around, and dozens of seals enjoyed the sun from on top of them. A wreath of tall, steep mountains surrounded the bay, and of course there were calving glaciers everywhere. Spoilt by breathtaking views as I was by then, the thing I liked best about the place was a hill I could climb and then slide back down again. Several times. Thanks to a lifetime of experience with having fun with snow and ice, and to my pair of super smooth trousers, I was soon king of the hill. A little bit later I also possessed probably the coldest butt on the continent.

To restore communications with my now numb behind, I broke off the sliding and walked over to the only buildings in Paradise Harbour; a couple of wooden cabins, a pier and some burnt-out ruins. There Super-Laurie recounted their history for me.

Once upon a time, in 1984, the time had come to replace the crew on the then active Almirante Brown research station. For natural reasons, the supply boat only came by once a year. It brought new people and everything they needed to spend the winter there, and took the people from the previous winter back home. After almost a year in the ice, the old crew was of course eager to return to Buenos Aires, where they would enjoy large steaks and long, hot nights dancing the tango.

It turned out that unfortunately the Argentinian logistics bureau for Antarctic operations had forgotten to include a doctor in the new crew. Or maybe they had just been confused by the fact that *all* the people they sent had doctor's degrees, without any of them actual being a medical doctor. Either way, the rules said that no one could spend the winter in Antarctica without having a medical practitioner present. It was promptly decided that the doctor from last year would just have to spend another year there. He wasn't too happy to hear this, but he seemed to accept his destiny and walked with his luggage and a pout back into the main building.

Unloading and loading of the boat took place, people said their goodbyes and wished each other a good warm or cold year, depending on where they would spend it. As the boat cast off, the now retired crew gathered on the quarterdeck. There they could have a last look at the poor souls left behind to defend the Argentinian sovereignty over hundreds of square metres of land by spending a winter where darkness and cold would soon prevail.

Before the boat had even left the bay, the passengers could see black smoke rise forcefully out of the main building, soon followed by ferocious flames. All of a sudden everyone on Almirante Brown stood outside and waved deliriously to the boat. It was *not* a wave of goodbye.

And that's how almost everyone, both the previous crew and the coming year's intended crew, got to spend the winter with steaks and tango in Buenos Aires. The only exception was the desperate doctor with an inclination towards pyromania. He spent that winter, and many summers and winters after it, residing in a madhouse.

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If you go to Antarctica, a place most people associate with the South Pole, travelling by boat won't get you far. Without an exceptionally thick and sturdy hull and a ditto wallet, the limit for how far to the south you can safely sail is approximately the southern polar circle. As you approach it, you're likely to be travelling down the Lemaire Channel. It's an extremely photogenic and calm, fjord-like section of the coast, where the captain will be chain-smoking and drinking a *lot* of strong coffee. Indeed, the large waves of the open ocean are avoided, but in return you risk getting stuck in a suddenly frozen sea. I could easily see that happening as we moved through the narrow passage.

Somewhat harder to understand was how the place had gotten its name. Charles Lemaire was a Belgian explorer, the first European to travel up the Congo River to remote regions of inland Africa. That is maybe the place on Earth with the least in common with Antarctica. Or maybe not? Going through the channel felt almost like gliding down a

river with beautiful, dramatic mountains on both sides. The peaks that should have been bright white were instead coloured orange by the rising morning sun.

We made it through and arrived at Pleneau Island. It's a small island, you can easily walk all around it on the beach in one morning. Penguins ruled the land there as well, and looming above the rest of them was a lonesome king penguin, almost twice the height of the others. In that size, a penguin's comical image quickly fades. Instead you find yourself starting to look for possible escape routes in case the penguin decides to come over to have a closer look at you, as many penguins do. Scientists have found fossils of giant, two metre, 135 kilogram penguins. We should thank Evolution for cutting off that branch of the penguin family tree before they came to rule the whole planet.

The greatest attraction on Pleneau is not the penguin colony, but an iceberg cemetery just off the island. Shallow areas surround the island, but further out the sea is very deep. When icebergs come sailing from the south and from the west, they run aground and get stuck just off Pleneau. Slowly they melt, and the stranded icebergs take on strange shapes that could not have formed if they were still floating around in the ocean. Some look like cathedrals, others like cruise ships, but they all appear mighty and enormous to a small human in a little boat floating next to the icebergs. Absolutely every shade of blue and bluish green are captured there, both in the ice and where the ice meets the sea and the sky.

The insane range of blue colours in icebergs is something you will never find in ice cubes from your own freezer. That's because your freezer is neither big enough nor old enough, no matter how much you would like to buy a new one. The blue can only develop if you pile up ice in layers of many metres, preferably kilometres. When that happens, the air is slowly squeezed out of the ice, and what you're left with is a chunk of compact, compressed water molecules with nothing between them. If the pressure is maintained for long enough, the



*A cathedral-like iceberg*

ice will go all the way from a sparkling, airy white through a selection of greens and blues, finally reaching the stage of "black ice". It's called this because it is close to fully transparent, and therefore appears almost black when floating in dark water.

An iceberg you meet in the Southern Ocean may have sailed for as much as ten years since it was calved off the mainland glacier somewhere far, far away. All floating icebergs melt continuously, usually more below the surface of the sea than above it, as the relatively warm sea water nibbles on it. This causes the weight distribution of the ice mass to change. Even though it happens slowly, sooner or later even the largest iceberg will roll over and rebalance itself in the water.

When this has happened at least once, the iceberg becomes more interesting to spectators above the water. Parts of the iceberg that used to be hidden in the sea can now be admired. On the previously submerged walls of ice we find long parallel and curved lines, paths left behind by millions of air bubbles liberated from captivity as ice became water. Assisted by gravity and the laws of physics, the bubbles eagerly float up towards fresh air and freedom.

Melting also takes place on the part of the iceberg that is above the sea, thanks to the relative heat from the sun, rain and the air itself. On top of large icebergs you therefore often find seals and seabirds taking advantage of the fresh water pools they find there. It's very similar to how you can find many animals and birds in and around ponds of fresh water on the African savannah.

Ice, animals and birds are all nice to observe, but a trip to Antarctica is not complete before you have seen how people actually live there. During the winter only about 1,200 inhabitants share the continent between them. In the summer the population is much higher, and it's interesting to see how the "locals" make their arrangements in order to survive in the ice.

Of all inconceivable possibilities, the Antarctica stamp I got in my passport was a Ukrainian one. I got it from the Akademik Vernadsky research station. Until 1996 it had been a British base called Faraday, and it is famous, well, *relatively* famous, for being where the hole in the ozone layer was first discovered.



Ukraine bought the buildings from the British for a symbolic dollar, and today a bunch of Ukrainian rowdies run the activities there. There's no doubt that the Ukrainians struck a bargain with this deal. Finally they have a place far, far away they can send their most peculiar citizens to for one year at a time. And if they don't turn into more normal people after one winter, they can just keep them there for another year.

Suspiciously many of the Ukrainians there had spent several years on the station already, and they still displayed a rather strange behaviour. In a predominantly nice way, mind you. They even ran a bar where they served all kinds of drinks, as long as you ordered either white or brown vodka. Women willing to donate a bra to decorate the bar even got the first drink for free. The boys there don't get out much, as you can imagine.

I supported the national economy of Ukraine, or more likely the personal economy of the scientists at Akademik Vernadsky, by buying a woven patch to put on my backpack. There was another way to part with money there. The Japanese in particular got out their big notes to take advantage of the small post office run by the Ukrainians. It was an official post office, and for a dollar each you could get a postcard and a stamp. If you licked the stamps and put them on the cards yourself, the Ukrainians promised that their national postal organization at some time in the future would do their best to introduce the card to international postal communication.

Although I sent a dozen postcards from there, I'm ashamed to confess that I doubted that the cards would ever reach their addressees. But the cards were probably taken away on the first post boat out of there. 378 days later, elated receivers of postcards started calling and mailing me to tell me that something unusual had arrived in their mailboxes. The lesson learnt from this is that you may not be able to make much sense of what the Ukrainians in Antarctica tell you, but you can trust them with delivering your mail!

I returned to the boat satisfied with having done just about everything you can do in Antarctica apart from putting on a pair of skis and shivering your cold way down to the actual South Pole. I was ready for something out of the ordinary, namely to travel north to get to South

America. No one was surprised to discover that we sailed straight into a new batch of the Drake Shake. I filled some bottles with drinking water and said "I am just going to bed and may be some time" to my new friends. I also wished them a nice weekend, even though it was just Wednesday. In the cabin I found my bed and put myself in the roller coaster position. There I stayed for the next four days, sometimes in bed, sometimes on the floor. It gave me ample time to digest everything I had seen and experienced in the *deep* south.

Rumours had it that on the return journey a series of excellent lectures on various polar topics were delivered. I left the cabin only twice; once to pick up my passport, now with a stamp from Antarctica in it, and once to drop off my tip to the crew. Normally I detest the whole concept of tipping. Coming from Scandinavia, where people are paid a decent salary whether they deserve it or not, tipping is just confusing. But when in Rome, you *do* do as the Romans.

The only problem is that I never know how much to give to whom. When I still try, it usually leads to me being stabbed with a fork in the back by a screaming waitress, or every employed person of the establishment will come out from wherever they were hiding to kiss my shoes. Sometimes I don't even understand what sort of extra service I have received that should be rewarded with a tip. On this particular trip, though, I felt very comfortable with leaving some non-taxable money behind. The expedition leader suggested a "fixed price", ten dollars per day, leaving it up to each of us to give more or less. All the tips were collected in a box to be split equally between everyone working on the boat. That sounded fair.

I left Antarctica not really knowing how I felt about the whole thing. Despite the high seas and the even higher ticket price, I was still glad I had done it. At the same time I was convinced I would never return. It is an overwhelming experience to see something like Antarctica, and I hope you get to do that or something similar at least once in your life. It was so untouched, pure and innocent that it almost hurt to return to the real world with exhaust fumes in the cities, with power lines often disturbing nature's natural curves and with pieces of rubbish almost everywhere. To Antarctica, the best would probably be if people (yes, including myself)

stayed away and were content just knowing that the clean and serene Antarctica exists. That would be the only way to assure that Antarctica can continue to be the largest area in the world not visibly damaged by us.

I spent the passage to South America lying down sipping on a bottle of water and philosophizing about the unparalleled Antarctica. In my drowsiness I held onto the bed posts and wondered what the strange sounds from the ship and the Russian messages on the intercom might mean for my survival in the immediate future. At last the sea calmed down again. We had rounded Cape Horn and were in lee of land. I walked up on deck and waved hello to Fireland. I allowed myself to fill with joy from seeing fresh, natural shades of green again. It felt good to have birds around that were smart enough to fear me and my fellow human beings.

The approach to Ushuaia through the narrow Beagle Channel makes it impossible to avoid getting rather close to Puerto Williams, a Chilean village. A navy vessel twice the size of our boat came from there and almost sailed straight into us, stupidly marking the marine border between the countries. It was depressing to witness this manoeuvre after my visit to the neutral and peaceful Antarctica. I hoped it was just a result of the navy officers being seriously bored.

We docked safely in Ushuaia. I said goodbye to my many new friends, before we all travelled north in every direction.





## In and Out of Africa

A couple of years had passed since my trip to Antarctica. August was ageing. Myself, I was only days away from turning thirty. It's an age where talking to friends often brings news about acquaintances that are expecting children. Mothers in the making will tell you how amazing it is to be pregnant, to feel life growing inside of them. A unique privilege. For women only. Something a man can never fully understand or participate in.

"Bah, humbug!", say I. I had spent some time that summer reading up on Africa. One of many things I had learned was that simply by going for a swim in pretty much any natural lake, river or pond in Africa, before I knew it I would be full of developing life, despite my chronic lack of ovaries.

Schistosomiasis, also known as bilharzia, is a most fascinating, contagious and lethal disease. It spreads through contact with fresh water. You don't have to swallow it, it's enough to barely touch the water. Maybe you dip your toes in the lake for a few seconds to cool off at the unfortunate moment when a millimetre-long larvae floats by. It will effortlessly penetrate your skin. Inside, the larvae enters your bloodstream and follows it until it reaches your liver, kidney and bladder region. There it settles with great satisfaction and grows until it reaches the length of a centimetre or two. Then it starts producing eggs.

The host, meaning you, is unlikely to notice any of this until several years later, when your kidney or liver suddenly stops functioning. In the meantime, the larvae inside you will have produced an enormous number of eggs and released them from your body by putting them inside your urine or your faeces. By their calculations, that should give the eggs a fair chance of reaching fresh water. If they do, the eggs will hatch to reveal new larvae, and here we find the most incredible part of this mechanism of contagion. These larvae can *not* invade a new human body just yet. First they must enter the body of a particular aquatic snail and develop further. Only after having done so will they leave the snail. *Now* they're ready to invade another human being. And they will.

At first glance this might seem like a hopelessly elaborate concept, doomed to fail. Unfortunately it has proved to be a ruthlessly efficient procedure. In most of Africa's fresh water sources these larvae exist, from the Nile Delta in the north to various South African watercourses at the other end of the continent.

The possibility of fathering countless larvae was not the only reason that I wasn't particularly tempted to go to Africa. Several other issues also rendered Africa unappealing to me. Norwegian newspapers have always reported stories of war, starvation, diseases and disorder in Africa. And worst of all, deep inside I couldn't get over how a roaring lion in the intro to a TV series every week throughout my childhood had sent me hiding under the couch. Without even being part of my actual world, Africa had always scared me.

Anyway, I was just days away from turning 30, and stupid Bjørn had decided that a goal of mine was to have visited all seven continents before then. There was only one continent left, and I had the time and the money I needed to complete the list. So there you have it, my shallow and uncomplicated reason for going to Africa.

My journey offered a taste of the third world already when I boarded the plane from London to Cape Town. There were no chickens or goats running up and down the aisles, but I was seated next to a beast. She was the mother of all nightmares of any cabin crew, swearing and threatening everyone around her. She kept complaining and whining loudly about

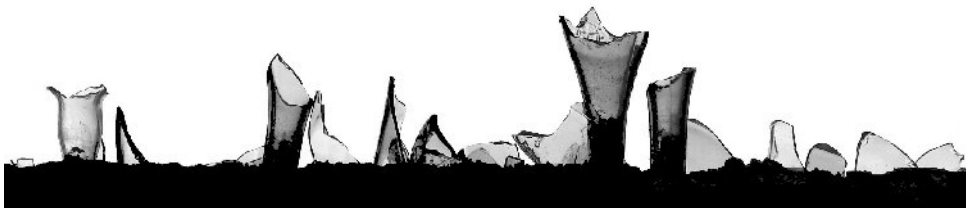
absolutely everything from the political situation in South Africa to the incompatibility between the width of the seats on the plane and her choice of body shape. In addition she was frighteningly ugly, even by British standards. Yet I was happy to have her there. I spent half an hour convincing her that I neither spoke nor understood English, and after that she ignored me. She also kept the in-flight attendants away, so that I could sleep instead of being woken up for food and drinks all the time. I could even sleep well. The monster had scared away the man who should have been sitting between her and me, so I had space to stretch out my legs. The poor man spent the last ten hours of the flight somewhere else than in his seat, that's all I know.



South Africa is far away from Northern Europe. Measured in kilometres my home town Oslo is about as distant from Cape Town as from Hawaii. Yet I could get off the plane after the long flight and not have to adjust my watch. I had travelled halfway around the world and not even left my own time zone. I did, however, have to adjust my sense of time with about six months, due to the southern hemisphere's opposite seasons.

I had never even entertained the possibility that Africa had seasons. Everyone knows it's just an eternal desert in the north and a jungle further south, right? Not so. Southern Africa appeared to have seasons, and very much so. Somehow it felt wrong to leave Norway in a late summer thirty degrees heat and arrive in a Cape Town where snow ploughs patrolled the streets. Well, it wasn't quite that bad, but it *had* been snowing in some higher regions of South Africa just a few days previously, and the air felt distinctly chilly as I walked out of the airport. Fortunately, on my way to the city centre I happened to catch a glimpse of a zebra in a park we passed. It made me feel at least a little bit as if I had finally arrived in the mythical and tropical Africa.

My journey wasn't exactly meticulously planned. Actually it wasn't planned at all, but an hour before I left home I had found the Web site of a hostel in Cape Town that seemed nice. "Have a nice stay in safe surroundings", the hostel bragged. The safe surroundings turned out to be a fortress constituted by the hostel itself. On a street corner outside it some sullen down-and-outs stood close together, drawn to an open fire in an old oil drum. They scowled at me. The driver of the airport minibus took off with screeching wheels as soon as I got out of the vehicle.



I was alone in Africa and on the wrong side of a wall adorned with the efficient third world version of barbed wire; numerous razor-sharp shards of broken bottles cemented in place. Puzzled about what to do next I saw no better option than to knock on the only door there. As in a badly written movie script a narrow panel in the door moved to the side, and two enormous, staring eyes appeared. "The eagle soars over the mighty mountain", I said, guessing that it might be the current watchword. An eyebrow on the other side of the door was raised considerably, but it must have been obvious to the guy inside that I was new in town and innocent. The door was opened and quickly closed again behind me.



Inside the walls I entered a parallel universe. The atmosphere was cheery and lazy. Backpackers, hippies and a group of British school children on a really long field trip enjoyed breakfast under the morning sun. The walls were covered with happy African colours and patterns. There was even a small, inviting swimming pool there, admittedly with what appeared to be a thin layer of ice floating in the water.

I was granted a basic room with a bed and a valid (but boring) PIN code for the front door. They also gave me advice regarding what I should and shouldn't do in Cape Town (well, most of the latter, really), and finally a wish of good luck with doing whatever I chose to do while in South Africa.

Since I wasn't jet-lagged or tired at all, I decided to head straight down to the harbour. That's where tourists are supposed to go, as it's a fairly safe area and most of the mandatory Cape Town excursions leave from there.

When the receptionist got wind of my plans, she called over a big man with dreadlocks. He was given the mission of accompanying me on the perilous journey to the taxi stand a hundred metres away. As we walked, he kept telling me to move faster and not look to the sides. I did well, and we made the trip unharmed. But there were no taxis there, just a tiny old lady who couldn't hear me because she was behind two layers of bullet-proof windows and a grid of metal bars. Understanding why I was there, she just pointed to a chair. I sat down and waited for my transport.

The taxi turned out to be not exactly a taxi, but a rikki. Apparently the driver had built the vehicle himself and on a low budget. The back seat was more like a cargo space. Cape Town had many rikkis, and you could easily hear when one was nearby. The one I got was named Rikki Martin, after the Latino artist with an international hit or two that year. Presumably because its passengers, just like Mister Martin when on stage, were likely to scream and shout quite a bit while moving their hips in suggestive ways just to stay inside the "car" when it made turns.

My greatest achievement that day was probably to prove that in less than 24 hours it is indeed possible to turn one's existence upside down, from doing the dishes at home in Oslo to sitting in a prison cell in South Africa

and ponder upon the mysteries of life. In my case the prison was Robben Island, which fortunately had been transformed into a museum and tourist attraction. The whole island was for now kept more or less exactly the way it had been when Nelson Mandela and a great many others were kept there for sometimes good, but just as often not so good reasons. A visit to Robben Island is probably most meaningful to people who actually lived through the apartheid regime, but anyone with an interest in history and politics would make a mistake if they visited Cape Town without going to Robben Island.

The mood on the ferry to the island was mixed. Most foreigners, obviously on vacation, gathered in the sunny spot on the aft deck, smiling and telling funny stories while enjoying the view of the city and Table Mountain. Many of the South Africans, however, seemed to prepare for a solemn and possibly even stressful experience. A visit to the island can bring both light-hearted and mournful moments. All kinds of visitors get what they come for.

On the island we were met by a stand-up comedian of a guide. "Have any of you been to Alcatraz in San Francisco?" (another infamous former prison, now museum) "Really? For what crime?", and so on. He pushed us into an authentic prison bus, previously used to transport the inmates in the penal colony to hard work in the stone quarries on the island.

A few years previously a large ceremony in celebration of international anti-apartheid work had been held on the island. Our guide told us with great enthusiasm that the guest list had featured celebrities like the US First Lady Hillary Clinton and the comedian Bill Cosby. With important visitors like that coming, it had been decided that a new bus was needed.

A luxury bus was acquired and a large helicopter was used to literally give the bus a lift from the mainland. Just a short distance off the island the wire used to lift the bus couldn't take the tension any more. It snapped. The thirty-two shipwrecks around Robben Island were joined by a bus wreck. So all visitors were still taken around the island in a very basic vehicle that once upon a time had been bought from Indonesia. I recognized it at once, having done a bit of travelling on Java. Indonesia is the only country in the world where the standard way of organizing the

seats is not 2+2 with an aisle in the middle. Instead they use a mix of 2+3 and 3+2, allowing for more seats, but also making it hard to move up and down the aisle.



*Cape Town with Table Mountain in the back and The Lion's Head to the right*

The highlight of the guided tour was supposed to be a visit in Mandela's actual cell. For almost a full five seconds each we were allowed to stand in it and contemplate what his prison life must have been like, and then we had to move on. Our next stop was a larger cell, more like a dormitory actually, where an authentic murderer and ex-convict, now employee of the prison, gave a truthful account of what life on the prison island had been like.

It seemed to me that in the reconciliation process initiated by Mandela when he became president, not only were political prisoners and prisoners of conscience released from captivity. All prisoners had been granted freedom, even those who had killed, like our current guide and narrator. You may have your doubts regarding the rationale behind the decision, but Mandela did it simply to save the country from a lengthy period of disruption and chaos. Fortunately it worked out more or less as he had hoped. For visitors to Robben Island this means that not only do the guides there *seem* a little bit rowdy, in many cases they actually are.

I had too little time in Mandela's prison cell to fully appreciate his suffering, but I had ample time to study the everyday life of some twenty-five thousand African penguins while I waited for the ferry back to the city. Previously the birds had gone by the name of jackass penguins, but apparently some advocate of animal rights had succeeded in raising the avian dignity ever so slightly by renaming the species. I'm guessing that an African American may have been responsible for the initiative, but I don't know for sure.

Lacking glaciers or even ice cubes to cool themselves down with, the penguins spent the hottest part of the day in the shadow of some shrubbery and inside caves they had dug out in the sandy ground. I was happy to notice that they looked and behaved much like proper Antarctic penguins. Coming out of their hiding places, it took them merely seconds to do something that looked really stupid to a neutral observer like me. Three ferries to the city came and went before I was able to leave them.

Seeing the penguins wasn't the only flashback from my trip to Antarctica that day. Back in Cape Town I checked my e-mail. Hidden between a number of offers to increase the length and girth of my manhood and promises of cheap medicine from Canada, I found a disturbing message from Keiko. The Keiko we're talking about is a Japanese, for lack of a better word, woman.

There are many countries in the world I have yet to visit. For some of them I still have a very clear idea about what it would be like to go there. Japan is one such country. They have blossoming cherry trees and overweight men confused about their age, wearing grandmother hairdos and baby diapers. Their cities are enormous, lit up by neon in such concentrations that they can be seen from the Moon. Japanese trains don't roll; they fly.

All this is certainly fascinating. For a Western male the most compelling reason to visit the country is still that he will experience something much like what Kal El (Superman) did when he arrived at a planet under a yellow sun. All of a sudden, inexplicably, he is equipped with superpowers, powers he did not possess where he came from. The superpower granted to the Western man upon arrival in Japan is that suddenly women will be enormously attracted to him!

Let me quickly point out that in real life, this is not necessarily true. Still, I *will* believe this until, theoretically, someday I'm proven wrong. I build my faith upon a number of mildly bizarre episodes involving various Japanese females and myself. Let me give you just one example.

Southwest of Melbourne, Australia, the Great Ocean Road is a magnificent scenic drive. It clings to the coastline in the direction of Adelaide, and around every turn there's a good reason to stop and admire

the view. If you want to experience the area properly, you must either drive your own car, or you can join a minibus excursion run by a hostel in Melbourne. I did the latter. Early one morning we set off, a small group of your average, mouldy-smelling backpackers, including some Japanese girls. The sights along the Great Ocean Road were as beautiful as ever, but to me the most memorable moment that day occurred when during a short photo stop by the roadside I pulled off my t-shirt to apply suntan lotion to my shoulders.

Before I had even gotten the lid off the bottle, one of the Japanese girls ran over to me, visibly excited. She looked shyly down towards the ground and politely asked "May I please lub your behind?" Even though her choice of words literally meant "Can I please feel up your butt?", I assumed she really wanted to say "What if I help you with that, and while I'm at it I can enjoy caressing your backside?"

I was terribly tempted to turn around, pull down my pants and say "Go ahead, baby!", but I don't do things like that. Anyway, my point is this: How many times has this happened to me back home? Zero. Never. What are the chances that something like this ever *will* happen to me in Norway? Again, slim to none. Not in a thousand years. But let me travel to Japan, and I guarantee you that I will return home with no sunburn anywhere on my body, to put it that way.

Oh well. Let's get back to Keiko, the Japanese backpacker I had met during my trip to Antarctica. The name was not all she had in common with the killer whale from the Hollywood-style environmentalist series of "Free Willy" movies. I was grateful for her sizeable contribution to stabilizing the ship on our way through the storms of the Southern Ocean, but I believe you have to be Japanese yourself in order to fully appreciate Keiko's other qualities.

The most obvious common denominator between Keiko the whale and Keiko the Japanese is that they were both completely lost as soon as you took them out of their natural surroundings. This is, of course, a trait possessed by any Japanese travelling on his or her own in foreign countries. They are simply unable to take proper care of themselves.

Somehow Keiko had heard that I was in Africa. From the e-mail I received from her, I learned that so was Keiko. She had just arrived in Zimbabwe, and in her opinion so should I, as soon as possible.

The e-mail scared me thoroughly. Few things can inspire more care and concern in me than the sight of a desperate, bespectacled, lone Japanese standing on a street corner, banging his head on a wall, miserable about having lost his group. However, baby-sitting Keiko on a continent where a thousand perils lurk under every tree and around every corner was simply not the primary goal of my trip.

Sometimes it's not so easy to communicate with Japanese people, and in Keiko's case it is permanently difficult to get any sort of sensible message across, both to and from her. On the boat to Antarctica she repeatedly came up to me to, and I use the expression loosely, talk. Our conversations invariably ran along this course:

– Biiioooo? [*Imagine a high-pitched, blaring voice*]

– No, my name is Bjørn.

– Biiioooo?

– No no, Biii-yearn.

– Biii-oooo?

– No, first 'Bi', then 'Yearn'. Bi – Yearn.

– Biii-ooooon?

We could go on like that for hours, until I pointed out an iceberg or some detail in the distance, and said "Photo?" This was her cue to run off to photograph whatever I was pointing at, while I ran in the other direction and hid as well as one can on a not particularly large vessel. Soon she would find me again, and we would continue our discussion regarding how to properly pronounce my name. With little success, I might add.

I have to give Keiko credit for her Norwegian being just as good as her English. Unfortunately she speaks neither of them very well, and the part of her brain that she uses to do so isn't even located inside her physical

body. Instead she uses a small, electronic gadget. The thing is simply a multi-language dictionary that translates directly word by word from Japanese to anything, whatever she wants to say. She types in Japanese words, and in return the doodad picks a seemingly random string of words from a long list of languages.

Sometimes the gadget will suggest a word that actually has something to do with what she's trying to say, but more often the message will be lost in translation. By looking through the list of suggested words, it *may* be possible to guess what Keiko is trying to tell you, but when Keiko herself chooses from the list and strings the words together in an e-mail, it can quickly turn into a most difficult read. What she herself gathers from what people tell her in anything but Japanese remains a mystery to me.

Anyway, this is the e-mail that scared me so:

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*Hallo Bjorn,*

*I am sorry for the writing to have become slow. I want to see the animal which runs about early in nature. A target is riding on the back of an elephant. Can it meet in Africa?*

*How are you!! I very fain! In Bulawayo. Now where you?? Vic Folls maybe better in Cape Town? Cape Town black criminal. And now Cape Town maybe very cold. Summer season Zimbabwe (swampy ground) maybe no malaria. Malaria attention!*

*And meet you early!*

*Hurry up!! Hurry up!! I'm wait here. Beautiful garden and pool and 2 dog!*

*(^^) (^^) Keiko (^^) (^^)*

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I know. The message can be rather difficult to comprehend. Yet I replied and politely declined what I supposed was her offer to accompany me on my way through a region of criminals, mosquitos and other African attractions. I told her that I would maybe go to Zimbabwe in a month or so, but for now I would stay in South Africa. I wished her a pleasant and safe journey, and good luck with everything.

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I should have accidentally deleted her e-mail instead. Ten minutes later a new e-mail arrived. From Keiko:

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*Hallo Bjorn*

*It go Cape Town. Where stay Cape Town? See you tommrow!*

*(^^) (^^) Keiko (^^) (^^)*

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Most great travellers throughout history seem to have enjoyed companions that left a distinct mark on their expeditions. Marco Polo brought his dad and an uncle to China. Diego Velasquez was helped by the ruthlessly efficient Hernán Cortés in keeping protesting Aztecs from blocking his road to riches. David Livingstone, tormented by malaria on his way to the heart of Africa, was kept alive and on his donkey by Chuma. Lewis and Clark pushed each other forward through the Wild West, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Sir Edmund Hillary was lifted to the top of Mount Everest by his sherpa, Tenzing Norgay. Even Mickey Mouse had a loyal companion in Goofy on most of his journeys. Me? I got Keiko.

To calm down my nerves while waiting for the storm to arrive ("keiko" is almost certainly Japanese for a particularly violent typhoon), I spent a day enjoying the soothing smell of flowers. I'm not sure how it happened, but the flowers of the world have somehow organized themselves into six floral kingdoms. Ask any botanist, it's true! And the only floral kingdom contained within a single "real country" is the Cape kingdom in the south-west corner of South Africa. *Thousands* of plant species grow in the wild there and nowhere else. The Dutch, who centuries ago initiated the spice trade between Asia and Europe, used to stop for supplies in the Cape region. As enthusiastic about flowers then as they are today, they made sure to take home some of the local flower bulbs. Many of our popular garden plants, such as the Gladiola, Erica and Iris families, all stem from Dutch abductions from the Cape floral kingdom.

The real aristocrats of this kingdom are the fynbos, the "fine bushes". Fynbos often have a slightly surreal appearance and were named for their colourful and tiny petals. The fynbos family has some eight or nine

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thousand members, of whom many have been found only within extremely limited areas. One of them grows only in the middle of the Cape Town hippodrome. On the same patch of greenery you can also find sixteen other plants of almost equal rareness. A peckish race horse gone marginally astray is enough to wipe out whole plant families for eternity!

Slowly these plants conquered the Cape Peninsula, so thoroughly that in the process they evicted all trees from the region. The trees that grow there today, an amazing number considering their recent arrival, are species brought from foreign lands by the Europeans.

The Cape flora is completely different from what you find in the rest of the world, so a trip to the Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden is of interest to almost anyone. To me, however, the most important feature of the place was that from just behind the garden there was a path up to the top of Table Mountain, Cape Town's distinctive landmark. An almost vertical walk led up from the bottom of the auspiciously named Skeleton Gorge. After a good hour of walking and climbing, surrounded by increasingly wild fynbos, I was definitely on a mountain. By then I had reached a pretty wild state myself.

On the way I encountered a group of English Boy Scouts. They were lost, and under the delusion that moss always grows on the northern side of trees. I gave them a short lecture in astronomy and the difference between the northern and the southern hemispheres, took out my map and pointed them in the right direction. Myself, I did fine until I suddenly was torpedoed by a bumblebee, of all things. I'll tell you this; the bumblebees of South Africa are enormous! Maybe that's not so strange, given the candy factory of a floral kingdom they hum and bum around in.

Anyway, this bumblebee slammed into my skull with so much force that I almost blacked out. I understand that large insects with ridiculously tiny wings may have problems with steering clear of meeting traffic, but the next time I go up on that mountain, I'll be wearing a helmet.

The top of Table Mountain is Malcolm's Peak, rising up to 1087.5 metres. A small dam there was full of frogs that had a far niftier view than most other frogs. Strong winds had closed down the funicular from the city for the day, so I was practically alone up there. At first I was

immensely pleased by the solitude I enjoyed in the usually busy tourist attraction. Then I realized that since there was no mechanical transportation available for going up the mountain, neither would there be any such service to take me down.

On shaky legs I carefully descended a path cutting through one of the gorges. In places it was a scary walk, and at the end of it an even more terrifying experience awaited me; a walk through the streets of Cape Town back to the hostel. Of course, I *could* have taken the bus. "The Topless Bus", a promising sign outside the lower funicular station said. Despite a stiff ticket price, "topless" turned out to mean just roofless and nothing else. I decided I'd rather walk.

The villas I passed indicated that their residents were so rich that they probably wouldn't be interested in robbing me. I still felt unsafe. The gardens and entryways of the houses contained enough security measures to put any American embassy to shame, and they probably did so for a reason.

To a Norwegian it can be difficult to fathom the extent of the wave of crime and violence that washes over South Africa. Having kept my eyes open while visiting, I can only say that they seemed to have *serious* problems. A small notice in the Cape Times newspaper announced that the local train company was on the verge of bankruptcy. The reason, you ask? Extensive vandalism on train cars.

Of course, similar problems are faced by transportation companies in many parts of the world, but in Cape Town the problems were on an entirely different scale. It wasn't just that the vandals had self-confidence issues forcing them to write their names in as many places as possible to confirm their own existence. No, in Cape Town entire carriages were being dismantled. People walked away with doors, window frames and aluminium pipes, taking them to the scrap dealer to sell the metal!

Reading another newspaper, The Cape Argus, was equally depressing. To be fair, the editorial called for all South Africans to pull themselves together and stop whining about how often they were being kidnapped and robbed. Instead people should show each other and the world that there *were* positive sides to the country. But then the rest of the newspaper

followed. One article after the other told of women being raped by police chiefs, of drivers who had been robbed and murdered after having stopped for maidens apparently in distress, of corruption scandals among the city's politicians, and so on. The only trace of South African pride I found in the newspaper was in eleven sentences in a corner, where the Minister of Education declared that the country increasingly was being acknowledged for its research on the mysteries of Outer Space. Imagine that. It was a light in an astronomical darkness, in more than one sense. Sadly it was only of infinitesimal use.

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Just to be clear before we continue: I am an *eager* reader of newspapers. Also, or maybe even *particularly* when I travel. To me, newspapers are the most reliable sources of information thinkable. I trust them more than I trust the people I meet. People tend to lie when they talk to foreigners. Yes, they do. Even you.

Let's ignore those who lie because they are trying to scam you for money. Ordinary, orderly people are also more than willing to lie to foreigners. "Yes, it's incredibly cold in Norway", we say, because we sort of enjoy being looked upon as a hardy people, tougher than most, ignoring the fact that most Norwegians really live in regions with a fairly mild climate. "Norwegians go skiing whenever we can", we say, even though most don't. "Norwegians are slender, fit people." Well, guess what? Exactly. Just like in other countries, obesity is increasingly becoming a health issue in Norway as well.

There's no reason to be ashamed of this. The lying, I mean. All over the world people will for various reasons tell not exactly the whole truth when they talk to foreigners about their country and fellow countrymen. Sometimes it just happens because the local and the foreigner communicate in a language that isn't the mother tongue of either of them, or for just one of them at best. Tiny verbal misunderstandings may turn into amazing facts.

At other times the local may worry that the foreigner will be disappointed, maybe even insulted, if he learns that reality doesn't conform with the beliefs implanted in the foreigner's head. Most often,

however, the reason is that the local wants you to believe something about his country or his people, something that may not be *entirely* untrue, but which nevertheless is at least a flattering exaggeration.

A newspaper doesn't think that way. A newspaper doesn't think at all. All a newspaper tries to do, is to quote facts that at least some of the people who buy the newspaper already know. So for a tourist, reading the newspaper is a most reliable way to learn about what exactly goes on locally. At least it's a much more trustworthy source of information than to base your knowledge on what someone you happen to meet happens to tell you. An even better way to learn what is true is of course to stay in the country or the region long enough to let you see through the propaganda from the locals. But if that's your strategy, you won't have time to understand much of the world during your ridiculously short human lifetime.

So clearly you should buy newspapers when you travel. Even in the worst of censoring dictatorships, a newspaper read the right way will tell you much of what you need to know. Also, it is much easier to catch what is being said when you can spell your way through it at your own pace, instead of having to relate to a steady stream of rapid utterances about something you've never heard of before.

The smaller the circulation of the newspaper, and the farther away from the many centres of the world the newspaper is published, the better. From a tiny newspaper in a remote region you can expect both the articles and the advertisements to be packed with intrigues and tales, stuff which you after having leafed through the tourist brochures would never imagine existed there.

Oh, and one more thing. Since foreigners aren't "supposed to" be interested in local news, walking around with a newspaper under your arm is of great help if you want to disguise yourself as a native. Particularly if at the same time you don't wear Bermuda shorts or have a huge camera hanging around your neck.

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At the hostel the atmosphere had changed. It was now inhabited, well, actually "infested" would be a better word, by a large group of not overly sophisticated South Africans who were smoking, drinking, swearing and playing billiards. They reminded me of northern Europeans on vacation in southern countries, which I guess is sort of exactly what white South Africans are. Keiko wasn't there, I noticed with a happy sigh. After dinner I went to bed while the South Africans were still relatively pleasant to be around. For the first time since I don't know when, I said my evening prayers.

"God is dead!", was my first thought when the next morning I walked out of my room and found Keiko in the corridor. She embraced me eagerly, smiling from one side of her glasses to the other, clearly overjoyed by finally having found someone who she thought understood what she said. Well, she actually didn't say much at first, but through some intense pointing to her electronic language gadget, I gathered that she had just spent forty consecutive hours on a bus, travelling from Zimbabwe first west through Namibia and then down the entire west coast of South Africa. Just to meet up with me.

She had not eaten since Zimbabwe, as neither she nor her Visa card spoke anything but Japanese. I have seen Keiko's photos from Antarctica. Fifty were of penguins, ten of icebergs, fifteen of me and then about a hundred photos documented in detail every meal and snack she had feasted upon during the trip. Keiko doesn't function well without a steady supply of food.

Two giant sandwiches and a large cup of coffee (she wanted it black with lots of milk in it) was all it took for her to get back to her old, jabbering self, the one I knew from before. I'm not entirely sure what she said, but I got the impression that she agreed that first I would accompany her through Cape Town for a few days, and then I'd get her safely through the rest of Africa.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but it appeared to me that dragging along an Asian woman that ran around pointing and laughing hysterically whenever she saw something she had not seen before, and this was often as Cape Town isn't Tokyo, led to more attention from the

seedy street people of the city than I had enjoyed previously. No longer ignoring me, they now showed an open interest in both me and my company. I pulled Keiko inside the first and best museum we passed, both for safety reasons and secretly hoping that maybe the museum would be interested in acquiring a new, living item for their Oriental collections.

Unfortunately it was The South African Museum. True, their collection of stuffed animals, which to a larger degree than most stuffed animals definitely must have seen better days, *did* for some reason include a not particularly African polar bear, but apart from that the museum was all about South Africa. It was highly unlikely that they would buy a babbling Japanese, no matter how cheap they could have gotten her from me.

The first display cases indicated that the highlight of the museum could very well be the strange fish that the local chieftain's son had caught last week, but fortunately the choice of exhibits soon improved. The geology section was good, as it should be in a country as full of natural resources as South Africa. They were also big on African tribal masks, of course, and there was a literally large collection of whale skeletons. Matching the whales in scale were the Karoo creatures, animals that ruled South Africa *before* the dinosaurs! I quickly decided that we shouldn't be too sad about the extinction of the gigantic and voracious Karoo lizards. Apparently they became extinct because in the end they had nothing to eat but each other, which they happily did.

I was denied a visit to the museum's most reputed display, "The Lives of the Khoikhoi". This tribe is today almost as extinct as the Karoos. When the Europeans arrived in southern Africa, the Khoikhoi had recently established themselves there, after having dislodged some other people in the usual, not very sympathetic way of violent newcomers.

Always keen to document the everyday lives of savages, the British, at the height of their colonial efforts, decided to create a set of lifelike displays of typical Khoikhoi activities. To ensure authenticity it was done by making casts of living people performing everyday activities. Unfortunately, this technique wasn't compatible with the respiratory functions of the models, so quite a few Khoikhoi actually died in the

process. This little detail had surfaced just recently. While the debate raged over whether it was ethically correct or not to display the results of this human tragedy, understandably the exhibition was closed to the public.

The entire day I piloted my newly arrived friend between the safe harbours of Cape Town. She became a bit easier to control after we both witnessed an older tourist, presumably chosen according to Darwinian principles, being robbed by two glue-sniffing children. I was happy and relieved when evening fell and we were both safely back at the hostel.

When Keiko had eaten and eaten and eaten again and gone to bed exhausted, I quietly began to plan my escape. In great secrecy I booked a seat on a bus to Mosselbaai leaving a few days later. Cheered up by the prospect of regaining my freedom, I studied a fresh batch of newspapers. In Africa that's always an exciting enterprise, as not only their tabloids offer hilarious headlines, absolutely all newspapers contain unbelievable highlights.

The most cheerful report in the Cape Times was a follow-up to a mysterious episode on a city beach reported a few days earlier. A local rugby star had explained how a life-saver had rescued him when he had swum too far out from the beach and been caught in a dangerous undertow. Excited on-lookers to the rescue operation, however, had thickened the plot by claiming that the life-saver first had swum out to the rugby star, then returned to the beach and disappeared for a while, and then swum out again and apparently rescued him. Finally the event could be explained.

The only emergency the rugby star had been in, was the one caused by an enthusiastic wave. It had ripped off his swimming trunks and gone on to rapidly transport them in the general direction of South America. The rugby star didn't want to leave the water naked, as this was a family beach. Therefore he had lured the life-saver into the water, and then had him retrieve a new, tight, minimal piece of clothing to cover his bare essentials. And that's how you create front page news in South Africa.

Just like the North Cape isn't actually the northernmost point of Europe, neither is the Cape of Good Hope the southern extremity of Africa. Those honours belong to respectively Knivskjellodden and Cape Agulhas. Since those two aren't that picturesque, most tourists prefer to go to the North Cape Centre or the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve when they want to see the ends of the world. So did I.

My hostel ran day trips to the Cape Peninsula, and I had signed up for going the next morning. When Keiko saw me handing over money to the girl in the reception, she ran up to her and said "Same, same!" and pointed to me and my ticket. I put on an artificial smile, and thought that it would certainly be nice with some Japanese company on the narrow paths along the sheer drops by the coast, where dangerously strong gusts of wind often suddenly appear. While waiting for our departure I studied a map on the wall, locating the places with the most impressive precipices.

On our way south we made several stops. One of them was at the beach in the tiny town of Boulders. Most beaches in the Cape Town area offer lots of space for their visitors, since the average temperature in the sea throughout much of the year is a puny 8–12 degrees Celsius. But this beach was overcrowded and full of life. One day in the mid-1980s the beach had with no advance warning been invaded by penguins, and they're still there. Nobody knows exactly what they're doing there, or how long they're planning on staying, but the villagers of Boulders immediately and to this very day lost their access to the sea. Also, they had to accept that a permanently noisy and lively beach party became part of their lives, day and night.

My theory is that the group of birds is just a platoon of elite scouts, sent out to develop resistance against malaria. Like all foolish beings, the penguins desire world dominion, but so far they have been stopped every time they have approached the Equator. Despite what you may think, it's not because it gets too hot for them. The only thing that has stopped them from conquering the northern hemisphere, is the fact that they are highly susceptible to a strain of malaria that simply kills them. But give them a few million years more, and I'm sure we'll be seeing them on northern shores as well. I can hardly wait!



The Cape of Good Hope itself is one of the world's many undeniably special places. Two oceans as well as two climate zones meet there. Both of these encounters can be seen with the naked eye, as a noticeable difference in the colour of the two oceans, and as storm fronts and cloud formations almost continuously crashing into each other up in the sky.

The cliffs along the coast stand tall and proud, their looks complemented by a couple of lighthouses put on top of them. First a large and monumental lighthouse was built in the highest location possible, at Cape Point, 235 metres above sea level. They put it there to make it visible from as far away as possible. A few shipwrecks later, they put up a smaller lighthouse only 80 metres above the sea. You see, on a typical day a thick layer of low-hanging clouds will cover the Cape Point completely, and since boats and ships most often stay at sea level, they are more likely to actually see the lower lighthouse than the upper one.

From the Cape Point a twenty minute walk led to the famed Cape of Good Hope. The area surrounding the path was lush, fresh, steep, wet, blue, green and grand. The original vegetation was preserved, so there were no trees, just a wide selection of moss, shrubbery and flowers. Solid fences had been erected in front of the sheer drops down to the sea, so Keiko had no trouble surviving the walk.

“Cape of Good Hope indeed”, I thought as upon arrival there I eyed a new opportunity to get rid of Keiko. A group of baboons suddenly appeared over the hill. “Mannkees!”, Keiko beamed. I smiled, and



*Penguins on the beach in Boulders*

encouraged her to go over to the animals so that I could take a picture of her with them. Keiko is probably to this day blissfully unaware of the fact that the fangs of a full-grown baboon are longer *and* sharper than a lion's. And she certainly didn't know that the Cape Peninsula baboons are among the most aggressive animals in the world, having been fed regularly by stupid tourists for decades.



*Not Keiko*

My plan didn't work out that well. Keiko came out of it without as much as a scratch. She walked right up to the baboons, and for some strange reason they didn't raise an eyebrow at her, much less any teeth. Instead they allowed her to sit smiling in their middle, treating her as one of their own. The idyll lasted until the whole group suddenly ran off with frothing mouths and loud screams. They were on a mission to devastate the leather interior of a rental car, whose windows had been carelessly left open by a horrified Italian couple who had run out of luck.

Over supper that evening, Keiko pulled out a ticket to Mosselbaai for the very same bus

that I had planned to escape in. I resigned. We played backgammon for the rest of the evening, while I pondered upon who her spy was. It certainly wasn't me!

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The bus out of Cape Town was full of British backpackers. They, in turn, were full of some beverage of alcoholic contents, and they stunk so bad that I spent most of the trip like a dog with my nose out of the

window. Actually, I guess to someone with a sense of smell a thousand times better than ours, even a freshly showered person must smell pretty bad in a hot car. So now I know why dogs prefer to sit with their heads out of the window when travelling by car.

What had been a short bit on the map between Cape Town and Mosselbaai, turned out to be four hundred kilometres of road. It made me wonder with worry how long the *long* stretches on my itinerary were. I am used to long distances from my own stretched country. South Africa, however, is four times the size of Norway, and with its significantly higher concentration of British teens on pub-to-pub tours, I suspected I was in for much time with wind in my hair, hanging out of bus windows.

We left the wine country outside Cape Town. The farms became ever more scattered. There were almost no buildings to see as we drove into the foggy mist of the Klein Karoo's mountain range.

The mist hid the views along the road. I didn't mind. All the turns and bends of the road through the mountains made me nauseous, so I kept my eyes closed anyway. Eventually we left the greyness and arrived in another world on the other side of the mountains. Cows didn't graze the hills in this place. The moo-moos had been replaced by large herds of ostriches. I had never seen an ostrich outside of a zoo, so suddenly to see hundreds of them wandering in the fields by the road was a strange sight to me. At last my trip to Africa was turning, well, *Africish*!

Having grown up in a small village on the North Sea coast, coming to Mosselbaai was almost like coming home. Even with more than fifty thousand inhabitants it was definitely a cosy small town. Wherever I turned I could see fishermen dressed in coveralls. Most of them were black ("African Africans"? No, I'll stick to black), but their children sported blond hair, for reasons I never established. They ran freely in the streets even though it was late in the evening, so I decided to venture outside as well.

I went down to the harbour to watch the boats come in with the catch of the day. For sure, none of the fishermen had any reason to complain. They showed off impressive amounts of giant sardines. The fishermen all seemed to lack their front teeth, but they smiled happily nevertheless.

Either there's a fair amount of fighting going on in the village on Saturday nights, or it was just their front teeth they didn't brush well. All their other teeth sparkled brightly towards me there in the dusk on the docks, the men joking and laughing as the end of their working day drew closer.

Mosselbaai happened to become the spot on Earth where I celebrated my thirtieth birthday. I was quite happy about that. My only wish for the day was that I wanted to enjoy myself thoroughly, and the path leading out of town, west along the Indian Ocean, was perfect for that purpose.

The sky was a perfect blue and the sun shone bright, giving the scenery surrounding the path deep, rich and happy colours. All stones were partially covered in orange lichen. An eternal row of turquoise waves crashed loudly as they made landfall against the rocky shoreline. Fynbos and other plants in purple, yellow and green welcomed me around every turn on the path, and the smiles from everyone I met were astonishingly white. That is, I met people only during the first half hour of walking. They stood in the water filling buckets with the mollusc creatures that gave the town its name.

15–20 kilometres southwest of Mosselbaai lies Dana Baai, a small fishing village. Between these two places you can walk on the beautiful St. Blaize Trail. Doing that walk was both my gift and my challenge to myself that day. At first it seemed like an easy stroll, something I was certain to survive. Then the path made a sharp turn, and suddenly I came face to snout with something deer-like. This could have been a pleasant wildlife experience, except the beast was equipped with pointy, spiralled horns, two giant sabres of ungulate manhood. The beast was making guttural sounds. Really, really scary groans.

On the narrow ledge that we shared there was space neither for me nor for the animal to escape easily. First we were both scared stiff. At least I know I was. Then it seemed as if the four-legged one got a bright idea. Apparently it had decided that attack was the best defence in this case, and it started running straight towards me.

Two thoughts filled my head. 1) Whatever people say, it is *not* a good idea to stop wearing diapers before you turn 30. 2) Would I rather die from having two long horns perforate my stomach, or would I prefer to

end my life by flying with a one-way ticket onto the ragged cliffs fifty metres or so below? I stood for a second weighing pros and cons of my options against each other. Before I had picked my poison, the buck sailed over my head in a most elegant leap and quickly disappeared around the corner.



*From the St. Blaize Trail*

Enormously satisfied by still having a non-pierced navel, and stomach, I continued my walk through the beautiful cliff landscape. Just after noon my heart jumped up into my throat for the second time that day. Keiko sat seemingly exhausted on a rock next to the path. By now I was long since convinced that she was a psychic, so I didn't ask her what on earth she was doing there. Instead I just sat down and politely greeted her, "Harakiri sushi". After some pointing to devices and creative thinking, I learned that she had gotten up at six in the morning and started walking along the path she assumed I would follow, and now she figured that we might as well walk together. And so we did. Slowly.

We reached Dana Baai late in the afternoon. It was obvious that walking back to Mosselbaai before nightfall was not an option. Neither were there any other obvious ways to get back to Mosselbaai safely that day. Fortunately we found a fisherman in the quiet village. He pointed us in the direction of the main road back to town. We went there, and I put my thumb to work.

Keiko started trembling when she saw what I was doing. It was obvious that it wasn't because of her tired legs, but because she was scared. She babbled away, shook her head and pulled out her guidebook. In it she found a particular page, on which she pointed to a picture of a policeman watching over a black citizen who happened to be wearing handcuffs. The swarthy man didn't exactly put on a smile for the photographer, and in the background I could see a bloody stretcher being lifted into an ambulance. "Denn-gee-roos!", Keiko stuttered.

Later I got ample opportunity to leaf through her guidebook. Japanese guidebooks are not like others. Where the books I prefer to use mostly describe what there is to see, eat and do, Japanese publications seem to put more emphasis on covering in full what is dangerous, what *not* to do and which areas have more shops. If you've ever wondered why Japanese tourists standing around alone with a book on a city corner look so worried, you can stop wondering now. It's probably because they've just read that where they're standing, they are 112 times more likely to be robbed and/or murdered than in, say, Kyoto.

The picture in Keiko's book was meant to illustrate the notion that hitch-hiking in South Africa is not necessarily a good idea. This was in line with my own perception after having read the Cape Town newspapers, but in lack of any better suggestions I continued to let my thumb point in what I hoped was the direction of Mosselbaai.

It didn't take long before a pick-up truck stopped. The white farmer behind the steering wheel told us to go in the back. There were already two African families and a couple of farm animals brought along for the ride there, but they were happy to make room for us. Keiko's eyes completely filled her glasses, and she shook her head while muttering "Iie, iie, iie! Denn-gee-roos!", over and over again. When I got up she

realized that the alternative to following me would be to stand alone on the road somewhere infinitely far away from the nearest Japanese consulate. She made the right decision and quickly climbed up and sat down next to me.

The ride went fine. Keiko's face shifted rapidly between confusion and fear, keeping the rest of us entertained. I imagined it wasn't too often they saw Japanese people up close there, and judging from Keiko, that's the way it will stay for a long time to come. Yet we arrived safely in Mosselbaai by sunset, which made us both very happy. She was glad just to be alive, and I was pleased to have experienced that even in a country with widespread fear and uncertainty among its citizens, there were still people who trusted others enough to help them out in this simple way.

My birthday and our survival were both causes for celebration, so we went out for dinner at the local steak house. Half a kilo of entrecôte for me, the rest of the cow for Keiko. From her bag she pulled out a gift, one that I spent quite some time interpreting the meaning of. It was a typical Japanese hand fan. You know, one that folds up nicely, so it's easy to carry and bring out when you need some air in your face. It came with a drawing on one side of a fat, bald god who with all his might blew up a wind. "Kamikaze!", Keiko said and smiled. "The Wind of the Gods".

Now, I *do* believe that the gift was meant to bring me good luck, and not an allusion to the various suicide attempts I had been trying to lure Keiko into. The kamikaze wind was originally a special kind of storm in the Sea of Japan. In its time it had stopped

the Mongolians several times from invading Japan, by sinking their boats or otherwise kept them from crossing the sea. After this, the lethal wind has been associated with luck and success by the Japanese. Later the term kamikaze acquired a new meaning. The Japanese fighter pilots of World War II who ran their planes, and themselves, straight into the enemy's



ships became known as kamikaze pilots. I guess the Japanese put more emphasis on how their country escaped invasion a long time ago than on more recent war history.

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A trip to the local museum the next day taught me that the squid is the smartest molluscan creature in the world. They had one there who could open screw cap bottles and then squeeze itself into the bottle in a way that was painful to watch. There the patient hunter waited to see if anything edible would swim by. This, in turn, taught me that molluscs in general cannot be *that* smart, since even a more stupid being could easily see the squid hiding inside the transparent bottle.

Despite this fascinating display of marine intelligence I decided that I would leave the coast. With Keiko hard on my heels I travelled inland.

Oudtshoorn is an ordinary city in an extraordinary valley. That is, the valley itself isn't that unusual. There's a river and some land with lots of farms on it and the Swartberg mountains around it. What was unusual, at least to me, was that the farms were home to almost exactly a million ostriches! This alone was more than enough reason for me to visit the place, but it soon turned out that the area offered other attractions as well.

The African winter was more discernible there, a vertical kilometre from the sea. We rented bicycles and with them on a trailer behind us we were taken another few hundred metres up, to the top of the Swartberg Pass. Amusingly, the highest point was just called "Die Top". Seriously chilly gusts of air came down the mountainside, providing me with motivation to step hard on the pedals to get back down to the wonderful valley of fairy tale farms full of friendly fowls.

Unlike the wind, the road told me to slow down. It lay there the way it had been built more than a century ago. From a distance it looked as if it had been laboriously put together using grey Lego bricks. It reminded me slightly of the Inca Trail in Peru and of ancient mountain roads in Norway in all its robust yet decayed simplicity. The road wound down



the mountain through countless sudden turns, all the time offering splendid views of the valley. Clearly, the Maker of Everything had never intended anyone to build a road there.

With the rounded, dark mountains semi-covered by fluffy clouds and with the green valley below, I found the landscape to be almost cute, if that is something a landscape can be.



*The Swartberg mountains*

Another attractive feature of the Swartbergs is that they can be admired from the inside as well. Limestone grottos, the Cango Caves, were several kilometres deep and open for visitors. I took Keiko there, obviously with only the best intentions. For our own safety, we were not allowed to wander freely in the caves. We only got to walk on our own into the first, well-lit cave hall, where we would meet our guide.

Two guides arrived. One of them to do the tour in English, the other in German. Keiko understood nothing of what was said, and ended up standing confused between the two groups. I pointed to a dark crevice in the wall, smiled (it *was* a joke, really), and said “Japanese tour in there”. Keiko returned my smile, said “Oooo keeee!” and disappeared into the hole.

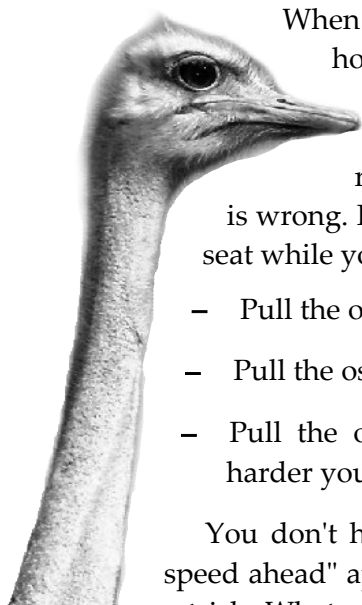
I was torn about what to do. Just then the guide said that we didn't have to worry about getting lost. He would make sure that no one was left behind, and besides, the maximum penalty for unauthorized walks in the caves was twenty-two years in prison and a giant fine, so he figured that we would probably want to stay close to him anyway, ha-ha.

Twenty-two years is a long time. I decided to tell the guide that I thought that maybe a Japanese girl had wandered off into that hole there. The guides and another cave ranger lit their flashlights and quickly went after her. It took them some time to locate her. In the darkness she had of course pulled out an ultra-hi-tech flashlight from her bag and walked off in the direction that intrigued her the most. Brusquely the men brought her back to the rest of us, while she still smiled as if she had fallen into a cauldron full of Prozac when she was a child. Then she joined the German group.

The caverns were nice. Lots of colours and peculiar stone formations gave me the feeling of being in the Hall of the Mountain King. When photographs were taken, the flash revealed that the walls were actually grey, but in the opalescence of the artificial lighting it was easy to be fascinated by the many natural sculptures with inspired names like the Bridal Chamber, the Fairy Hall, the Drum Room and the Crystal Forest.

Back in the daylight and on our bicycles we soon arrived at one of the largest ostrich farms in the valley, the country and the world. A fellow named Roland eagerly showed us around. There were ostrich eggs, young ostriches and *fully* grown ostriches everywhere. I even got to ride an ostrich. Well, maybe I shouldn't really mention that. In photos from the event, where I'm being assisted by Roland in straddling the creature, an untrained eye could get the wrong idea and think that I was doing something entirely inappropriate with the poor bird. But it was great fun!

Ostriches are simple-minded creatures. If you weigh in at less than 80 kilograms (176 pounds), an adult ostrich can carry you on its back. That's not to say that it *wants* to carry you around. So before you climb on, you put a hood over the ostrich's head. Like a giant cage bird the ostrich thinks that night has come and that it should calm down and rest. Then you put your feet over its wings and sit down as comfortably as you can.



When you think you're ready, you remove the hood. The ostrich will be confused by the sudden sunrise, but it quickly gathers that something is wrong. The bird's natural reflex is to start running away from whatever is wrong. Fast. Real fast. Your only job is to stay in your seat while you steer the ostrich using these basic controls:

- Pull the ostrich neck to the right = Turn right
- Pull the ostrich neck to the left = Turn left
- Pull the ostrich neck towards you = Brakes on. The harder you pull, the more sudden the stop.

You don't have to worry about how to accelerate. "Full speed ahead" appears to be the default setting for a troubled ostrich. What you *should* concentrate on is how to fall off as softly as possible. Riding an ostrich is not exactly something you do into the sunset. I tried to slide off backwards and hit the ground running, but instead I got myself a bump in the back of my head.

Roland had explained that sometimes an offended ostrich can become so worked up about being used as a horse, that after having thrown you off it will come running back at you to yell hard at you, and then some. If that happened, Roland said, I should start running away from the ostrich. This is of course a hopeless venture. So just before the ostrich got me, I should throw myself at the ground and lie still. According to Roland, the ostrich would then proceed to think like this:

- *Oh, I'm going to get him! That monkey descendant has got some nerve, sitting on my back like that! I'll show him a good kick in the butt, I will!*

- *Gotta run, gotta run, gotta run!*

- *What a strange human-shaped rock! I'd better jump over it.*

- *Gotta run, gotta run, gotta run...*

- *Why am I running? I think I'll stop and think about that for a while.*

And then you're safe.

"My" ostrich was kind enough to jump straight to that last thought, so I could just brush off the dust I had gathered and get back to learning more about ostriches. Roland bombarded me with bits and pieces of information, most of which I instantly archived in the "Useless and forgettable" section of my brain. Only the main facts stayed with me; Oudtshoorn was the first place in the world where they managed to domesticate ostriches. This happened in the late 1800s, making Oudtshoorn the ostrich capital of the world, which was a good thing in an age when an ostrich feather could be sold for more than its weight in gold. Ost-rich indeed!

The sudden wealth, "the great feather boom" as it was dubbed, was caused by the popularity of feathers among fashion designers in Europe and America. They were used to enhance hats and dresses, and for a long time it was impossible to meet the demand for them. The farmers built elegant manors, "ostrich palaces". Many of them can still be seen in Oudtshoorn. The first World War came and went. The times had changed. People had less money, and the fashion houses chose new and less extravagant styles where ostrich feathers played no part. Many of the farms went bankrupt. In fifteen years the number of ostriches in the valley collapsed from about a million to an estimated twenty-five thousand.

Slowly Oudtshoorn recovered. Today the valley exports literally tons of ostrich meat to the whole world. Painted ostrich eggs are best-sellers in souvenir boutiques all over South Africa. Even the fashion designers favour the ostrich again, now for its leathery, robust and lightweight skin.

On the fields we bicycled past there were tens of thousands of ostriches, happily unaware of being part of a major industry. I stopped and walked over to a fence to have a closer look at the birds. They behaved just like cows, being curious, social and innocent creatures. Soon I had dozens of ostriches pushing at each other to get as close to me as they could. There's something special about those trustful birds with the large, round and melancholic eyes.

My heart warmed, I went back to Oudtshoorn and had dinner. Ostrich steak, a lovely and loveable meal.

A night in Oudtshoorn spent freezing inside a sleeping bag and under a blanket made me return to the coast so quickly that not even Keiko managed to keep up with me. I said goodbye and smiled at her from my window seat on the bus. Her face was less than cheery.

My escape vehicle brought me to Knysna. It's pronounced "Nice? Nah", and I should have gotten the message. Knysna is the largest town on the Garden Route, a group of pleasant villages and towns along the coast east of Cape Town. The Garden Route is not at all the most exciting or interesting part of South Africa, but next to safaris in the north and Cape Town, it is nevertheless a heavily promoted tourist attraction. This has several explanations. For one, tourists can actually feel safe on their own there, as the risk of becoming victim of a crime there is low. Besides, I bet the local tourist board had figured out that the most profitable tourists are elderly, slow-going people who are easily tempted by anything called something with "garden".

Knysna consisted of a cluster of buildings on both sides of the main road, picturesquely located next to a small bay. Every second house seemed to be inhabited by an eccentric artist. Gardens and windows were embellished by abstract sculptures and paintings with lots of artificial colouring added. The place clearly attracted the kind of people who are unquestionably creative, but who still are unable to use their skills for anything useful. Knysna had that distinctive spirit of the free arts, like you can find it in certain cities and neighbourhoods spread all over the world, the regional capitals of the arty, if you like.

Places like that are always interesting to visit. It was easy to enjoy walking up and down the streets and let myself continuously be surprised by the art on display. This was all nice and well, but after a while I began to wonder what other things I could do in Knysna. "Go on a cruise in the bay, you'll like that", suggested the Indian matron of the hostel I stayed in.

That was one cheap hostel, by the way. It was so cheap that the bread at the breakfast included in the room price wasn't edible until it had spent five minutes in a toaster. Also included in the room price was an annoying, small boy who I repeatedly caught searching through the

contents of my backpack. I tried to put my dirty laundry on top, but not even that helped. Desperate to get on good terms with the snotty brat, I decided to try the balloon trick.

When I travel I always carry a pack of party balloons in my backpack. They are perfect for befriending village people. First the young ones, then their parents, and in the end the chieftain will see that you are a good person, one who should be allowed to put up his tent nearby. Balloons can also be traded, for instance for food on a bus ride of unexpected duration. Or if you're suddenly surrounded by kids begging you for candy, balloons are better for their teeth. The possibilities you have when you own a bag of balloons are many, and now I discovered a new one.

As soon as I pulled out a balloon, the boy stopped moving. His eyes grew to double their normal size and the rascal ran screaming down the hall to seek comfort from his mother. She explained to me that he had recently had a traumatic experience with a balloon exploding in his hands, and the memory of this had stuck well to his brain. So all it took to keep him away from my stuff was to attach a balloon to my backpack. I also enjoyed chewing gum and blowing small gum bubbles in his presence. Popping them paralysed him every time, before he ran off and hid in the garage.

With the balloon on guard I could safely leave my backpack and head down to the harbour. A sign outside the ticket office of "The Featherbed Experience" promised a memorable cruise in the lagoon and a delightful guided tour of a nature reserve on the other side of the bay. I started having second thoughts when I saw a busload of retired people slowly crawl onto the boat. Both my guidebook and Madame India had recommended the tour, so I walked on anyway.

The "Featherbed" was the inner part of the lagoon. When the Europeans first started rounding the Cape of Good Hope to travel to Asia, this had been known as a great place to seek shelter from the large waves of the Indian Ocean. Captains could bring their ships there for a good night's sleep. They might as well have chosen a less alluring name for the place. No fewer than 46 shipwrecks lay strewn across the seabed near the entrance to the lagoon. Many a sailor would rest there in eternity.

On our way to the nature reserve we sailed past the Thesen Islands, named after some Norwegian emigrants. In 1869 they had been on their way to a new life in New Zealand, when they sailed into the bay for the night. Their ship sank, and the family had to come up with a new plan. Luckily they were skilled carpenters and shipbuilders, and they started cutting down trees to build a new vessel. Before they knew it, they had established a lumber yard and a shipyard and found that they could make a good living from it. The Norwegians chose to stay in Knysna and came to play an important role in it's development.

The lumberjacks were so efficient that today the remaining forests near Knysna have been declared protected primeval forests. The Thesen family had left the area, but the Thesen Islands were under heavy development, now as some sort of an African Venice. Out in the lagoon, the islets had attracted a large number of luxury dwellings surrounded by canals, a modern-day moat efficiently shielding the inhabitants from the worries of the mainland. There were restaurants out there as well. I was sad to find that none of them served their food with Thesen Island dressing.

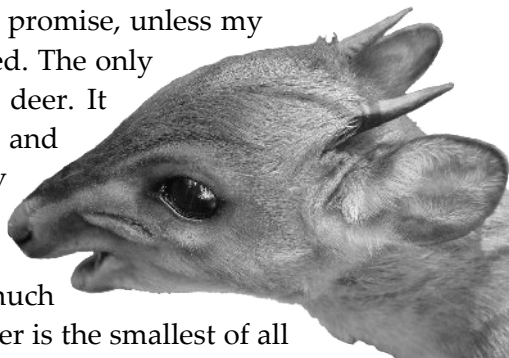
The crossing came to an end, and it had been pleasant. The gentle waves had made me relax. But when I walked off the boat, the whole tour began to smell of camphor and mentholated mints.

We were loaded onto a tiny train thing, which soon chugged miserably up the hill from the quay. After fifty metres, at the top of a steep slope, we came upon a perplexed turtle. The guide was excited; "Wow! Look at that! We are unbelievably lucky today! By pure chance, a giant sea turtle has left the sea to enjoy a few rays of sun here!" The train tilted heavily to one side as fifty elated tourists with either grey or no hair leaned over to photograph the poor reptile. A bit further on it became clear that not only was the slope steep enough to stop even the friskiest turtle from climbing it, there was also a tall fence in place to prevent anyone from coming or leaving.

Sixty metres later we made another stop. "Whoa! Here we actually have two blue herons, the national bird of South Africa! Spectacular!", the guide shouted. "And they have almost not had their wings clipped either", I mumbled, less enthusiastic. Continuing like this we moved

slowly through the nature reserve, a place far less beautiful than the Mosselbaai coastal trails or even the mountain road in Oudtshoorn. Soon I couldn't take it any more. I jumped off the train as it moved ahead at full steam, we must have done least three kilometres per hour, and I ran off into the forest. The guide, slightly panicked, shouted something after me about there being wild animals in the forest.

This turned out to be an empty promise, unless my temporarily maddened self counted. The only slightly wild animal I saw was a deer. It was a real deer with antlers and everything, but it was extremely skittish and quickly disappeared into the scrub. Standing only forty centimetres tall that wasn't much of a challenge for it. The blue duiker is the smallest of all cloven-footed animals.



I also happened upon an interesting insect. I have spent enough time in dirt cheap hotels to be able to recognize a cockroach from a long distance. This was a cockroach, but not a normal one. It was fairly large, almost ten centimetres long, and it didn't seem at all scared or worried by my presence. While a normal cockroach will run for cover at the slightest disturbance, this one just kept cockroaching no matter how close I came, as if it knew I wasn't going to harm it.

Now, when an animal or insect acts indifferently like that, there's always a good explanation for it. That'll be either A) You're in Antarctica and the creature has never faced evil humans before, or B) There are good reasons, obvious or hidden, for not bothering the thing. Since I wasn't in Antarctica, I of course had to investigate further. I got the insect up on a stick and poked at it with a straw. Explanation B struck. Hard.

The cockroach quickly realized that it was dealing with an ignorant idiot. With a sigh it shrugged its shoulders, leaned back and started emitting a whistling sound of astonishing intensity. It was obviously a warning signal ahead of an incoming attack. The attack followed without delay. Little Mister Cockroach raised his butt and produced a small canon

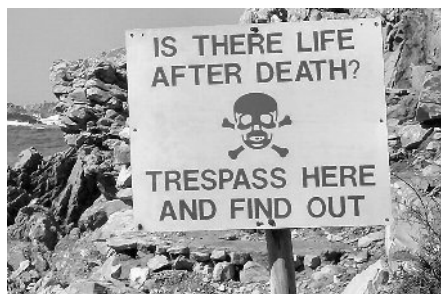


out of its, well, you know, back there. A thin, small jet of a mysterious liquid matter was sprayed in my general direction, and it stunk. It stunk of a dead man and his wet dog. I chose to give the insect some privacy and retreated quickly. It was the most marvellous discovery I made that day. The cockroach seemed less impressed by my performance.



*A howling skunkbutt cockroach*

As far as I knew, I was the first human to observe this species, so of course I had to name it. Should you ever happen upon an insect with looks and behaviour fitting this description, congratulate yourself on having met the howling skunkbutt cockroach.



*An empty promise on the beach*

Exiting the forest I came down to a nice beach. I sat down in the sun and watched oysters being harvested in the bay. Oysters do not exist naturally in the area, and strangely that is exactly why it is such a perfect place to breed them. Since they "shouldn't" be there, neither are there any oyster parasite algae around to worry about.

Algae like that can be the downfall of an oyster farm, as they love nothing more than to invade oysters and make them unsuitable for people to eat. Without the algae around, growing oysters can be a sweet business.

All you need to grow oysters is a place with suitably clean and nice water, and you have to buy "oyster seeds", typically from France or Chile. Put the seed in the water, and eighteen months later you have lots of small and tasty (by which I of course mean tasty in an oyster kind of way) delicacies. If you wait twice that long, you'll get big ones. To me,

however, two days in Knysna was more than enough. Then again, I wasn't expecting my stay to make me neither more pearly nor edible.

The local newspaper didn't do much to persuade me to stay longer. The Knysna-Plett Herald's lead story, spread all over the whole front page and the following two pages, was about a young man who had killed some dogs because they had been harassing cows and sheep in his neighbourhood. Seen in the light of the cruelties chronicled by the Cape Town newspapers, I thought that making such a big fuzz out of a relatively harmless event had to be a sure sign of the area's innocence.

Unfortunately, that's when I saw a small notice tucked away in a corner in the back of the newspaper. It put the dog killings in perspective by listing the arrests that had been made by the Knysna police the previous week: Fourteen armed assaults, one normal assault (whatever that means), two cases of domestic violence, nine men had spent a night in the drunk cell, there had been one case of illegal consumption of alcohol in public, eight burglaries, three possessions of ganja (hashish), three rapes, five cases of shoplifting, four other thefts, two cases of contempt of the court, three incidents of malicious vandalism, and, saving the best for last, four murders!

That's a pretty impressive amount of crime, considering it had all been performed by just sixty thousand people in Knysna in one week. If this was a normal week, and the size of the notice certainly didn't indicate anything else, Norway would have to increase its murder rate some 250 times over to keep up with the Knysnas. *If* the Norwegians had done that, I bet that our newspapers too would have chosen to ignore the *real* tragedies, and instead concentrated on minor felonies like dog shootings.

Where all this crime went on was hard to understand when I walked in the streets full of art galleries. All I could see were white, smiling faces. But on a hill above the happy town loomed a township, a large number of shacks and sheds, the homes of the unemployed, poor and more or less desperate black people. I walked up the hill and had a look around. In the sunshine it actually seemed like a nice place to live. It had the atmosphere of a large campsite. Friendly faces everywhere, children playing with each other and with chickens that walked around as they pleased. Laundry in

a hundred colours hung waving between the houses. I could see no crimes taking place there either. Unfortunately the sun only shines during the day.

I walked back to town in time to watch the sunset. When darkness fell, men from the township suddenly appeared in the town centre. Wearing Rastafarian caps and colourful t-shirts they occupied just about every street corner along the main road. With faces void of expression and nervous head movements they sold marijuana, or dagga as it's called in southern Africa. Their business seemed to go well. The youth of Knysna probably needed all the excitement they could get, and most of the excitement in Knysna was sold by the gram.

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Guess who I met on the bus out of Knysna? Yes, indeed! Keiko was there, with a smile as wide as ever. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised, but it still had the same effect on me as my balloons had on the kid at the hostel. While on the surface I managed to stay in control of myself, inside my head I ran off, screaming for my mum.

My worries about Keiko's return were quickly forgotten when we met Kenji at the hostel in Jeffrey's Bay, South Africa's premier surfing spot. Kenji was a Japanese surfer, or more precisely, a surfer wannabe. This was his third week in Jay Bay, as the übercool surfer dudes of course had renamed it, and no one had yet heard him speak. He had the newest, most expensive and most advanced surfing gear that could be obtained, but his success rate when it came to getting up on the board was rather low. To be a cool guy in one of the surfing capitals of the world was clearly more a dream than something he could actually do. He was visibly depressed.

And that's why everyone at the hostel were touched to see how he and Keiko both suddenly blossomed like cherry trees in the spring when they met each other. "Soko, soko, soko! Fujitsu hokkaido wakarima-su!", they bubbled. And they just kept going for hours, speaking continuously and simultaneously, literally jumping of joy from having found someone they could talk to. It had obviously been a while since the last time for them both. In their ecstasy I quietly slipped out to explore the town.

Sixteen degrees Celsius in the sea in Jay Bay was not enough for me to work on becoming better at surfing. Neither were there many others braving the chilly water. Although the beach supposedly had the best surfing waves in the world, the world's best surfers were certainly not around. So there was not much to do and not much to see in Jay Bay that day. Fortunately the beach could be used for tanning as soon as I found a place to lie down with some shelter against the ice-cold wind. I was finally able to comfortably sunbathe for the first time in Africa, two weeks after I had left Norway in the middle of a heat wave. Our world is truly a strange one.

The main story in *The Star*, a Johannesburg newspaper, was also strange. A carjacking is when a bad and usually armed guy hijacks a car and forces the driver to take him to some secluded spot. There the carjacker will claim ownership of the car and often commit a bit of raping and murdering of the previous owner. Carjackings are so frequent in Johannesburg that they're rarely even mentioned in the news. But this story was about a carjacking out of the ordinary.

A white woman and her two children had been carjacked, and they were just minutes away from being left without a car in the middle of a bad neighbourhood in a Johannesburg township. It's a situation with poor prospects no matter how you look at it. But then the guy who had ordered a white Volvo arrived and started to complain about the fact that this was not a white Volvo, it was a *beige* Volvo! "Get me another car, and in the right colour this time, if you would be so kind!", he said and returned the keys to the beige car to the lucky and bewildered woman. He even gave her directions for where to drive to return safely to the white world.

Now, *there's* a sad sunshine story for you!

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It was easier to spend the time in Port Elizabeth, a larger city on the coast a bit further north. That was partially because Keiko had decided to stay longer in Jeffrey's Bay to continue her Japanese happy-dance with Kenji, but also because Port Elizabeth really tried to keep its visitors satisfied. Actually, maybe they tried too hard. I rented a room a couple of

blocks from the beach in what was just about the only small house left there. Most buildings near the sea had been torn down to make room for a number of high-rise hotels and apartment blocks. That was probably the only way to make room for all those who wanted a home with a view towards the sea, and I'm sure it had been done with only the best of intentions. It was nevertheless sad to see the original, colonial Port Elizabeth be replaced by modern concrete.

I'm not suggesting that the best reason for visiting Port Elizabeth is to see its museum, but the colour of my skin (bright red) after my day on the beach in Jeffrey's Bay indicated that spending some time indoors would be a good idea. The museum was of the typical African kind, containing a little bit about a lot, and a lot about almost nothing.

In this case, the almost nothing was a huge exhibition about the Great Storm of 1902. No less than 27 ships had sunk right there in the harbour of Port Elizabeth. All sorts of strange items had randomly been salvaged from the shipwrecks and put on display in the museum. Then there were various outfits and traditional dresses from South Africa throughout the ages. For some reason most of the dresses were in typical European styles from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, but they had thrown in a couple of grass skirts as well, apparently as an afterthought.

One section in the museum was called "The Curious", and that it was. Actually the only thing the different displays there had in common was a certain weirdness. The first treasure I found was a human foetus in its fifth month, well preserved in a jar. "Eigte" ("Real"), was written in Afrikaans on the sign in front of it. I'm sure it was. To its left stood two larger bottles, one containing a whale foetus, the other a puppy with two heads. Maybe it was meant to symbolize that all creatures on Earth must live in peace side by side. I don't know.

Delving deeper into The Curious I found a giant hairball from a cow, complete with a long explanation of how cows ruminate by sending balls like the one on display back and forth between the different compartments of the stomach.

Judging from its impressive display case, the most unique treasure among The Curious things was an 8x10 centimetre piece of cloth. "Part of

an Abyssinian king's tent" was the only explanation offered. It certainly looked like any piece of cloth to me.

Having enjoyed these gems I was curious to know what kind of stuff they *didn't* put on display, but kept hidden in their archives instead. "Abnormal ribs from goat" I thought belonged in an inaccessible corner of the backroom, but instead they had been given a prominent place. To me they looked like normal ribs from a goat. Then again, I'm not really a goat rib connoisseur.

Much excited by all this, as you can imagine, I was forced to pay a visit to the toilets. A plaque next to the sink said "Akuvumelekanga ukuba kusetyenziswe ez! Zindlu zanganese njengezindlu zokuhlambela enkosi". It turned out to be a lengthy way to notify visitors that bathing was prohibited in the sinks as well as in the toilets. If the woman in charge of selling tickets and translating museum signs could be trusted, that is. She hesitated with revealing the true nature of the text to me, so she was probably serious. Some of the tribal locals who came to town to visit the museum every now and then apparently had not yet acquired sufficiently sophisticated museum habits.

For once I exposed myself to McDonald's. I can go without a Big Mac longer than a camel can go without water, but in Port Elizabeth the fast food giant's outlet on the beach offered a view that was hard to stay away from. A herd of enormous southern right whales hunted for whale snacks just a few metres from the burger joint. They patrolled the waves back and forth along the beach the whole day, indifferently finding their way through the crowd of surfers. In the beginning the surfers just lay fascinated on their boards and watched the show, but by noon they had become visibly annoyed by the giant chunks of meat and blubber getting in the way of all the best waves. I happily ordered another chocolate milkshake. And another one.

Time forced me to move on. The next day a bus took me almost a thousand kilometres north, from the pretty coast in the "white south" to the centre of Zululand, the KwaZulu-Natal province. Our driver was a fresh graduate from the national tourist guide academy. He introduced himself as Jay and told us that we were in for a treat, as he would give us

plenty of interesting information about all the spectacular sights along the road to Durban.

Shortly thereafter we received our first treat; "We're now driving out of Port Elizabeth." An hour later he said "I think that was Grahamstown we just passed through." And that's how it went. "Here's a bridge." "That's Umtata, I think Nelson Mandela has a house somewhere around here." I appreciated his comments being so brief and concise, as Jay was unable to say anything at all without turning his head towards the passengers and looking us in our eyes. Maybe that's an excellent skill to have when you're a tourist guide in general, but while driving, especially in South Africa, it's just plain stupid.

No one really listened to him anyway. That is, we all listened intently when he suddenly left a hundred metres of smoking rubber on the road in a way that almost put us all to death, yelling "Where the hell did that *cow* come from!?"

It was indeed a cow. I wish I could say it was a big, fat, scary cow, but it wasn't. It was a meagre heap of bones wrapped in a shabby cowhide. We had entered Zululand.

North of Port Elizabeth, a distinctly European city in good shape and with Victorian buildings, lies the former Ciskei "homeland". The apartheid presidents Vorster in the 1970s and Botha in the 1980s still dreamt of a predominantly white South Africa, where the black population was to be kept out of sight in segregated homelands. There they would manage themselves under the watchful eyes of the white government. Although the black population constituted about seventy-five percent of the country's total population, only ten percent of South Africa's area was given to them to live in. To ensure that they wouldn't have too much fun living there on their own, the homelands were located in areas with barely any roads, industry or infrastructure for electricity and potable water.

All the blacks were classified into ten loosely defined tribes. These tribes, of course, had precious little to do with the actual population groups that lived in South Africa when the white man arrived. This didn't worry the apartheid government much. After being classified, people

were forced to move to the homeland they "belonged" to. Unless you had a special permission to go and work for a white employer somewhere else, you had to stay in your homeland. Black people were not even allowed to travel from one homeland to another without a permit.

In most cases those who were allowed to work outside the homelands were men. Because of this, many men had to live apart from their wives and children for long periods of time. The homelands were heavily overpopulated, and what natural resources had been there originally were soon exhausted. In other words, the homeland system functioned exactly as intended by the government. People starved and suffered.

By the time I got there the homeland system had of course long since ceased to exist, but the former homelands were still the poorest regions in the country. It was easy to see that we were now entering one of them. Lush farmland was replaced by dry and unproductive fields. The roads were suddenly full of potholes. Cows and goats roamed about freely, including in the middle of the road. There was a noticeable change in the buildings as well. Houses of the European kind became rarer. Instead there were sheds resembling bricks with chimneys, and simple, round straw huts, except they weren't made of straw, but of concrete. Having changed the building materials, the houses were still traditional with only one large room with a fireplace in the middle. Strangely, even though there were no visible streets, telephone poles or other modern development, the houses still stood neatly in rows, as if some kind of city planner had put them there. Maybe that was even the case.

Judging from the long lines at the water pumps along the road, the houses probably had no water installed. The most common hair style in the two former homelands we passed, Ciskei and Transkei, indicated that people had access to ample supplies of electricity, and that they were no strangers to using it. It was like driving through a troll catalogue, people's hair pointed skywards all over the place. Still, electricity must have been scarce. The whole day I saw many a buxom mama with a goat in a leash and a pile of firewood balanced perfectly on the top of her head, presumably on her way home to cook dinner on an open fire. When the sun came down and night fell, it got *really* dark. The only light came from the flames of numerous grass fires spreading up the hillsides.



Finally I had arrived somewhere that actually looked like the "real" Africa and in accordance with my expectations. Big and beautiful women in large, colourful dresses danced home in the evening sun. Impenetrable bush hugged the road. The most visible indication that people were using their heads was all the stuff they balanced on top of them. Most of the trade in the area took place less than three metres from the traffic and without the use of any cash registers.

Even though people lacked electricity and TVs at home, their evenings were not spent in boredom. Instead of sitting on a sofa, drinking coffee and endlessly watching the news and sitcoms, people went to the main road. There they stood around and chatted while they waited for something interesting to happen. And something of interest seemed to happen often enough, if I am to judge from the many car wrecks along the road. It wasn't the fault of the locals if a day went by without a car accident. They certainly did their part to make things happen. Wide smiles and terrified faces kept popping up in front of our car as the locals danced and ran between the vehicles driving at roughly a hundred kilometres per hour.

It is possible that car accidents were looked upon not only as entertainment, but also as an opportunity for acquisitions. The wrecks by the road were picked clean of any loose or detachable parts, only the vehicle skeletons were left. I saw a girl embellished with two furry dice around her neck. She admired herself in a Toyota side mirror she held in her hands.

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I had always wanted to go to Durban. Unfortunately, the reason was that I thought Durban was in India, and that it would probably be an excellent base from which to explore nearby hill stations and picturesque tea plantations. Okay, so that was probably stupid of me, but the matter of the fact is that as soon as you start believing this, it's easy to continue to do so. Durban is a place you never hear much about in Norway. After a couple of hours of city walking, in the shade of a Swiss girl giant who strangely enough was more afraid than me to walk alone, I realized why. There *isn't* much to say about Durban.

The city has more than three million people and is the capital of the KwaZulu-Natal province. No, that's not "KwaZulu-Natal". It's pronounced "*\*CLICK\*Zulu-Natal*". The guttural sound that most of us use only for snoring has been developed by the Zulus to become a functional part of their language. And it's not even a rare phenomenon in their speech. The mysterious clicks appear all the time in the most unexpected places. It's nigh on impossible to learn unless you start practising as a child.

My first impression was that Durban had to be the ugliest city in the world. I had not yet been to Russia, obviously. This notion was probably intensified by the fact that I came there straight from the well-kept Port Elizabeth, but Durban *is* a foul, grey and noisy place. It desperately tries to be Miami, with its enormous Art Deco buildings on the beachfront. Unfortunately, their façades rise so high up into the air that they almost disappear in the smog.

Equally high are the crime rates in Durban, on a well deserved second place in South Africa after Johannesburg. People handling cash in shops and kiosks were all sitting behind bars and bullet-proof windows, with armed guards in place at every door. As soon as money was handed over, the person inside the fortress would quickly throw it into a safe with a time lock. It was depressing to watch, as I realized that it probably was like that for a reason.

When evening suddenly arrived and I was somewhere I shouldn't have been, there was only one thing to do. I slunk my way back to the hostel through alleys and backstreets that were as dark and shady as possible, so that no one would see me.

I glimpsed a trace of grim humour in a newspaper that reported on the difficulties the city's prestigious golf club experienced. For years they had suffered from cows straying onto the green and eating it. They had built fences to try and stop the cattle, but the fences were stolen again and again. So the feast of the cows continued. Then they had tried planting a wall of trees to keep the animals out. The trees were stolen as well. It was rough times in Zulu City.

The surfers on the beach in the middle of the city had taken the usual surfer laziness to a new level. They didn't even bother to swim out to wait for the waves. Instead they just sauntered to sea on top of long piers, jumped in and surfed back to the beach. Repeat.

I was happy to leave Durban, but the journey got off to a bad start. First, I was seated next to Maureen from Canada, who was consuming a large bag of buns at an impressive pace. Strictly speaking, she should have bought two tickets to justify the amount of space she required to sit comfortably. But that was okay, I managed fine on my half-a-seat. What I found harder to cope with, was that as I sat there and practised making click-sounds without choking, Maureen first turned silent, then green, and suddenly a fountain of breakfast bun goo cascaded forcefully out of her mouth and into the plastic bag I had brought, containing postcards I had planned on writing during the day. "Not to worry. It's just my malaria medication kicking in", Maureen said, and had another bun.

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Both malaria and malaria medication are at the same time scary and fascinating stuff. Malaria is an illness that affects half a billion people every year, killing one, two or three million of them, depending on which source you believe. No other disease spreads more efficiently. We have tried in many ways to stop it, but we just can't do it.

Exactly how and why malaria medicine works is still a mystery to science. Using it can to some people lead to psychedelic experiences recognizable only to the most eager flower children of 1968. Other users have been driven by the medicine to murder the person next to them on the bus, themselves or their families back home several years later. At least that's the claim of the rumours you constantly hear when you travel in tropical regions.

From Medieval Italian, "Mala aria" translates to "bad air". European explorers realized early on that there was a connection between the outbreak of the illness and staying in places with unmoving water and damp, moist air. These are of course great places for mosquitos to prosper. Still, as we all know, mosquitos do not limit themselves to pestering people near swamps and bogs. No, the mosquitos are almost

everywhere, and they're happy to attack not just humans. Apes, frogs, birds and large deer are some other favourite targets. If there's blood in a body they will go for it, whether they'll have to penetrate skin, feathers, fur or scales first.

The keenness of hunting mosquitos is possibly only eclipsed by the willingness of biologists to map the diversity of species on our planet. Inconceivably they have managed to identify more than three thousand different species of mosquitos. Some four hundred of them belong to the anopheles branch of the mosquito family tree. These are the mosquitos who can carry the malaria parasites that make people sick. In some cases so sick that we die, other times only so sick that we wish we were dead. The risk of actually dying of malaria depends on which malaria parasite you are exposed to. There are four different kinds; vivax, malariae, ovale and falciparum. The last one is the one you really should worry about. It kills.

You may take slight comfort in the fact that to the mosquito, *you* are the carrier of the infection. In many ways it is just as correct to say that *we* infect the mosquito with malaria as the other way around. Both human and mosquito are slaves of the malaria parasite.

To outwit us in our attempts to eliminate them through the use of medicaments, the parasites use a complicated life cycle which begins and ends neither here nor there. To understand how it works, we will start with a healthy, young and pregnant mosquito of the anopheles family. She, the poor thing, buzzes around in the air, desperately seeking just the *tiniest* amount of blood to ripen her eggs with. Sooner or later she finds what she seeks: A human. The person is probably sleeping, or maybe not. It doesn't matter. He won't see the mosquito anyway, as she sensibly hunts only in the dark.

The mosquito prepares its proboscis and plugs it into the human source of life-giving, thick, red liquid. Most often this is good for her. Other times, though, when the mosquito has picked a human that carries malaria, Miss Mosquito will leave its prey as an infected and soon to be sick insect.

You may feel sorry for yourself if you ever wake up in the morning with a pounding head and a dysfunctional stomach. Well, imagine how it would be to feel like that when your expected lifetime is about two weeks, and you know that you have to go to work today no matter what. That's what it's like to be a mosquito with malaria.

The parasites acquired from the human blood stream find their way to the mosquito's stomach. If the temperature both inside and outside the mosquito's body is at least 16 degrees Celsius, the malaria parasites will start having massive orgies in there. As a result of all this passion, the rascals will melt together and fasten themselves as cysts to the walls of the stomach. We know precious little about what this feels like to the mosquito, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was a triggering factor behind the suicidal behaviour often observed in mosquitos.

Sooner or later the cyst breaks, and the parasites again move through the fragile body of the mosquito. They meet up again near their host's salivary glands. The next time the mosquito strikes a human blood vessel, the parasites will accompany the chemicals that are injected into the human by the mosquito to keep the blood flowing. In a few seconds or minutes, the parasites will have reached the human's liver.

There they calm down for at least eleven or twelve days. Some of them will remain dormant for a long time. Months and years can go by before they develop any further. Others will almost immediately start invading and destroying red blood cells as they spread through the human body and excrete poisons. The new carrier of the disease gets sick from the poisoning and must lie down, unable to defend him- or herself against new bloodthirsty mosquitos. And there you are, the cycle is kept going, apparently forever and ever.

For obvious reasons our battle against malaria has focused on eliminating only one of the two involved carriers of the parasite, namely the mosquito. Many methods are in use, everything from the universal, forceful pat on the mosquito's back, to mosquito nets, repellents, burning spirals and even extensive use of DDT in areas where they can't afford to stop using it. All these actions limit the spreading of malaria, but it's not at all enough to make neither mosquitos nor malaria parasites go away.

Unless we get rid of the mosquitos, we will not get rid of malaria. Therefore antimalarial drugs is something tropical travellers must relate to, whether they like it or not.

Fortunately there are many ways to avoid being infected by malaria. Sadly, the safest method is to stay in polar regions, preferably far away from any international airport. If you insist on going to the tropics, you will have to stay inside air-conditioned rooms and make sure that you keep your skin covered in a highly toxic liquid. This is hardly compatible with having memorable travel experiences.

A wide range of drugs meant to save you from malaria are available if you want to go to places where there's a real risk of meeting up with infected mosquitos. This kind of medication will not stop malaria from entering your body. Instead it aims to prevent the parasites from developing the disease in your body. Sounds good? The problem is just that, well, actually there are several complicating factors.

The problem that should be of most interest to you, is that the medicine may very well not work at all. Every time we come up with a drug that kills malaria parasites, the parasites will sooner or later develop a strain that is resistant to our chemicals. If you read the small print that came with your medicine, you typically find that medicine X gives you seventy percent protection when travelling in area Y. Hmm. We're talking about life and death here. *Your* life. How many condoms would be sold if they were marketed like this: "With this thing on, only three out of ten women will become pregnant"? How popular would bungee-jumping be if the brochures on it said "Jump off a ridiculously tall bridge here! (The bungee cord occasionally snaps)"? Not much, is my guess. But okay, if you know exactly where you're going and you have updated information on what strains of malaria parasites are at large there right now, you *can* find a drug that will give you decent protection.

Then comes the second problem, which is also the reason why we will *never* get rid of malaria completely. Medicine that actually works is expensive. To poor people they are prohibitively expensive, and even to a tourist on a long-lasting trip the cost can be harder to swallow than the pills themselves, as the medicine must be taken both before, during *and*

after the duration of the trip. Two weeks of travelling may mean seven weeks on drugs. If you travel on a limited budget, you may end up spending more money on protecting yourself against malaria than on food or accommodation.

Some of the drugs, typically those that actually work, can only be used for a limited amount of time before to continue taking them becomes seriously harmful to your body. These medicines will of course never be an option for those who live permanently in malaria areas. And there are plenty who do, so the parasites will for a long time to come have lots of victims to attack.

The high price of the medicine may be related to the third problem, namely the many potential side effects. The pharmaceutical giants must pay good money to print the pamphlets that accompany the pill bottles, where all known side effects of the medicines are listed. In addition I guess the companies have to pay an army of lawyers for their assistance as new side effects present themselves.

The number of identified side effects from taking normal anti-malaria drugs is vast. Your skin may become more sensitive to sun, which isn't really that dangerous, but neither is it desirable when the reason you take the pills is because you're in the tropics. You may experience nausea and vomiting, cramps, rashes, loss of hair, an irregular heartbeat and dizziness. You lose your balance, and in return you just get paranoia and problems with sleeping, often due to frantic nightmares. If you're really unlucky, the medicine can give you anxiety attacks and psychotic reactions. That another side effect is depression can hardly come as a surprise. Tragically, it has also been documented that individuals have been driven to clinical madness and suicide after taking some of these drugs. Because the chemicals are active and stay in the blood for a long time, the side effects can be experienced for several months after you stop taking the pills.

Fortunately only a few people experience the most severe side effects. It's still easy to be scared off by the long list of worst case possibilities. Especially when at the same time you know that no one really understands why or how the medicine works. The chemicals used to

make the drugs have been extracted from various rainforest plants. I can imagine how a witch doctor with a feather hat and an eerie wooden mask took a bearded white scientist into the jungle and pointed out the plants that his tribe always had used to cure malaria. The white man brought the plants back home, analysed them, scratched his head and did some testing on rats. Sure enough, they seemed to work. Granted, they had some side effects, but who cares about that? He certainly didn't. Now he's sitting somewhere by a swimming pool with lots of servants running around, hoping for the best while his bank account keeps filling up.

Before you choose to take the drugs, you *must* give them a test run at home. Maybe you'll discover that your trip probably will be better without the medicine after all. *If* you find the right medicine for your destination, at a price you're fine with and without you starting to see pink elephants the second you swallow the pills, there's still at least one key point to consider: Should you do what's best for *you* or what's best for the greater good, here represented by the lives of people living in the area you visit?

Despite what you may think, malaria can in many cases easily be cured. If you get sick, one treatment consists of taking a large dose of the same drugs that are usually taken to prevent you from being infected with malaria in the first place. This is the cheapest cure, hence it is also the one that is usually offered to financially challenged locals in malaria areas. The only problem is that when people use a medicine to prevent being infected, malaria strains will develop immunity to exactly that medicine. This will in turn lead to the medicine becoming useless as a cure for people living in malaria-prone areas. Tough luck for them, huh?

If you value other people's lives anywhere near as highly as your own, you should probably do what they do. Only use the drugs in the fairly unlikely case that you're actually infected with malaria. If you ask doctors back home what to do, they will probably tell you that for the sake of your own health you should take the medicine. It's their job to say that, and you are free to listen to them. But you should *at least* investigate what strains of malaria actually exist where you're going. If the lethal one, *falciparum*, is among them, there's more sense to taking malaria pills than if it isn't.



All things considered, the most important thing is to take all necessary precautions to avoid being bitten by mosquitos at all. You know, put on mosquito repellent, wear long sleeves, don't fall asleep drunk in the jungle and just try to stay away from mosquitos, especially when it's dark. If you still get bitten, don't panic. Most likely there are no malaria parasites in the mosquitos that bite you. Just be aware of any symptoms of illness. Remember that it'll take almost two weeks before the malaria can be felt. If you know you've been to a region where malaria exists and you start feeling feverish and shivering cold in turns, immediately seek out a doctor. In places where malaria is common, medical personnel can quickly find out whether you're infected or not, and if necessary they will treat you in the best possible manner. Soon you'll be fine again and can move on.

It's not often you can make a choice that saves both other people's lives and your own money, plus you can avoid some nasty side effects! This is one such opportunity!

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Back from the malaria lecture, we're on the bus out of Durban. My next stop had an amusing name. KwaMbonambi! Which in turn was located just outside even funnier Mtubatuba. I wouldn't be surprised if Africa's first spaceship, ready to go in the year 2365 or so, will be named Mtubatuba. It means "He who was flung out", after a local king who once upon a time started life as participant in an unusually lively birth.

I don't know what KwaMbonambi means, but I will always remember it as the place that was drowning in rain. We drove under a large, black cloud full of heavy raindrops as we entered the town. The intense, vertical shower explained the thick vegetation surrounding the place. It was a small and rural town with only two thousand inhabitants. Nevertheless, they had a total of eight butcheries, two "surgical medical" offices (which I guess may have bordered on being butcheries as well), fifty billion mosquitos and about a hundred old women sitting next to each other on the main street, selling everything they had. Their teeth they had sold a long time ago. Or maybe not. During the day we had driven through

endless sugar cane fields. Most of the children I saw walked around chewing on sugar canes, so the toothless gaps in the faces of the grannies may have been just the long-term effect of the local staple.

The observant reader probably noticed that I wrote "we" several times in the previous paragraph. Keiko was back. In the end Kenji had had enough of her. He apparently preferred to escape back to the sea, to surround himself with voracious white sharks and murderous jellyfish the size of cars. Keiko had not read more than half a page about Durban in her guidebook before she decided not to stop there. And that's how she caught up with me.

The transition from danger zone Durban to the completely relaxed mood in KwaMbonambi was pleasant. I had left a hostel where the staff was distressed by merely the thought of how to get home safely after work, where the beds were stacked four high and where the narrow corridors would be sure to kill in the event of a fire. Now I was staying in a large, old wooden house and playground, run by a funny bunch of kindergarten assistants.

It began at check-in. "Would you like to stay in the main building or in a tree house in the garden?", they asked me. A quick look up the trees outside, from which rain water was gushing down, made me decide to stay inside. But hey! It was great to have the choice! When I asked what my room would cost, they answered "Well, it depends. Do you want to walk the plank?" One of them wore pirate's pants, but I didn't quite understand what they meant. It turned out that they had a long, slippery log placed across a swimming pool in the garden, and anyone who could walk across it wearing whatever they had on at check-in, got the first night's accommodation for free. If you failed, you'd pay wet money for your bed. I was already soaking wet from the rain, so I tried the walk. I ended up paying anyway.

In the forests near KwaMbonambi almost half the world's population of wild southern black rhinos can be found, about two thousand of the toughest natural combat vehicles on the planet. There's also a fairly large group of white rhinos there. I had hoped to go into the woods and pay them a visit, but the staff at the hostel figured that with all the rain lately,

the ground would be extremely muddy. That would make it all too easy for the rhinos to flatten me into the ground, if I should be lucky enough to happen upon them.

Fortunately there were lots of other things I could do. The hostel kept a large supply of rhino dung, a superb material for making paper. The result isn't something that will be mistaken for perfumed love letters, but if you know any hippies or environmentalists, I'm sure they'll be delighted to receive some thoroughly recycled organic matter in the mail.

Another activity on offer was to visit a small, "authentic" Zulu village, where the poor residents sat around wearing next to nothing, shivering from the cold weather. This made me understand why the first Europeans to round the Cape of Good Hope had not encountered many Africans. South Africa can be so cold that most Africans of course stayed further north for as long as possible, in a warmer climate.

A small, thin boy stopped me and begged me for a job. Painting walls or cleaning up my garden, perhaps, or whatever, really. It was the first time in my life I wished I had a garden. I gave him a few dollars, hoping it would improve my conscience. It didn't.

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The next night was like the first. Rain and thunder came down from the sky when I fell asleep, and thunder and rain crashed to the ground when I woke up. All eight times. I didn't sleep that well.

Rainy days are good for changing your location, so for the time being I waved goodbye to the forest with the rhinos and got on a bus to a small village on the coast, Saint Lucia. Now, that was a different story than KwaMbonambi's poor, basic community. This was a rustic resort town located in the middle of a wetland area, a national park with a well-earned World Heritage status.

All kinds and grades of accommodation were available. I ended up staying in a simple room in a rebuilt barn. I'm glad to report that the only part of the building that still smelt vaguely of horse was the communal shower area. In my own room I had a bit more of that genuine African feeling. Over my bed there was a mosquito net, and for once I could say

that I shared my room with a monkey without that being an insult to the creature in question. He was tiny and cute, and not supposed to be in the barn, yet he came in anyway whenever he felt like it. Most of the time he would stay up on the roof, but he came in to check out what I was doing every time he heard the sound of rustling plastic bags. If I said something out loud he looked at me with great interest. I'm pretty sure I taught him the word "banana" before I left Saint Lucia. I made sure to close my backpack *very* thoroughly before I left the room.

There are thousands of things to do in South African national parks, of which the most important one is to stay alive. To find out how that was best done there, I went to the crocodile centre just outside the village. The rules were simple. All I had to do was to stay away from any rivers, lakes and the ocean. If I really had to go near the water, I had better keep at least one crocodile length of land between me and the shoreline. Apparently the local crocodiles couldn't be bothered to move further inland than that, even though they were perfectly capable of running both fast and far. Judging from the most impressive beasts in the park that meant I had better stay at least six metres away from the river that ran through Saint Lucia.

In the crocodile centre some old crocs had just been fed for the week. They lazily lay resting and digesting close to a simple wire fence. Since there were no guards there, I decided it was completely safe to crawl up to them. I wanted to see my reflection in the beautiful, awe-inspiring eye of a crocodile.

A crocodile's muscles and teeth can easily tear you to pieces. Its brain will never regard you as anything but fresh food. Yet it's the eye of the crocodile I find to be the most scary part of the animal.

Surrounded by armoured camouflage skin it sits there, observing, immovable, large and round with a hypnotic glimmering of green. In the middle there's a narrow, black stripe which nevertheless is wide enough for all of nature's cynical cruelty, or rather indifference, I guess, to shine through. It's the last eye in the world you want to see looking back at you through the keyhole when you're trying to find out what causes that strange sound outside.



*The hungry eye of a crocodile*

If you ever have to fight a crocodile (which few do, and extremely few more than once), you will want to know that precisely the eye is the only soft spot on the entire animal. If you stick your finger in there, you have at least in theory the possibility to inflict some discomfort on the monster, maybe even enough to put it in a bad mood for the rest of the meal. Good luck with that.

Fascinating crocodile eyes aside, the most exciting sight in the crocodile centre was a warning sign at the top of a semi-steep hill. It showed a terrified man. He was sitting in a wheelchair accelerating down a slope, and at the bottom a large mouth full of big teeth waited for him. I wonder if the sign was a result of learning from the past or just precautionary



*Check your brakes!*

thinking. I felt a sudden urge to steal the sign, but sadly it was too large and well secured.

The crocodile eye wasn't the scariest thing in the park. That honour went to a glass cage in the snake section, where a sign read "Puff adder – Extremely poisonous". The door to the cage was slightly ajar, and there was no snake inside.

I crossed over the peninsula to the side that faced the ocean and walked back to Saint Lucia on the golden beach. The whole time I kept my distance to the water. There were enough signs with pictures of grumpy crocodiles and hippos on them to help me remember what I had just learned.

My evening was spent in a small car driving up and down the streets in the village. It's not the way I usually like to spend a Saturday night. Driving back and forth in the main street in small towns is in many countries mainly a favourite pastime of young men with limited intellectual interests, but in Saint Lucia this activity offers something of interest to almost anyone. As soon as darkness falls over the city, animals come out of the water and the woods to rule the parks and the gardens. Sharing a room with a monkey was one thing, but to have hippos, chameleons, leopards and other wild creatures roam freely around the house corners was definitely a novelty to me.

The hippopotamus leaves the water to feed on grass and if necessary to trample down any humans that are unfortunate or stupid enough to get between the animal and the water. Leopards come to search for all kinds of food. In Saint Lucia the dogs are kept indoors at night. If they weren't, the pets would soon be gone.

Having dangerous animals loitering around us was all well and good, but it was an encounter with a chameleon that fascinated me the most. I had never seen a wild chameleon before, if you can say "wild" about an animal that is a few centimetres long and moves at a snail's pace. All I knew about chameleons was that some of them can change their skin colour to blend in with the surroundings, a trick they use to make themselves hard to see for both its prey and its predators.

This skill and the fact that it was now completely dark made me think that we were unlikely to find any chameleons. But then Mother Nature struck in a most unexpected way. Chameleons have special cells in their skin that give the animal its ability to change colour. Those cells come with a side effect. If you expose them to intense light for a while, they will glow in the dark! So by turning a powerful flashlight on a tree in Saint Lucia for a minute and then turning it off, I suddenly looked up at a tree full of small, insect-eating stars.

The chameleons weren't invisible any more, to put it mildly. I carefully picked one down from the tree. It immediately clung innocently to my finger, although it was probably rather annoyed about being disturbed in its nocturnal hunt for food. It didn't complain, but my driver told me that it had probably taken the chameleon several days to get up there. I felt guilty and tried to put the animal back exactly where I had found it. With a bit of luck it wasn't eaten by an owl before it managed to get rid of its glow again.

As I fell asleep that night, I told myself to be happy that I wasn't a chameleon. It would be annoying to turn off the reading lamp on the bedside table and then have to wait another fifteen minutes or so for myself to go dark.

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The next morning I woke up early. The monkey wandered noisily back and forth above me. I had always imagined monkeys would sleep in late. It's not as if they have a job to go to. All they have to do is stuff that can be done just as well later, so they should be able to relax. Apparently they don't.

A coral reef, the southernmost in the world, stretches north-east from Saint Lucia towards Sodwana Bay. I'm not a big fan of attractions based on latitude. Even though it can be looked upon as a mark of distinction, or at least a curiosity, anything presented with its location as its chief achievement is often disappointing. Like the taste of wine from a place where there's not really a climate for growing grapes, but somehow

someone managed to force a few grapes to grow there anyway. It's much like being introduced to the world's largest dwarf. But I do love coral reefs wherever they are. So I went on a kayak and snorkelling trip, hoping for an encounter with the reef.

On our way to Lake Bhangazi we picked up a group of radio presenters and disc jockeys from a luxury resort. They stayed there for free in return for saying nice things about the place in their programs. Apart from Sir Richard Attenborough and Helen Keller, I'm not really sure who I would want to accompany me on a kayak trip in a nature reserve where you have to be quiet if you want to see any wildlife. But I *do* know that never again will I go with radio talk show hosts on an excursion like that. They babbled away nonstop. What they said sometimes actually was quite entertaining, but I soon longed for a volume control and an off button. The beautiful surroundings required and deserved some peace and quiet to be enjoyed thoroughly.

Until a few years previously the area had been dominated by lumberjacks and the felling of timber. Now South Africa let the place transform itself back to something as similar to virgin forest as possible. Slowly time healed the scars in the landscape. Already there were many signs of progress. I saw zebras, kudus, warthogs, fish eagles and the aptly named Goliath heron, standing a metre and a half tall. And all this before we had even gotten our kayaks on the water.

Even more exciting wildlife appeared as soon as we left the beach. First in line was a large crocodile. When it saw us approaching, it slid down from its sweet spot in the sun. A few seconds later it lazily tailed my kayak some ten metres or so behind my nervous butt. It did this for a while, until it to my great distress suddenly just disappeared below the surface of the water.

My worry was quickly forgotten when all of a sudden I found myself facing a hippo and seven of its best friends. They were visibly curious as they cautiously closed in on us without making any sound. When they were only twenty metres away from my kayak they stopped. Quietly they just stood in the water, snorting and eyeing us suspiciously. Even the radio people were speechless.



Africa's hippos are probably responsible for between three and four hundred human deaths every year. It's not because hippos are so aggressive. It's because they are so big, yet oh, so anxious. Despite their five centimetre thick skin, sunlight is harmful to them. Because of that they have to stay in the water all day. With teeth up to a metre in length and extremely powerful jaw muscles, they can easily create two half crocodiles from a whole one if they have to. So they're safe in the water, but vulnerable on land. That's why they always make sure they can quickly get back to the wet whenever they leave the water. If they sense any danger, such as someone blocking their path to safety, they will immediately run back. Because of their size, they don't see the need to run around any obstacles. They just run them straight down instead. And that's how people die.

A few basic precautions will help you avoid any hippo hassles. When on land, *never* get between a hippo and the water it came from. Yes, that *can* be hard to remember when half-asleep on a camping trip you need to go to the bathroom in the bush in the middle of the night, but *do* try.

The same principle goes for when you're on or in the water. Never ever get between a hippo and its access to *deeper* water. Sometimes being in water is simply not good enough for a hippo. They like to go well below the surface, where they can rummage happily around like the ballerinas they can never be on land.

By floating slowly between the beach and the inquisitive hippos, we got more than close enough to have a good look at them. We survived with a comfortable margin, despite our frail kayaks.

The beach also housed some beasts. In the science fiction novel "Dune" there's an unforgettable seriously scary sandworm. It lives underground in a desert world, and sometimes its enormous mouth bursts out of the sand to wolf down whoever happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The role model for this worm lives among other places in South Africa, fortunately in a much smaller version: The antlion.

The beach was dotted with small depressions in the sand. Inside them there were antlions. They are neither ants nor lions, but to an ant they are far more terrifying than lions are to us. The antlion is an insect as well as

an expert on digging holes. It doesn't dig very deep, but it makes sure that the steep sides of the hole are covered with loose sand. When the hole is ready, the antlion hides at the bottom of the hole. There it will wait for an insect to come by and slide into its den.

Sooner or later a small, unfortunate insect will wander into the hole. As soon as it's over the edge, the loose sand will start to roll down and bring the insect with it. Gravity will feed the victim to the gaping mouth and the two gripping tentacles of the ruthless antlion at the bottom of the hole. When all life has been sucked out of the prey, the antlion pulls the corpse out of the hole and takes it out to sea to dump it with concrete shoes on. After a while, I'm guessing, the antcrocodile will come by and destroy all evidence of the slaughter. Or maybe not. Anyway, having disposed of the corpse, the antlion will go back to its hole and wait for its next guest and meal. If only safari tourists had not been so rude as to fake sliding insects by playing with straws down antlion traps, life as an antlion would be close to perfect.

After the kayaking we ditched the radio people and drove to Cape Vidal. It was time to see the coral reef. Bursting with joy and high expectations I put on my snorkelling gear and waded out from the beach. I was ready for the parrot fish, the clown fish, the trigger fish and infinite variations of patterned and coloured corals. I was to be a weightless god soaring in the deep blue space over a marine world. Like any other god, I would observe the puny beings below without disturbing their eternal struggle for survival, no matter how tempting it might be to intervene.

The previous night had been windy and rainy. Instead of lying peacefully down at the bottom of the sea hiding flounders and treasures, the sand was whirling wildly about in the water. I saw nothing, and certainly no reef, until after a few minutes of blind swimming I banged my head straight into a coral wall. This was not the day for a grand snorkelling adventure.

After a short discussion we brought out the kayaks again. The rest of the day we surf-paddled in the large waves off the beach. I have never ever swallowed and retained as much sea water as I did that day. Several decilitres of ocean spent the afternoon and the evening exploring my

cranial caverns, until it all suddenly escaped out of my nose as I lay down to sleep. Used to being single, I rather enjoyed for once having a chance to sleep on a wet spot.

It was well worth getting up early the next morning. I was to have a great day on a guided driving safari in the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi wildlife reserve, South Africa's oldest and possibly also its finest. Zack, a local pothead and surf dude, drove off with Keiko and me in the back seat at four thirty in the morning. Our hope was to be the first car allowed into the park when it opened at six. I was slightly worried about how Zack would perform as a guide with lions and elephants about. All I knew was that his speech was slow and slurry, and that much of what he said made little sense. It turned out he did an excellent job.

On our way to the park we hit the morning rush. Luckily, in rural Zululand the morning rush consists mainly of people who walk for hours to get to jobs that don't pay much. They work for so long every day that they barely have time to return home in the evening and go to bed before they have to get up and walk to work again. Observing this I thought of people back home, who will complain loudly about buses and trams that sometimes are a few minutes late and where if you're unlucky you have to stand. The hardships of the two worlds simply do not compare.

The drive through the reserve was one long climax. Zack knew exactly what terrain and vegetation the various animals preferred to stay in throughout the day. Little by little we found all the creatures I had hoped to see.

The elephants were of course the easiest to locate. Our first clue that they were nearby was when we came to a place where all the trees had broken branches and were stripped of their elephant-edible bark. It was generally a sad sight, really. From there we just had to figure out in what direction the enormous piles of elephant dung were most smoking hot. Following the smelly pointers we soon came upon four huge elephants enjoying their breakfast.

The rhinos weren't much harder to find, not even the rare black edition. I discovered two of them standing motionless right next to the road.

We didn't have to search at all to find the white rhinos, who really are grey. They just turned up by themselves all the time. While the elephants arrogantly had ignored us, the rhinos considered our car just too much of a threat to leave us alone. If we came too close to their comfort zone, they laid their ears flat and started wagging their heads slightly this way and that. If we didn't get the message quickly enough, they set off on wild runs straight towards us. I guess they weren't interested in damaging their horns. They stopped a few metres away from us every time and backed down again. This didn't prevent a panic-stricken Zack from crashing the car in reverse straight into trees several times. Great fun, and scary too!

The hours went by quickly. We kept finding new animals, and I kept thinking “Oh, so *that's* how tall a giraffe is”, “Warthogs are unbelievably ugly”, and so on. Each animal was allowed to excite and amuse me for just a few minutes before Zack decided that we had seen enough of it and moved on to find other species. Driving from one animal to another that way was a bit like watching TV when someone else is in charge of the remote control, someone in the mood for an intense session of channel surfing. You only get to see fragments of many stories, not enough to actually understand what you're seeing.

I wasn't satisfied. I mean, it was great to see many different animals, but I really wanted to see more of everything. I decided that next time I would find a way to get closer to the animals and have more time to watch them.

We returned to Saint Lucia. For now there were no more wild animals for me. A wild country was a good substitute.

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Of the two hundred or so independent nations in the world, there are many who do not exactly put their heads up and demand attention all the time. Or maybe they do, but nobody listens to them anyway. Two of the most modest countries are Swaziland and Lesotho. They're both located more or less inside South Africa. The countries are tiny, only together can

they match the size of a Switzerland, and their populations are respectively one and two million people. In cunning ways they avoided being absorbed by the large country surrounding them, unlike so many other tribal nations.

These are young countries. Both were established by potent kings in the nineteenth century. With the arrival of the first white settlers, a forerunner of the modern day South Africa claimed sovereignty over Swaziland. After a bit of fighting, the Swazi king wisely cooperated with the British Empire and had his kingdom declared a British protectorate. When the Union of South Africa was created in 1910, Swaziland was not a part of it. If it had been, the country would no doubt have become a homeland of some kind, and the apartheid regime in South Africa would have tormented the Swazis. Instead the people was free to keep its traditional culture and general way of life going, as they were living in almost complete isolation from the rest of the world. Their large, surrounding neighbour certainly didn't want anything to do with Swaziland. The government of South Africa already had more than enough with dealing with its own black and coloured population and all the problems *they* caused.

The age of colonization eventually came to an end, and semi-kings of protectorates became real kings of free nations. In the case of Swaziland this happened in 1968, and the king in question was an old-fashioned absolute monarch. When he died his son took over, but nothing else changed. King Mswati III is not the kind of king who willingly lets democracy gain foothold in his country. The king and his hand-picked band of advisers and majority of members of the parliament rule freely and completely. Opposition parties are illegal. In a speech he gave in 2003, the self-confident king basically said that democracy is just a buzzword that the rest of the world is obsessed with. The Swazi people has its own culture and its own ways to do things, and they should not be changed, the king claimed.

Nobody knows how much longer his time as undisputed chief of the nation will last. His people suffers badly from HIV, draughts and starvation, and they are beginning to open their eyes to the fact that what little money the country actually has, could maybe be spent more wisely

than in the ways King Mswati III seems to prefer. For a long time he tried to buy a large jet plane, "for official use", priced at tens of millions of US dollars. At the same time a large number of poor people were dying from malnutrition and AIDS in Swaziland. The madness was averted when Western countries threatened to withdraw all development aid from the country. The order was cancelled, but too late to avoid a deposit of millions of dollars from being lost into the pockets of the plane manufacturer.

Unruffled by the increasing criticism, the king keeps coming up with new ideas and projects. More or less every year he takes a new wife, and for every new wife he also has to build a new palace. Now, the definition of "palace" in Swaziland isn't more than what would pass for a reasonably comfy modern home in Europe. Still, that is many notches up from what the average Swazi can afford. People are beginning to grumble audibly about this. While the country for a long time appeared to be an African idyll surrounded by apartheid in South Africa and civil war in Mozambique, the normalizing of those two countries has made the misrule of Swaziland increasingly visible.

By the way, it's not just in financial matters the king appears a bit eccentric, but people seem to be more tolerant towards his other quirks. An example? It's a tradition for young students to spend their Christmas vacation weeding the royal fields. When in 2003 the weeding took a bit longer than usual, the king promptly postponed the first day of school in the new year with one week. There were no protests.

Possibly the most serious problem in Swaziland today is HIV and AIDS. More than a third of the adult population carry the virus. The king displayed great determination when in the fall of 2001 he decided that all young and unmarried women were in for five years of celibacy. The law *was* enforced, and the penalty for breaking it was a fine of more than a hundred US dollars, alternatively one cow.

This may all seem just tragic. Yet everything I had heard about Swaziland made me look forward to visiting a place where so many things were so different. My expectations were met right at the border. I waited for Keiko to finish photographing the border patrol office, the one

with the big sign that said "NO Photography!!!" on it. In a kiosk next to it I bought an ice cream, ten metres inside Swaziland. The ice cream was okay, but I was immensely pleased when in addition to the ice cream I also received a handful of something that looked like cog wheels, nuts and bolts. They were my change!

I have no idea what the Swazis used before they got a modern monetary system, but normal, round coins was obviously not good enough for them. Instead they had come up with small pieces of art, some with twelve sides, others shaped as flowers. For a long time all their money looked weird, but eventually they came up with at least one normal coin, the one lilangeni. Possibly after a lot of pressure from manufacturers of slot machines. They still messed it up slightly. The coin had the exact same measurements as the British one pound coin, worth about ten times more. So now the Swazis could go to expensive England and enjoy cheap parking meters and vending machines.



*Money makes the world go around*

Keiko's clash with the border officers ended disappointingly well. After some initial fear, one of them pulled himself together and walked over and told Keiko that there had been enough photographing now. She complied, but only because she was out of film anyway. The officers were barely interested in doing any work at all. I had to use all my charm to even get a stamp in my passport, and there was no visible customs control.

Maybe that's not so strange. The South Africans on their side are *extremely* eager to perform, so criminals crossing the border will be taken care of anyway. Besides, Swaziland doesn't fear anything that can be brought from other countries, with the exception of ideas regarding political reforms, of course. Its neighbouring countries, on the other hand, have good reason to worry about what comes out of Swaziland. The country is a major producer and exporter of dagga (marijuana) and a transit country for various designer drugs from China.

Those wishing to sneak something into or out of the country have ample opportunity to do so elsewhere than at the official border points. Just the thought of what can be accomplished with an elephant trained to swallow condoms filled with various substances is enough to dishearten any border patrol. This may even explain how some European circuses are financed. I'm pretty sure using minimum wage Bulgarians as workers and dressing the orchestra in flea market uniforms from 1970 isn't the whole secret.

We drove on and there was no doubt that we had arrived in a new country. The concrete "straw huts" in South Africa were gone, replaced with the real thing with straw roofs and straw walls. To the great satisfaction of all the cows walking freely on and next to the road, I imagined. Finally I had found the real Africa, and at least on the surface it seemed like a nice place to live.

The fields were green and wide, decidedly easier to cultivate than the rolling hills on the other side of the border. Earlier on my trip I had seen Lesotho in the distance from the bus. It had appeared to be a rugged mountain realm, a place I'm sure no colonial power of the 1800s saw much value in. Swaziland, on the other hand, looked lush with vegetation and manageable. It was easy to see why the British and the Boers bothered to battle each other for this land. Everyone I saw along the road seemed happy. I'm not sure if there's a connection here, but one of the districts of Swaziland is called Hhohho.

I stayed in a hostel in the country's largest city, Manzini, right in the middle of Swaziland. In the smallest nation in the southern hemisphere that meant it was an excellent base for exploring the country. Everything of interest was an easy day trip from there.

We arrived late in the day, so I had to limit my initial exploration to buying the local newspaper, The Times of Swaziland. The front page alone was worth the price:

**POLICE CAR STOLEN FROM STATION**

**BABY NUMBER 27 DUMPED**

**A DISGRACEFUL UNCLE (niece pregnant)**



In the story related to the last headline, all individuals involved were identified by name and address. Apparently little was kept from the public in Swaziland. I also found a statement from an interviewed police commissioner slightly disturbing and controversial. He advised other fathers and uncles with incestuous inclinations to find themselves a cow to cuddle instead.

As soon as daylight returned, Keiko, I and an Asian named Kinji, who we never found out exactly where came from, were picked up by a small guy who was fortunate enough to own a minibus. He was to take us on a grand tour, *The Highlights of Swaziland*. It seemed the Swazis must be exceptionally fond of shopping. Everywhere we stopped, the main attraction had something to do with exchanging money for merchandise.

Our first stop was the Manzini market, a trading centre that according to a sign by the entrance had proud traditions all the way back to 1983. A number of stalls offered fruits and vegetables, plastic baskets, colourful textiles and music cassettes, most of them from 1983 as well. In the souvenir section there were elephants in wood and stone, shirts and skirts with portraits of the king, as well as a full range of Zulu articles, including spears, shields, cowhides and scary masks.

Everything was authentic and impressive, no doubt, but my backpack had little room for souvenirs, so I bought nothing from the aggressive salespeople. Kinji walked around mumbling something in whatever language he spoke, while at the same time practising some rather clever martial arts moves. It was an efficient way to keep pushy salesmen away. Keiko bought three skirts.

We drove out of town, to a batik factory outlet. It was more of a sewing circle than a factory, a room full of eighteen chattering women experimenting with paint and needles. They explained so thoroughly what they were doing that I understood even less of batik afterwards than I had done before. Keiko bought three more skirts.

The next mandatory stop was a candle factory, which really was quite impressive. They made elaborate elephants, rhinos, cows, cats, owls, hippos, jaguars, Zulu queens, Pharaohs and in general pretty much anything you wanted them to make, with wax, wicks and the works. A

sign there said that the candle art was one of the the most important export articles of Swaziland, and I'd like to believe it. All shopped out, we were ready for what we from the loud enthusiasm of the guide understood was the climax of the tour; House On Fire.

The House On Fire wasn't burning. It was just a hot spot for cultural and musical performances, the arena to which international pop stars flock when they want to conquer the important market of Swaziland. It was quite cute, with a tiny royal balcony and everything. My estimate is that it could comfortably fit an audience of about two hundred people, provided they sat real close to each other. The stage was large enough to accommodate at least a string quartet, as long as no one played the contrabass.

The place also had a small restaurant, so we ordered lunch. Our guide was convinced that it would take a good hour before the food was on the table. He suggested that we went to see a museum in the meantime. On our way there he found time to drag us through a couple of handicraft shops, where among other things they sold traditional wood sculptures. One of them, surprisingly, sported a pair of wooden sunglasses with a Calvin Klein logo.



An exhibition about the previous king, Sobhuza II, constituted the lion's share of Swaziland's only museum. It was probably the creepiest display I've ever seen, macabrely competing with the Paris catacombs and the pickled Siamese twins at a medical museum in Bangkok.

Outside it looked like a nice enough place. The car park was huge, well-kept and covered with grass. The only parking wardens were two cows, happily grazing on parking spaces C24 and C26. Except for them and us, the whole place was deserted.

We passed a marble entrance and made some noise to wake up the guide and gateman who was relaxing on a bench there. Having collected the ticket fee, the man explained to us how much the Swazis love their royal family, and how they will never love anyone more than they loved King Sobhuza II, who had been the father of the nation for more than 60 years when he died in 1982. Sobby truly must have been married to or

literally father of a larger part of his subjects than any other king in history. He worked his way through about two hundred wives, creating some six hundred children in the process. No wonder he claimed strong support from his people. Most of them must have been his descendants! Yet the overgrown car park and the guest book in the museum disclosed that it could go days between the visitors there. That the deceased king was dear to the people was probably true mainly because it said so in a decree written by the king himself before he died.

Behind the museum there was a small shed with glass walls. Inside it I could see a withered wreath of flowers. A guard wearing a shame of a uniform had been given a good old blunderbuss to stop people from coming too close. Once upon a time King Sobhuza's coffin had been inside, and there the king's spirit had dropped off all its power before it left this world.

In Swaziland the percentage of people who believe in spirits and ghosts is negligibly smaller than the percentage who are of Christian faith. And yes, those two groups *do* overlap. Many Swazi truly believe that if someone goes too close to where the coffin once stood (apparently apart from bored men wearing stupid uniforms and carrying elephant guns), he will be able to steal the king's power and can use it to enhance his own position in society.

To be allowed inside the shed you had to already be a head of state of some nation or people, because then you would have no interest in stealing the spiritual power. Revolutionary Leader Gadaffi of Libya had recently paid a visit, but more impressive was the claim of the guide that the president of China had also been there. That guy doesn't usually waste his time visiting tiny countries in Africa, so I asked the guide if I had heard him correctly. He pulled out a photo to prove it. Except the man in the photo wasn't the president of China, but of Taiwan, as usual on a desperate mission to seek out countries willing to recognize his country's right to exist. "China, Taiwan, it's all the same", the guide said, presumably to the dissatisfaction of the president of Taiwan, should he ever read this book. (And why shouldn't he?)

The photos and signs in the museum, accompanied by our guide's less than balanced praise of the previous king and his reigning son, made me dislike the place strongly. I left an extremely caustic and radical comment in the guest book before I left. I wrote it in Norwegian. You never know, you know?

Lunch arrived at our table back at the restaurant just as we returned. Instead of freezing inside the air-conditioned dining room, we took our meals outside and ate it next to a large, intensely green sugar cane field. It was slightly distracting to have several chickens running around literally between my legs while I ate one of their recently deceased friends, but it didn't seem to bother the little birds at all.

It had been evident from the very beginning of our tour that it was a pure dollar tourist thing. So I wasn't surprised when after lunch we were brought to a culture park, an "authentic village" full of the kind of homes those who are not related to the king must be content with. Whether it was authentic or not I do not know, but at least I learned that it's possible to build much more elaborate straw huts than the ones I used to build in my summer vacations when I was a boy.

The village lay beautifully in a green valley with steep mountains around it and a lazy river in the middle. To be honest, the scenery was a lot more inviting than the culture. It didn't help at all when the locals gave a song and dance performance. In honour of a busload of American tourists they wore decent t-shirts instead of the traditional costume, where both men and women appear topless.

The performance was supposed to be our last stop, but our guide stopped the car at a street market when he discovered that some of us had money left. Keiko bought her seventh skirt that day, while I only managed to be accused of insulting the monarch, as I tried a little bit too hard to haggle down the price of a large piece of clothing with an almost full-size king on it.

The guide was satisfied. It had been an easy day for him, driving us from one cash register to the other, probably earning a nice commission at every stop. He smiled broadly when he dropped us off at the hostel. Some new guests had arrived, a group of Germans who had travelled all over

the continent for months. Sitting in the common area, they loudly declared how hopeless and awful everything was in Africa. I couldn't help but ask how they could bear to travel in such miserable regions. It turned out that as long as they were cheap enough, even bad places were good for visiting.

When I asked them what they thought would be a solution to all these problems, their answer was stunning, ideas I'd be prepared to hear from war criminals of World War II, but not from young Germans of today. We should withdraw all aid programs, they suggested. Instead we should let the Africans fight their wars until they were all dead. Only then should we return and build a proper continent, without any black people around to mess everything up.

I admit that I too several times on my trip had found the African way to organize things to be less than perfect. Especially when I compared it to how we do things in my own country. But now I discovered a side of me that was willing to defend Africa much further than I had previously thought possible. With little success, sadly. It was difficult to discuss common sense into the Germans, but it was surprisingly easy to accidentally drop a cockroach into the casserole they prepared for dinner.

Someone else who wasn't overly enthusiastic about African ethics was a guy living near the hostel. After a number of burglaries he had put up this sign several places around his house:

**IMPORTANT MESSAGE!**

*To all local thieves who can read and write, please bring this message on to those who cannot.*

*When you break into my house, please use the gate instead of cutting a hole in the fence. The gate is never locked anyway. (Remember to close the gate behind you.)*

*You do this on your own risk, since it is dangerous, simply hazardous, to break in here. (You are hereby warned.)*

I found this to be a more sympathetic approach than what most house owners seemed to go for, namely to fill their gardens with dogs that obviously were on steroids. I doubt it was equally effective, though.



*Beware of slobbering!*

The local newspaper told me that something else definitely wasn't effective. Many suffered under the royal decree about mandatory sexual abstinence for young women. Abandoned baby number 29 that year had been found in some bushes near a latrine in the village Ludzeludze. Poor Cebi, who according to the newspaper had just been on her way to the shop on the corner, told the reporter that since this was her first time finding a baby, she was a little bit shocked.

I got the impression that she figured that this could very well happen to her again, and that the next time it happened, she would probably not be so surprised. Unfortunately she might have been right. It certainly wasn't impossible that she would find another baby someday. Few families and especially not single mothers in Swaziland were able to pay the fine for breaking celibacy, a cow. If an illegal baby was lucky, it would be dumped in a place where it could be found alive by someone. The unlucky ones were just killed and buried as soon as they were born.

Another story in the newspaper reported that twelve men had been caught driving under the influence of alcohol. That's a *lot* in a country where you can legally drive a car with a blood alcohol concentration of up to 0.15 %. I stayed a good distance from the road when I went shopping for dinner after reading that.

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Swaziland isn't just handicraft and feigned worship of royals. Even though it's a small country, it still has its share of natural wonders. Mbekhwa, a man who had walked from Mozambique to Manzini with not exactly all his papers in order, hung around the hostel and offered his services as a guide to anyone with money. He told me about Sibebe, the second largest granite rock in the world, surpassed only by Ayer's rock, the red, magical mystery nugget in the Australian desert. Sibebe was only an hour's drive away, a perfect trip on a day like this, Mbekhwa claimed. I persuaded Spanish Guillermo to join us, and off we went.

Mbekhwa had no transportation, so we started by walking down to the main road to Mbabane, the capital of Swaziland. We hitched a ride on the first pick-up truck that came by, and it was with lots of wind in my hair and heart in my throat that we made our way to Mbabane. The road was good and straight, and our trajectory upon it the same. I soon forgot about the drunk driving article. As soon as I managed to relax, it was plain fun to be shaken back and forth in the back of the car that moved at nearly a hundred kilometres per hour.

In the centre of Mbabane the driver slowed down slightly, to a speed in which he reckoned we could survive jumping off the car. It turned out he was exactly right, and as I came down from the adrenaline rush I found myself in the middle of a typical third world bus station. People carried chickens and walked around with cows and goats on a leash. A woman balanced the left half of a pig on the top of her head. The whole bus station was chaotic, full of honking and otherwise noisy cars, minibuses and buses. They kept gently crashing into each other, but no one pulled out any accident report forms. Men with thunderous voices called out "Manzini – Manzini – Manzini!", "Phuzumoya – Big Bend – Lubuli!", and so on for all the places the buses could take you. No one

knew of any schedule, the buses would leave when they were full and then some. The bus terminal *was* the city centre, surrounded by mostly modern buildings with soulless shops. There were no tall structures. The ground was too unstable. If something was built too high, it would simply collapse. This they had learned by trying and failing, I could see. Complete chaos reigned. I loved the place.

A sign read "Four Ways Meat Market – Body Parts Specialist". It wasn't as bad as I first feared. It was just a slaughterhouse and a car repair shop sharing a building.

We waited half an hour for our bus to fill up enough for the driver to start the engine and get going. The journey took less time than the wait at the station. When we got off, Mbekhwa pointed almost straight up, grinned like a madman and said "This is world's number two largest rock! As you can see, it's very steep and difficult to climb, but I do it many, many time." He looked at Guillermo and me, obviously expecting us to acknowledge and admire his mountaineering experience. The wall in front of us was indeed massive, precipitous and impressive, but it was also rough and had lots of cracks and edges, making it seem quite possible to conquer.

Mbekhwa took us to what appeared to be the steepest side of Sibebe Rock and pronounced that this would be our starting point. I thought it a bit strange, but hey, he was the veteran! So we began gaining altitude, putting our feet wherever we could find an edge to support us. We tried finding a route along some tufts of grass that looked solid enough to hold on to. Sometimes we slipped, or the grass we held on to was suddenly not a handle, but just grass, useless to anyone but a hungry cow. For a second or two I would sway back and forth. I could easily see myself sliding screaming down the hillside, leaving a trail of skin cells. Somehow I managed to hold on to the rock face every time, and I continued my climb ever so slowly.

After a while Guillermo's footwear forced him to stop. He was wearing a pair of frail sandals, and after a couple of accidents they had now ceased to provide him with a trustworthy foothold. Mbekhwa seemed delighted and said "Oh well. I guess that's it. We must go down, then." But my



hiking boots were having a blast and refused to turn around. I suggested that Guillermo could just wait there while Mbekhwá and I continued. "Weeeell...", Mbekhwá hesitated. "It actually gets a lot worse from here. Pretty impossible, actually. We really should go back", was his opinion.

Fine. Except it wasn't. I just can't give up on something I both want to and believe I can manage. So I kept going. I had to find the way on my own, as Mbekhwá declared that he thought it would be best if he stayed with Guillermo, in case he wanted to play chess or something.

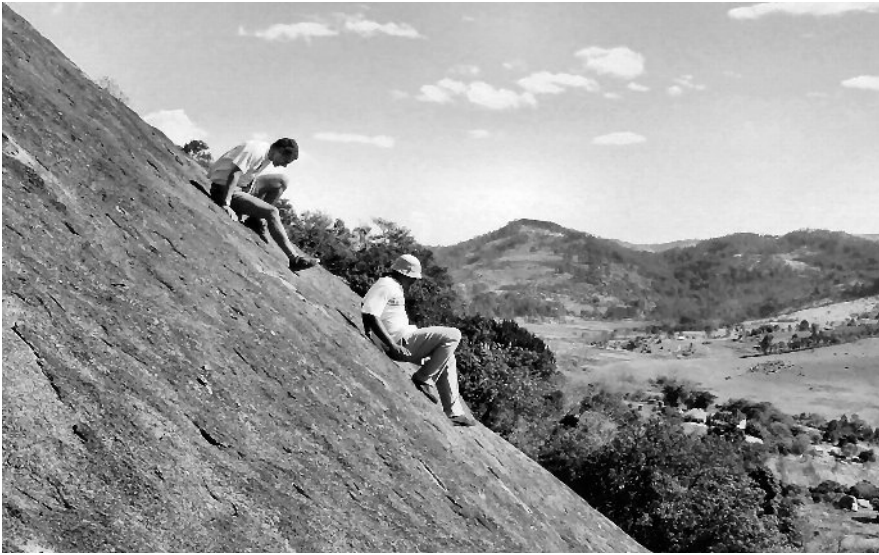
It soon really got worse, as promised, but I found a nice crack in the rock that enabled me to continue in relative safety. The crack provided me with a good grip, and after some time I reached the top. My reward was rich. The view down was slightly scary, especially when I remembered that soon I would be going down the same way I had come up. But in all other directions the scenery was a great, rounded landscape with straw huts, fields and miniature roads and rivers.

Behind the top of the rock I came upon a green meadow. It was full of cows. I started to suspect that there might exist an easier route up than the one Mbekhwá had picked out for us. The cows seemed even more surprised to see me than I was to see them, but after some initial scepticism, the bovines relaxed and went back to ruminating.

Having enjoyed the view to the fullest, I started tacking my way back down. Even before I reached the first serious descent, I suddenly heard heavy breathing. The cows had not followed me to watch me die. Mbekhwá had changed his mind about stopping and was now finishing his crawl up the rock! Ecstatic about this accomplishment he confided to me that this was actually the first time he had come more than half-way up the rock. It wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear from the guy I had hired as a guide, but at the same time it was hard not to be charmed by his enthusiasm over finally having conquered Sibebe Rock. His shoes were old and torn, and I felt bad for sort of having forced him up there. He had taken a much larger risk than I had.

Mbekhwá insisted that I came with him to the top, so that my camera could perpetuate his hour of triumph. He wanted to make a brochure with a photo to document his now actual experience with climbing

Sibebe, to be used in future marketing of his services. I did what he wanted, and to this day I often pray to the powers that be that in doing so I have not contributed to anyone's death or mutilation.



*Hardly a graceful descent from Sibebe Rock*

Thanks to modern hiking boot technology I got down from Sibebe alive, while Mbekhwa did the same thanks to his hardened palms. Safely down, we wiped off blood and sweat and began walking back to Mbabane. The last few kilometres we hitched a ride with a minibus. We shared it with seventeen other passengers, two cages full of live chickens and five cases of Coca-Cola. I think I would actually rather have walked, but happily intoxicated by the Sibebe experience I still sat there smiling the whole way.

At the hostel I declared the day a complete success when I learned that the Germans had moved on.

My days in Swaziland were long and relaxing. It seemed like the perfect place to recuperate for a weary traveller. I, however, was hungry for new experiences, so I moved on.

After rural and recumbent Swaziland, it was a bit of a shock to be exposed to South African efficiency again, at the Oshoek border crossing. The place was swarming with properly uniformed, fair-haired, blue-eyed

personnel. With an ice-cold stare my face was checked for sufficient resemblance with my passport photo. Straight to the point they questioned me about what I might possibly want to do in their country. Not even Keiko dared to photograph them.

Waiting in line I inspected my passport and compared it to the passports of my fellow queuers. The Norwegian passport is a boring and humble document. In a previous edition at least there was a page where you could put comments and list any personal hallmarks of the owner of the passport. That page is gone now, and I miss it. There we could write things like "This person is on a diet and must under no circumstances be allowed to enter the USA!", or "The bearer of this passport has a fetish for women in uniform, especially immigration officers". The Norwegian passport doesn't have the appearance of a particularly serious document anyway, so I'm sure it wouldn't hurt.

Other countries exceed Norway by far in their pompousness. The British passport, for instance, declares: "Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary". Now, *that's* the way to get things moving. And what does my passport say? "The bearer of this passport is a Norwegian citizen." That's all. Amazingly, I am still allowed to go anywhere without any trouble, so maybe my passport isn't that bad after all.

The city of Nelspruit in the province of Mpumalanga is no beauty, but it *is* the best place to go to arrange a good and fairly inexpensive safari in or near the Kruger Park, South Africa's largest national park. There, on the doorstep to a large number of wildlife reserves, the local tourist information expertly mediates last minute deals for a wide variety of wildlife experiences. With a bit of luck you can get a large discount compared to what you would pay if you booked your safari from home. Travel agents often charge huge commissions for their work, which often amounts to nothing more than to make a quick phone call. Also, if you buy your trip in Nelspruit it's likely that the price includes being picked up from wherever you stay in the city.

My requirements were simple. One: I would like to *walk* among the animals rather than just watch them from a car. Two: There should be no Keiko nearby. The most promising alternative was something called the Transfrontier Walking Safaris. They offered three full days of walking, and they only had space for one more person. In a private wildlife reserve just outside Kruger, the nights would be spent in small cabins with walls and beds and everything. During the daytime we would stalk giraffes and lions on foot, accompanied by a guide with a gun. According to the tourist information the company had not yet had to kill any animals. I signed on immediately.

As I paid for my trip, the girl in the office rather unexpectedly told me "When you walk, you stink!", just like that. Nothing personal, I hoped. "No, of course not", she laughed. "It goes for anyone, and it means that you will probably not see as many animals on this trip as you would on a driving safari. In return, the animals you *do* see, you will see extremely well, and you will experience their sounds and smells much more intensely than you can from inside a car." "Maybe you'll even be eaten alive!" Well, she didn't actually say that last bit, but from the tone of her voice I felt that was what she really was saying. But I didn't worry. As long as I listened to the guide, I was most likely in for three days full of close encounters with many different animals.

This made me so happy that I wasn't the least bit annoyed about having to share a dorm with three German girls who snored in unison, and with Keiko. Keiko doesn't snore. She's too busy talking in her sleep. Loudly. In Japanese. To share a bedroom with her inevitably leads to nightmares reminiscent of bad karate movies from the 1970s. I know more about this than I would have liked to.

Carelessly I showed Keiko the Transfrontier brochure and told her what I would be doing for the next few days. She grew silent and walked away. That's never a good sign. Two hours later I nearly exploded.

Keiko had found Jeff from Canada, who also wanted to go on a walking safari. She had told him about my trip, and had made him talk to the Transfrontier people and arrange for a couple of extra guests on the trip. My brain burst out in a stream of swearing, but all that came out of

my mouth was a whispering “Excellent...” while my face put on what must have been a very stiff smile. Then *I* grew silent, walked away and locked myself in the bathroom until I felt better.

Next morning I eyed a tiny hope. Maybe I wasn't going on the same tour as Keiko and Jeff after all? They were picked up by a minibus at eight in the morning, whereas I had been told to be ready at ten o'clock. My hopes were crushed when the minibus returned at ten to pick me up after having criss-crossed through Nelspruit and picked up others the whole morning. “Herro. Priest to meet you!”, Keiko greeted me, smiling.

My paradise for the next few days lay a couple of hours drive into a fenced wilderness. The camp was considerably more civilized than I had expected. Two large African mamas worked full-time preparing food for our group of ten. The cabins had electricity and a flood-lit water hole just in front of them, a great place to watch animals come for a drink at night.

“Do we have anyone with abnormal eating habits among us? In other words, are any of you a vegetarian?”, our god/guide demanded to know. That's how a macho setting for a safari is established. Fortunately we had none such deviants among us, so Maria and Nomsisi in the kitchen could put all their energy into preparing an excellent steak for dinner.

We went for an introductory walk at once, to learn how to behave when walking in the wild. It was obvious that we had much to learn. It was winter and the middle of the dry season, so bushes and trees offered little foliage for animals to hide behind. Yet all we saw on that first walk was the buttocks of two flummoxed kudus, three old and wrinkly giraffes who slept standing even as we walked past them, a hole that may or may not have been dug out by a porcupine, one termite mound and two unidentified birds.



The rules for bushwalking were simple and similar to the rules for any kind of parade. We had to stay behind the guy with the gun and walk close to each other on a neat line. The idea was that to the animals we should appear as one large, slow organism, rather than as a number of smaller individuals. This, in theory, would make us seem like less of a threat, so that we maybe could get quite close to the animals. If that

wasn't motivation enough, we were warned that certain predators would be happy to pick out anyone who strayed too far behind or away from the rest of the group.

Different from normal parade behaviour, we were asked to keep any shouting and yelling inside our heads, and in general to make as little noise and smell as possible. That's probably where we failed miserably on our first walk. The minibus had been sauna-like, making us reek of sweat. In addition, a certain Japanese female tended to scream in joy or horror whenever she saw something she had never seen before. And this wasn't exactly a walk through Japantown.

The group was your typical safari bunch. First there was Keiko. Enough said. Then there was Jeff, who was enthusiastic to the extreme about anything to do with nature conservation and aboriginal tribes, and who said "Amazing!" every time we saw something he had never heard of in Canada. A tiny, old Australian lady limped along in the back. She rarely said anything, despite her claim to have worked in marketing her whole life. Of course we also had a couple of Germans. Tina and Herbert didn't speak much English, but this was their honeymoon, so they spoke more than enough body language between themselves. Finally there were two Spaniards, Andres and Barbara. They had originally come to South Africa to see the great white shark, and sadly that was the only remotely exciting thing about them. But I didn't mind the bland gang of people I was walking with. With all the lions, buffaloes and other four-legged creatures around, I was sure there would be enough excitement anyway.

Of course our guides were stereotypical, khaki-clad, Australian-inspired tough guys called Bruce, Brandon and Bryan. It gave the safari a distinct flavour of Discovery Channel. I looked forward to when a crocodile or a lethally venomous snake would show up, so that we would get to watch the guides do something incredibly stupid. The Bruces had recently assisted a Norwegian film team. They had taught them to say "Fy faen, fine pupper!", which is Norwegian for "Hot damn! Nice tits!" This immediately became their general greeting to me, morning, midday and evening. It was great fun for at least almost half the first day.

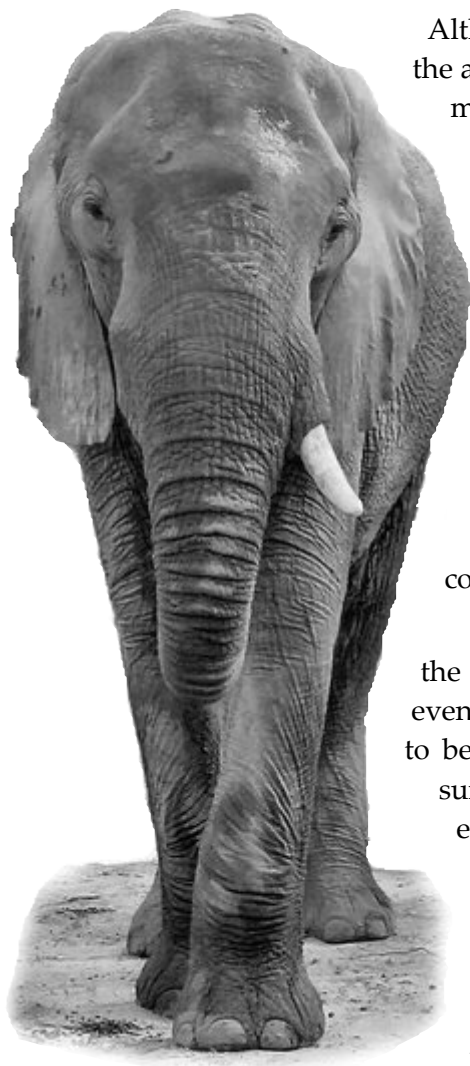
Our nature walks improved gradually. As I grew familiar with some things, other new and interesting details would come to my attention. The guides passionately shared their knowledge with us. Granted, I suspect that much of that knowledge was created on the fly as we asked questions one more stupid than the other, but still. We always followed a visible path, along which mysteriously there was a steady stream of curious things to see. An eland skull here, some lion dung there. The paths had been made by rhinos, the guide said. And I guess that would be difficult to disprove.

Even though the trees were dry and grey, they were still beautiful. Large, crooked and bent, exactly how I had pictured trees on the savannah to be like. I photographed and studied them closely during the breaks we took. As I approached a tree that looked ancient, Bruce suddenly asked me to not investigate it too closely. I had discovered the tambotie tree, a species that can easily become a thousand years old. It does this by being extremely poisonous, so lethal that only rhinos can digest it and not die straight away.

The Africans have of course found a way to utilize the tree. They use it for fishing, in much the same way that we, uh, *some people* fish using dynamite. You just cut off a branch from a tambotie tree and throw it in the water. Dead fish will soon float to the surface. And yes, you *can* eat the fish. Just make sure that you don't use wood from a tambotie tree to build your cooking fire. If you do, consider yourself lucky if the only result is that you experience some interesting hallucinations. More likely you'll never eat fish again for the short rest of your life.

The hours spent walking passed quickly. Every walk started out with a feeling of part fear, part excitement, all natural when you know you're about to enter an environment full of wild lions, giraffes, hyenas, buffaloes, snakes and all those other factors that you don't usually have to worry about when you go for a walk. Gradually the feeling changed into a trance-like condition. My thoughts cleared up, and I found the solution to many questions regarding my life back home. At the same time, my brain lazily followed the signals from the guide.

A frantic, low wave from Bruce quickly brought me back to Africa. Three large rhinos were playing around in the grass just a few metres away. It was a spectacular sight, which unfortunately ended prematurely when Keiko ripped open the Velcro on her camera bag. When she finally had her camera up and ready, she looked infinitely surprised that the rhino had run off to somewhere over the horizon. I won't say that I was upset with her, but it took quite a bit of walking before my meditative state returned.



Although much can be written about the animals of Africa, I think that pretty much all of it has been written by someone already. They certainly have received more attention than most other aspects of travelling in Africa have. So I won't tell you more here about what I saw and experienced in and around the Kruger Park. Only that it was great, exactly like it should be, and thanks to South Africa's tourist industry, the way it's going to be for a long time to come.

My most memorable moments in the reserve took place late in the evenings, when all the others had gone to bed to get ready for a new walk at sunrise. I sat alone and let an enormous dinner and the many impressions of the day sink in, while I thought and listened. The air was full of sounds from nocturnal animals and insects. A darkness filled the world, only broken by the weak glow from the



many clear stars above and the slightly fewer smouldering bits of wood in a dying bonfire. It was even more thrilling than the daytime walks. Indeterminable rustling in the dark bush around me could be literally anything, including the end of the world as I knew it. Rhythmical insect sounds became loud, intense chanting. I could hear lions hunt, all the time communicating between themselves by grunting. It sounded as if they were right nearby, but they may well have been kilometres away. I sat quietly, completely satisfied, listening to the sound of wilderness until the heat from the open fire became too weak to keep the cold night away.

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Thanks to the Germans, who had bought a package including transportation back to Johannesburg, the rest of us were also invited to come along instead of being taken back to Nelspruit. Keiko caught me trying to escape just in time to throw her backpack and herself into the moving car. The journey took most of the day, and it was a nice and relaxing thing to do after all the walking. First we drove along the Small Drakensberg, which weren't at all small, but rather mighty mountains. They looked as if they had been built to be used as backdrops in a Western movie, but then they had been left in a corner for so long that moss had started to grow on them, so now they couldn't be used after all. They looked perfect for spending a few days of solitude in.

We turned and drove straight towards the mountains. Via a pass and a tunnel we came to the Highveld, South Africa's richest farmland. All the way to Johannesburg the straight-ahead road was surrounded by fields, only interrupted here and there by tin mines, nuclear plants and large accumulations of poor people's shacks. Enormous grain elevators loomed over the land, telling the world that this was southern Africa's pantry.

Johannesburg was exactly as nice and friendly as I had imagined it. The driver looked around nervously every time we had to stop for a red light. Well, except for the times when he decided that the safest thing to do was to keep on driving, red lights or not. When we dropped the Germans off at a luxury hotel and casino, we first had to zigzag through the hotel's entrance, a seven lane labyrinth of concrete and barbed wire.

The hotel's private army watched over us, a large number of armed guards wearing full body armour and sour looks. As if the hotel's room rates alone wasn't enough to make anyone stay away from the place.

When people say that the crime rates in South Africa are high, it's an understatement. And the crimes we're talking about are not limited to bicycle thefts and driving without wearing seat-belts. It's difficult to compare the situation there with other countries, since the government is reluctant to release updated statistics.

A South African politician observed in the summer of 2006 that the parliament was surprisingly willing to spend much time debating how to respond to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, an atrocity that took at least 1,110 lives. Surprisingly, because during those same thirty-four days, according to official numbers, 1,750 people were murdered in South Africa, and no one wanted to talk about *that*. That's 51 murders per day. On average! Officially!

If you ask the tourist information agency of South Africa, they'll quote you a somewhat lower average number of daily murders. If you ask the morgue workers union, they'll tell you the real number is much higher. Whether the correct number of murders in the country per day is fifty or a hundred, it's not really what you would call a high crime rate anyway. "War" would be a more appropriate description.

The biggest battles in this war are fought continuously in the streets of Johannesburg. The 2001 statistics tell us that for every 100,000 citizens, some 600 people were murdered in the city centre. That's a murder rate almost six hundred times higher than Norway's. It was even a hundred times worse than New York City that year. Even though New York City may be one of the safest cities in the US, it still makes Johannesburg's murder rate impressive in a disturbing way.

The city also had some 2,000 burglaries per year, again per 100,000 citizens, and the burglaries and the murders often came together. The thieves of Johannesburg didn't always bother with waiting for the residents to leave the building before they acted. If all this made you want to leave the city, you had better do it in an armoured vehicle. Carjacking was another dangerous and frequent crime in the city.

I took great pleasure in explaining to Keiko what a criminal mess we were in the middle of, even though I wasn't completely comfortable with being there myself. Fortunately the highway quickly brought us further, to nearby Pretoria, a pleasant surprise of a laid-back city, especially considering its evil twin city.

We chose a hostel located in a venerable old building in a neighbourhood containing mainly embassies. I got a great room with a beautiful wooden bureau, a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, a large bed with tall bedposts and a floor that creaked when walked upon, exactly like a floor in an old wooden house should. My happiness was further increased when I discovered that the hostel offered full laundry service. I handed over all my dirty clothes, and wearing what little I had left I had dinner with Keiko. Time had come for the first phase of Operation Sayonara, a farewell to Keiko.

When Keiko's e-mail had found me in Cape Town, she had been in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. She had told me several times that she wanted to go back there and see more of the country. Now I told her that I too wanted to go there, maybe with the train from Pretoria in a few days time. I said this despite the fact that in secrecy I had booked myself onto a different trip. I was going on a tour by minibus, and even though it would take me to Zimbabwe, I would be going through Botswana, a different route than the one the train to Bulawayo takes. I felt slightly evil, but by then Keiko had been tagging along for about a month, and I had decided that was enough.

The reception clerk at the hostel told me that if I was just a little bit careful, I could safely walk the streets of Pretoria. So the next morning I went wandering, as soon as I had gotten so much of my laundry back that I could walk around without being arrested for exposing too much skin. My goal was set. Coming to Pretoria I had seen something I thought only existed in Disney cartoons; Uncle Scrooge's massive Money Bin!

The Bin was farther away by foot than it had been by car the night before. I walked swiftly and nervously through the city for about two hours before I decided that I needed a break. It seemed safe enough to stop for a while in the city prison.

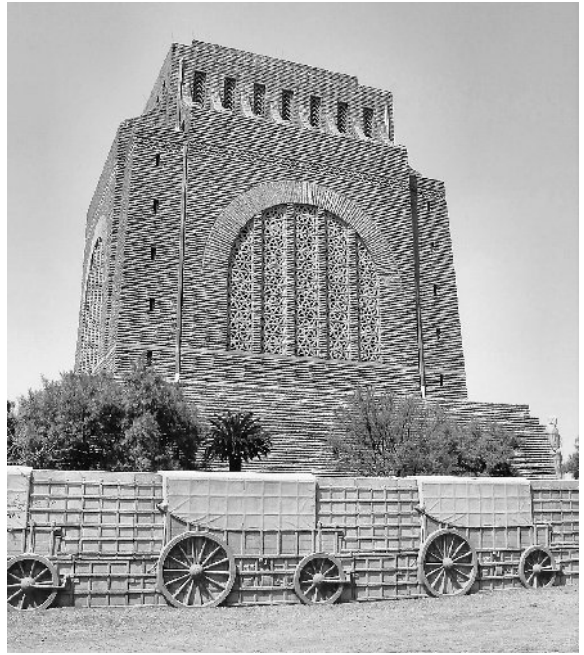
Until 1990 the place had been used to house death row prisoners. With the end of apartheid it became a normal prison. In honour of those who unfairly had been put away there, part of the prison had been recycled as a museum. It was a strange place. Some old benches used for torturing people were on display, blood-stains intact. Along the walls there were shelves full of home-made, or rather cell-made, pipes for smoking dagga, plastic keys that actually had been able to unlock cell doors, knives, guns and various other weapons and items. Strangely, there was also a replica of Nelson Mandela's cell on Robben Island. The museum bathroom was out of order, but I couldn't let that stop me from leaving it as a relieved man. According to the museum guest book I was their first visitor that week. I wasn't surprised. Before I was allowed to enter the prison I had to agree to have my person searched rather thoroughly. Or I could have committed a serious crime, of course.

Visiting the domain of The Beagle Boys made me even more eager to see Scrooge's Money Bin. I had it in clear view, up on a hill just south of the city. The pavement along the road ended, so I had to walk in a ditch next to the highway to continue. Just as I thought I was there, a robust obstacle appeared, a high fence with barbed wire on top. I was disappointed. Surely Uncle Scrooge and Gyro Gearloose could come up with something more ingenious to stop people from getting too close to the money?

It was annoying to have gotten so far and then be stopped like that. I reckoned that there had to be another way in, and I followed the fence to find it. After a while I saw a large goat on the other side of the fence. Or rather, the *remains* of a large goat, half-eaten by someone or something who must have had sharp, big teeth. A voice in my head congratulated me on being on the right side of the fence.

At last I found a gate where they sold tickets to the Money Bin. It turned out it was not a money bin at all, but the Voortrekker Monument, the pride of the white South Africa. It was basically a huge, cube-shaped stone building with various statues and decorated walls, built to commemorate the European pioneers in South Africa. Settlers' wagons encircled the building, as if they were expecting the Zulus to attack at any moment.

This glorification of the actions of the first white men in South Africa's interior is controversial. Some look at it as a tribute to those who with bravery and ruthless efficiency went first and conquered the land for themselves. To others it is a symbol of the apartheid regime. It was originally intended as a war memorial, to remind people about both the wars against the Zulus and the struggle for independence from the British. To me the similarity to Scrooge's home in



*The Money Bin outside Pretoria*

Duckburg was an extenuating circumstance, and I hope the monument will be left standing as it is. If you can ignore the fact that it's not a pretty building, its size is certainly impressive enough to merit its continued existence. Dismantling the thing would be prohibitively costly.

For a long while I was the only one there, and I started to suspect that it was *really* politically incorrect to visit the place. Fortunately a busload of Japanese tourists turned up. The atmosphere became less gloomy thanks to their cameras, their Hello Kitty umbrellas and their pale faces positively glowing with total incomprehension.

The view towards the city was great from the top of the monument, and in the basement there was a museum. It taught me all I needed to know about the challenges involved when you have to conquer a new continent and all you have to help yourself is a bible, a few ox carts and a huge supply of weapons that are vastly superior to anything the locals have to defend themselves with. It will never be a place you feel good about visiting.

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I met Keiko for dinner. Beaming with joy she showed me her brand-new train ticket to Bulawayo. I smiled and appreciated her treasure, saying that I too looked forward to going to Zimbabwe. Technically I wasn't even lying.

As a gift on the occasion of the farewell Keiko did not yet know about, I offered to accompany her through the city for a trip to the zoo. I was going to the Norwegian embassy anyway, and according to the phone book it was located close to the zoo. My business there was to find out whether or not I needed a visa to enter Botswana. When I booked my trip I had asked and been advised to get a visa. So I walked over to Botswana's embassy and politely asked for one. The fat man behind the desk told me that this could only be arranged by their consulate in Johannesburg. "And it will take about two weeks", he said, before he lazily patted himself on his big stomach and went back to sleep. I was to leave the next day, so this was not good news.

I wailed about this to the reception clerk at the hostel. "Fokkit! African embassy workers! They're not willing to lift a finger!", she said and called the consulate for me. They claimed that there was no reason to come and bother them with any paperwork. Of course I could get my visa at the border. Maybe. My guidebook believed that Norwegians didn't need a visa for Botswana, but these facts change more often than travel guides are revised. When in doubt, it's always a good idea to check with your embassy what is the current truth.

After an hour of hurried walk through the city behind a visibly worried Keiko, we found the zoo in a rather lugubrious neighbourhood. The people at the Norwegian embassy must have realized that the area was no good. A security officer at their old address told me they had recently moved to a new office just a few blocks from my hostel. I gave up on finding out about the visa situation and decided I would instead bring enough dollars to be able to put matters straight at the border, one way or another. And then we went inside the zoo.

A few hundred Keikonian photographs later we returned to the hostel. My Japanese friend meticulously packed her things, and she thought it strange that I didn't do the same. I just told her that I was leaving later.

She was happy to have me accompany her to the station, though. I did it to make sure she was disappearing out of my life, but I also wanted to see Pretoria's famous old railway station, built in classic colonial style.

Unfortunately I was too late. South African railway customers had again demonstrated their great short-sightedness and willingness to act like idiots. The very same skills that Cape Town scrap dealers benefited from, as you may remember. But where Cape Town had been bad, Pretoria was pure madness.

One Monday afternoon in February of 2001 the local commuters at the station were told that all trains had stopped due to problems with the signal system. This made them angry. Very angry. They went completely bonkers. All six thousand of them. They charged over the counters and into the railway offices, demanding to see the signal system, presumably not intending to repair it. We'll never know for sure exactly what they wanted to do to the signal system, but when they failed to gain access to it, they simply burned down the whole place. So when I got there, all train journeys from Pretoria started out surrounded by burnt-out ruins.

I merrily waved goodbye to Keiko. Finally I was on my own again, for real for the first time in a month. Sometimes it's better to be alone than not, and to me this was definitely a time like that. Keiko wasn't so lucky. She seemed unhappy when she entered the train. Later I received this e-mail from her:

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*Date: Mon, 07 Oct 09:12*

*2. Oct. from Bulawayo to Vic Falls by train inside my bag storen! Passport, visa card, money, camera, other....*

*But big bag is OK.*

*4. Oct. arrival at Harare. To Enbbcy!*

*Now where you?!*

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The underlying message was impossible to interpret as anything but accusing. No happy Japanese-style smiley (^)(^) Keiko (^)(^) at the bottom of the e-mail this time.

She had apparently managed to get to Bulawayo and presumably spent some time in confusion there, before she had moved on to Victoria Falls. I suspect that she may have gone there to look for someone. On the train on her way there she had fallen victim to theft of her money, essential travel documents, camera, photos and, well, pretty much everything you really don't want to lose when you travel. I was impressed that she had managed to find her way to Harare, where the nearest Japanese embassy, or embassy, could be found. Apparently they had helped her, and now she could continue her trip.

The last sentence in the e-mail worried me slightly. Was she about to hunt me down, to get me for having abandoned her? To be on the safe side, I didn't reply to her e-mail until after I had returned to Norway.

Yes, I did feel bad about the whole thing when I first read the e-mail. But that was later, and not two minutes after having regained my status as a free traveller, looking forward to new adventures beginning the very next morning.

Time heals all wounds. Weeks later I received another e-mail from Keiko. It showed that it's just not possible to stop her:

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*Date: Fri, 08 Nov 11:22*

*I'm now Hermanus! (South Africa)*

*It is very happy today.*

*It is because the whale was seen.*

*There is Whale crier, and a trumpet will be played  
and taught to here Hermanus if a whale is seen.*

*The parent-and-child whale was seen from the shore in  
the 50 meter place.*

*And the tail of a whale was also able to be seen with  
the jumped whale!*

*(^\_^) (^\_^) Keiko (^\_^)/~~~~*

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So she was back in South Africa, probably seeking safer surroundings. Hermanus, a town in the very south of the country, is known for its excellent whale-watching. During the right season you can walk along the



beaches and watch whales play close to the shore. From Keiko's e-mail, I'm guessing that as a service to the tourists they play some kind of fanfare or signal in the town when there are whales around.

It was a relief to know that even without me by her side, there was still African travelling to be had for Keiko.

—

Just as I finally had gotten rid of one helpless individual, another one entered my life.

I was supposed to be picked up at 5:30 in the morning. A minibus was to take me to Botswana to join a group of travellers. As per instructions I stood outside my hostel at the appointed time, but not until well after six o'clock did the car and its stressed-out driver Wayne turn up.

You can say a lot about Wayne, and I'm going to, but let me start by pointing out that the man at least was able to look at himself with some irony. He wore a blue t-shirt with the Superman logo on it, slightly de-superified by a giant blotch of ketchup and four cigarette burns.

An unassuming couple from Wales had been Wayne's passengers for an hour already, but they were still only a couple of kilometres from where they had been picked up by Super-Wayne. This was his first day working as a minibus driver, he told us. We could tell. We stopped at no less than three gas stations to ask for directions before we even got out of Pretoria.

North of the city centre the densely populated area soon ended, and we entered the proper countryside. The cars we met were mostly trucks sporting bumpers large enough to deflect cows, and the grass stood tall and green everywhere along the road. Enormous desert areas loomed just around the corner to the north and to the west. Thanks to a number of rivers and streams it was still possible to farm the land there. People in the area knew they depended on the river, even though they hadn't always known exactly which river it was.

One of the towns in the Bushveld region is called Nylstroom, literally "Nile river". When the whites first arrived they didn't know much, but they knew they were in Africa, and they knew that the river they had

found was flowing north and that it had papyrus growing in it. Therefore, according to the only guidebook they had brought, the Holy Bible, the river had to be the source of the Nile. No time was wasted in choosing a name for their little settlement. I'm guessing that Wayne's ancestors may have been among those most insistent on the Nile theory. To be fair to them, back then there were few gas stations to seek information from.

On the straight road we moved quickly northwards. Wayne celebrated the early morning by playing thundering techno music on the car stereo. At the South African border I was attacked by the national tourism authorities. They wanted me to sign an evaluation form, mysteriously filled out in advance by someone with a remarkably positive attitude towards all things South African. They promised me a nice gift if I would only give them my signature. Before I signed, I made a few adjustments to the form, especially regarding the statements "In South Africa I felt perfectly safe at all times" and "I will recommend Johannesburg to my friends back home". Guess what? Suddenly I no longer qualified for the gift. Oh well, at least they allowed me to leave the country.

On the Botswana side of the border we immediately made a stop at a gas station. Believe it or not, but it wasn't because Wayne was lost again. It was just that the fuel was so much cheaper there that it was important to start driving on petrol bought in Botswana as soon as possible. While filling the tank, Wayne took the opportunity to have a cigarette.

I immediately took cover in the safest place I could find, a restroom located inside the gas station. My knowledge about Botswana increased instantly.

The first thing I noticed was that petrol smells different there, but I don't know why. The second was that restrooms smell a *lot* different there, and I don't want to know why. The third was that now I knew I was in the third world, because there was no toilet paper there, and I know why. It's hard to find a more telltale sign that you're in a poor country than when even toilet paper gets stolen. You don't have to do much travelling in countries like that before you acquire the habit of always bringing your own toilet paper.

The petrol station was also a currency exchange office. I bought some pula. I sniggered a bit about this country having a currency named something rude in Norwegian, and then we drove on.

OK, if you insist. The pula thing. To me it's like if you came to, say, Burmania, and you literally could exchange your dollars into "fucks". Later I learned that "pula" means "rain". In a desert region, where rain is more precious than anything else, what is more natural than naming your currency after it? The beauty goes further. One pula consists of a hundred thebe. "Thebe" means "raindrop".



*Raindrops keep falling ... against the Euro*

Botswana didn't impress me much on the first day. Driving through the flat, dry country on the straight roads of decent quality had a calming effect on me. It helped me slumber through some heavy rock music of an intensity and a loudness I had never imagined possible from a car stereo. But it kept Wayne awake, and that was a good thing.

The vegetation along the road was just sad, scattered bushes, but as we moved north, gradually more and more baobab trees appeared. During the winter the giant trees can hardly be described better than by saying that they look like obese trees growing upside down, with what looks like roots pointing skywards. A stranger tree you will seldom see.

All around us and sometimes right in front of us on the road, goats, cows and donkeys in unbelievable numbers wandered and grazed. I bet Botswana is the only country in the world where *wild* donkeys outnumber humans more than two times over. In addition there are lots of domesticated donkeys used for transportation. You see Kalahari Ferraris all the time, plain carts pulled by four or six donkeys.

As if driving slalom between all this wasn't crazy enough, tens of thousands of wild elephants also roamed the country. The grey giants

ignore inferior beings like us, often with fatal results for both parties. Wayne, bless him, drove as fast as he could, in order to get to our destination in northern Botswana before dark.

Every now and then we had to stop at basic, mysterious roadblocks in the middle of nowhere. Wayne figured they were looking for stolen cars, but the signs claimed they were control posts for foot-and-mouth disease. At every roadblock a couple of men with impossibly tall hats came over to our car and stared intensely at us, as if concentrating hard on deciding whether we were sick cows or not. After a bit of discussion they let us pass. It didn't cost us a single bribery fuck. Sorry, pula.



*A baobab tree*

We did get to see police away from the roadblocks as well. After having whooshed through a small settlement, Wayne was beckoned to stop by a uniformed man on the road. He had just driven in 90 kilometres per hour in a 60 zone. "That will be three hundred pula, please", the officer said. Wayne explained that he simply didn't possess that amount of money at the time. The pragmatic policeman decided to reduce the fine to whatever Wayne had, which was a hundred pula, paid there and then and without a receipt. Everyone was happy, with the possible exception of the Botswana National Treasury.

Against all odds, at sunset we arrived in Nata as planned. Wayne was visibly relieved, and celebrated this great achievement by drinking two beers so quickly that his face turned a deep red. My guidebook told me that the place was a dust hole that received visitors only because the next petrol station was 150 kilometres to the west or 250 kilometres to the north. Fine by me. All I wanted to do there was to meet up with more people and get started on the real tour.

We were met by our new driver, guide and superhero, Brett. He downed a beer, burped loudly and prolonged. "Oh boooooooy-ah, that one went down like a homesick badger!", he informed us. Our camp was just behind the roadside pub, so we set out on the last two hundred metres of our drive that day. Wayne tore down only a couple of fences on our way. Brett and Wayne spent a couple of hours cooking up a simple pasta dinner, while the rest of us experimented with assembling our new homes, some old tents that came without instructions.

Brett wasn't much like Wayne. Short, muscular and with beaming blue eyes. His head was clean-shaven and his mouth was as quick as it was coarse. Not the kind of guy African border guards or corrupt policemen would want to get on the wrong side of. He was a retired South African mercenary, having made good money abroad for a number of years. Now he got his excitement and fun from meeting foreigners in his own backyard by working as a guide on fairly rough tours. His ideas about black South Africans would have been less controversial a hundred years ago than they are in our time. Still, I felt that to herd a group of naive backpackers through an unstable region, you would have a hard time finding someone better for the job than Brett. But he wasn't a great cook.

The next morning Brett expertly took the minibus on the road and headed it north. Behind us I could see Wayne standing miserable with big eyes as he watched us leave, much like a dog left behind when the owners go on vacation. I don't know where he was heading next, but I bet he was thinking "Now, how on earth am I going to get there?"

The scenery north of Nata was as dreary as southern Botswana had been the day before. Mostly it was just grey, salty, infertile dirt. At least we saw a number of elephants doing their early morning exercises, often right next to the road. I don't think Brett saw them, or maybe he just thought they were a result of his heavy drinking the night before. It didn't matter. What counted was that we were driving fast towards the Victoria Falls. According to Brett it was the best place to be on the planet. The economy of Zimbabwe had completely collapsed, so for now this was where the cheapest beer in the world could be bought.

We reached the border after three hours of "Ice, Ice, Baby" on auto-repeat on the car stereo. Botswana smiled and laughed and was happy to let me go. Zimbabwe was decidedly truculent and demanded 250 rand to give me a visa, my ticket to a chaotic country.

The Victoria Falls are part of the river Zambezi, and the rapids zone and the waterfalls are split equally between Zimbabwe and Zambia. On the Zimbabwe side, right by the falls, there's a busy tourist town sharing its name with the main attraction itself. The place has several good hotels, but for people who only need basic facilities there are campsites available as well. As we rolled into one of them, Brett's cool signature tune still sounded from the loudspeakers, word to your mother. Eight buses, large and small, were already parked there.

As soon as we opened the doors, we were welcomed by a smiling man eager to sell t-shirts with our names and the route of our "expedition" on them. A similarly enthusiastic woman pitched kayaking and rafting tours on the Zambezi, waterfall fly-overs in small planes or helicopters, rock climbing, paragliding, rappelling, horse riding, bungee jumping and more. Victoria Falls has so many activities to offer that sometimes people go there and leave again without even having been to the actual famous waterfalls.

Brett certainly wasn't going to be seeing much of the waterfalls. The only natural wonder he would experience was a stunning beauty who immediately came over and handed him a bottle of beer. She knocked him unconscious by using only her eyes, before she dragged him into a tent by the hair he didn't have. I began to understand Brett's enthusiasm for the place.

I was on my own for the next couple of days, but Brett had given me a good start. He had introduced me to one of the locals. He lived in a dark alley and was an archvillain kind of guy, one you don't mess with. On his head he wore extensive dreadlocks, poorly concealed under a red, yellow and green knitted cap. Better hidden somewhere in there he had stashed away large supplies of alternative tobacco and cash. All his teeth were golden and the left side of his face lived a life on its own, communicating with the world through strange spasms. His eyes wandered nonstop, and

most important of all he offered the best exchange rates in Zimbabwe. While the hotels and the official currency exchange office claimed that one US dollar was worth fifty-six Zimbabwe dollars, Brett's friend figured that it was actually worth just over ten times that.

My stay in Zimbabwe was to last three days, so I decided to start out with exchanging just thirty dollars. Ticman Marley's eyes lit up in astonishment, and he had to dig deep in his hair to fulfil my order. I got my twenty thousand local dollars. When I later that day went to get something to eat, I discovered that everything cost close enough to nothing. I began to understand why the money guy had questioned my sanity.

So my big bag of money was a bit excessive, as all I could buy with it was a rather narrow range of barely edible food, peculiar soft drinks and the local newspaper. Anyone selling stuff or activities for tourists would accept payment in US dollars or South African rands only. In the shops the shelves were empty, with the exception of towers of beer, soft drinks and soap. At the petrol station even Wayne would have been safe. Nothing flammable had been sold or set fire to there lately. Still, that day a long line of waiting cars had formed. Rumours had it that a tank lorry loaded with petrol was on its way from somewhere. No one had jobs to tend to anyway, so they figured they might as well spend the day in line waiting for some Shell Super Formula Godot.

The atmosphere in the village was depressing, so I left it. I walked down to the river, a bit upstream from the falls. I sensed that something was wrong, and I soon knew what. Three guys were following me, and they didn't seem like the nicest kind of people. Many others were around, so I didn't really worry about it. Down by the river, a few hundred metres away from one of the greatest natural wonders on Earth, I found intense village life in a nudist camp sort of way.

The river is also the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, and a large number of signs forbade any crossing of the river, swimming, hunting, fishing and pretty much everything else you can do by and in a river. Still it seemed like half the population of Vic Falls were there to wash themselves, do their laundry or just sit around naked. Some

combined this with catching fish for dinner using fishing nets and fishing rods and even by throwing spears into the water. If there was no food in the shops, thank gods the river was full of it!

When I continued my walk up the river I noticed that my three new admirers still followed me. I started to walk faster. So did they. I was moving along at a good jog, when suddenly there was no one around other than me and them. I chose to throw myself in under some bushes next to the path. Like in a really bad movie the three men stopped just outside my hiding place. They argued loudly back and forth for a while. In the end they swore loudly goodbye to each other and disappeared. I was a bit more careful in Vic Falls after that.

By a stroke of luck, the moon was full and the skies were clear on my first night in Zimbabwe. When that happens, Victoria Falls is one of only a handful places on the planet where you can experience a bright moonbow. Yep. A moonbow. Neither had I heard of such a thing before, so I jumped on the possibility when I read about it on a billboard in the village.

A moonbow turned out to be a kind of rainbow, except it only exists at night, when three factors that rarely come together do so anyway; 1) a source of bright light, such as a full moon, 2) just the right density of water particles in the air, not too many and not too few, such as in the mist of a waterfall, and 3) yourself standing in the right position, meaning having the light source behind you, and the water drops in front of you. Just the concept of a rainbow in the dark was mind-boggling to me. What would it look like? Colours in the sky? Hardly. I was guessing it would have to be some kind of a greenish, ghostlike version of a rainbow.

The conditions were perfect, but half an hour's walk through a dark forest filled with the eternal spray of water from the invisible waterfalls didn't bring much promise. The only light I saw was from the flashlight my guide carried. He constantly turned around and shone it in my eyes to see if I had walked off a cliff yet. I was walking next to the largest and most impressive waterfalls in the world, yet I couldn't see them, only hear their mighty and unstoppable roaring. Only the certainty that I would return the next day and behold the spectacle kept me from screaming out



my frustration. Finally we made it to the lookout point. The guide turned off the light and leaned back to enjoy the incredulity of someone who sees a moonbow for the first time.

There it was! A proper rainbow in the dark! Not as clear and richly coloured as they can be in sunlight, but it was still full of colours. The view was simply absurd, even to me who many times have witnessed the northern lights playing on the black celestial canvas over Norway. I couldn't get enough of it, but in the end the guide decided enough was enough and took me back.

An hour later I was in Las Vegas. Although Zimbabwe had gone off the rails both economy-wise and politically, at least they still made sure that the luxury hotels could serve rich, foreign tourists in a most profitable way. "The Kingdom" was a money machine as good as any in all of the world's top tourist destinations. A large hallway full of dingy, buzzing and flashing slot machines bid me welcome inside the front doors and showed me the way to the restaurants. There was a steakhouse, a pizzeria and an enormous self-service buffet with anything you might want to gorge on. All made with ingredients that had been impossible to find in any nearby grocery store for the last few years. Only kilometres away people were starving, according to South African newspapers. There was nothing there to make you believe it.

The pizza left a bad taste in my mouth, even though I'm sure it had been carefully prepared in a stone oven the proper, Italian way by some superchef using only fresh ingredients. It didn't feel much better to return to the campsite. A large and loud open-air disco was going on, but on the pavement outside the fences poor people wanted me to pay close to nothing for handicraft items they had made from exactly nothing. What to do? I don't know.

I always try to avoid supporting governments that clearly aren't doing a decent job. Also, I try not to give money to anyone unless I know with some certainty that the money will go to people who really need it, whether I give directly on the street or through aid organizations. It can be difficult to know what you can do that *really* makes the world a better place, and not risk bringing harm to someone, maybe even to yourself.

Staying at home makes no difference in either direction, so if you want to help, you really should travel. Just make sure you do it right. Handing over cash to the wrong guy on the street may be to put money in the pockets of criminals, people who just act needy. Or even worse, you could play a part in an insane game where parents mutilate their own children in order to make them more efficient beggars. This happens, I'm sorry to say, so you really need to know what you're doing when confronted with beggars.

Sadly, another possible outcome of giving to beggars is violence. Be too generous, and the poor, desperate people may start a fight between themselves for your gift. It is also likely that by giving money, you encourage other beggars to hang on to you, because they know you will cave in eventually. Finally, if by giving money you also reveal where you keep your cash, you run a higher risk of becoming a victim of pick-pocketing or robbery.

Don't get me wrong. Of course you should help people who suffer. I'm just saying that you must think twice about exactly how you do it, and you should *never* let yourself be carried away by the pain you feel in your heart when you're faced with the cruel and complete lack of justice in this world. What may at first seem like the right thing to do, can quickly turn into a seriously bad situation for both yourself and those around you.

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Seeing Victoria Falls properly takes a while. I spent a full day exploring the waterfalls, from sunrise to sunset, and started out by crossing over to Zambia. Someone had told me that while the park in Zimbabwe was strictly controlled and cordoned off, on the Zambian side of the river I could go pretty much wherever I wanted to.

Crossing the border was easy. The border guards were used to thoughtless movements back and forth across the floating frontier. Ten dollars bought me a piece of paper that allowed me to leave Zimbabwe, as long as I didn't walk too far away and I promised to return before the evening. Equipped with that I walked into the no man's land between the countries.

No man's land was mainly a bridge suspended high above the river, and it was not at all as lacking in men as one might have thought. A guy with a rickshaw insisted that the bridge, which I by the way could see both ends of right behind him, was several kilometres long, so if I was even the tiniest bit intelligent, I should pay him to transport me across it instead of trying to walk it on my own. I politely declined the offer.

Several other men sat side by side along the pavement and tried to sell wooden statuettes. Halfway across the bridge an entrepreneur had put up a bungee jump business, but he had no customers. They tried hard to make me invest in a plunge, but I said no thanks, even when they called me a coward. On that day I would leave all the falling to the water.



*Victoria Falls. Zimbabwe to the left, Zambia to the right*

Paying for entrance to the national park in Zambia truly bought me much freedom. The only guard I saw was the one selling the tickets, and there was barely a fence or any other kind of barrier to be seen. The waterfalls, on the other hand, were both visible and audible. From a

viewpoint by the park entrance I saw the whole edge where the Zambezi river makes its dramatic fall of a hundred metres down from an edge two kilometres wide. Barely any water fell where I stood, but the rapids became gradually more agitated to the west. My view disappeared into a mist, a thick carpet of heavy water rising somewhere in Zimbabwe.

The might of the Victoria Falls varies widely from one season to the other. When I visited, there was relatively little water in the river. Instead of a continuous row of wild cascades, the water gathered in just a few decent waterfalls here and there along the wide edge. This gave me the opportunity to do something that most of the year is impossible, namely to walk on the edge of the waterfall almost the whole way back to where I had come from.

Freelance guides lurked in the grass. They jumped onto the path in front of me and offered to show me a safe way through the natural wonder. I chose to manage on my own, experienced from having spent a major part of my childhood balancing on slippery stones by the North Atlantic coastline.

Most of the time all I had to do was to jump comfortably from one stone to another through an almost dry river. The easiest and quickest way to do it was by staying as close to the edge of the waterfall as possible. There the water moved quickest, making the river divide into many small and narrow streams, each of them easy to cross.

The intensity factor of the experience was extremely high. I was almost alone on *The Victoria Falls*, and I could move freely on the edge of a sheer drop of about a hundred metres. On the other side of the gorge, in Zimbabwe, hundreds of people were fenced in like sheep, almost getting into fistfights for the best view.

I felt blessed. This was unreal, almost like being in a cartoon. You know, one of those in which if you walk off the cliff, you will not actually fall until you look down, and even then you will no doubt land safely on a boat loaded with eiderdown or something. I whistled a merry tune as I jumped from stone to stone.

My spinal cord vibrated with the thunder from the main waterfall, ever stronger as I came closer to the place where the onrush of water was heaviest. With the sun behind me, I was constantly surrounded by perfect single, double and triple rainbows. The complete lack of any safety measures made my subconscious relax a little. If this had been dangerous, surely they would have stopped me? On the other hand, this was Africa. Never mind. I was fine, and that was by far my best experience at the Victoria Falls.

If I thought I had been a bit of a daredevil walking *on* the waterfall, my madness was dwarfed by what met me when it wasn't possible to continue any further without first getting wet feet and then dying. At the Main Falls I met a father and his seven-year-old daughter. He had brought her there to teach her how to swim!

From Norway I know fathers who are so ambitious on behalf of their children that they give them instant swimming lessons simply by throwing their offspring into deep water. Usually with some sort of flotation device as part of the story, mind you. This father's plan was a bit more, well, shall we say challenging? Fifty metres upstream from a lethal plunge down the Victoria Falls, he released her into the water and made her swim as best she could. The water was more high than deep, so to speak, and with a good current, so she really had to struggle to stay in place. And that was the perfect thing, the father said. A bit of a current to fight against made it easier to learn how to stay afloat.

Incredibly, the daughter was smiling and laughing all along.

Deep pot-holes had formed in the rock several places at the edge of the waterfall. They functioned as perfectly good bathtubs. I watched the locals jump into them and play around. Since nobody died, I decided to give it a try myself. It was easy enough as soon as I forgot what I was doing. To lie in the water in the middle of the largest waterfall on the planet and look over the edge at water crashing against the rocks far below me was quite an experience. Not exactly what I had imagined I would be doing there.

The sun dried and warmed me, and then I walked back to Zimbabwe. I wanted to see the Falls from that side as well.

In contrast to the stimulating freedom to balance on the edge between life and death surrounded by rainbows and fantastic scenery, being rounded up as part of the tourist crowd on the other side was an anticlimax. Well away from the water and any danger, we just stood in the mist and got wet. It didn't help when a group of Americans surrounded me and blurted out their usual stream of "Oh my God!" and "Awesome!", while comparing the magnificence before their eyes with the Niagara Falls. Especially when they decided that Niagara was better, as there you could get a decent hamburger to go with the view.

But hey, the Victoria Falls *are* great also when viewed from Zimbabwe. It's just that compared to my adventure on the Zambian side, it seemed a bit tame that day. I'm sure that with high waters in the Zambezi, it can be more than thrilling enough to just stand on the Zimbabwean side and behold the water wonder.

The campsite entertainment that night brought even more tameness. "Authentic African culture – Singing and dancing!", the leaflet promised. What turned up was a group of young men who undeniably were talented, but who demonstrated it by reciting an a capella interpretation of the soundtrack from the Disney movie "The Lion King". I applauded politely, and I knew I was done with Vic Falls.

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Our scheduled departure back to Botswana was late in the morning, so I had decided that I would have a lazy day. It turned out to be an all too lazy day. On my way back from a preposterously huge and cheap luxury breakfast buffet at The Kingdom, I suddenly felt sick. A seasoned traveller, I immediately recognized the symptoms of food poisoning.

The Kingdom was probably not to blame. Spoilt food in their restaurants would quickly lead to bankruptcy. Instead, I had probably carried the latent poisoning for days, and now it bloomed, although that may not be an appropriate metaphor for the uncontrolled spewing I entertained myself with that morning. An exhausting day at the Victoria Falls and an insanely large meal were probably just triggering factors for something unavoidable.

I barely had the energy to pack my tent and my backpack, before I had to sit down with a cold sweat in the shadow of a tree. It was hardly malaria, as I had not yet suffered any mosquito bites, and my symptoms didn't fit any other likely diseases either. So all I could do was to wait for my body to cope with whatever was going on in there.

It certainly isn't a good feeling, but to be sick like that is unfortunately just part of the whole travel thing. Sooner or later it is bound to happen when you leave the familiar culture of bacteria surrounding you at home. Sometimes, of course not often, but *sometimes*, it's not even necessarily a bad thing when it happens. This turned out to be such a time. No, I didn't meet a beautiful nurse thanks to this, but my illness had a positive outcome. We'll get to that in a bit.

Slightly delayed we got going, and somehow I made it through both of the border controls. I don't remember the herd of eighteen elephants that at one stage allegedly crossed the road right in front of us. To me it was just an episode where all my fellow passengers screamed and babbled incomprehensibly somewhere far beyond my unusually heavy eyelids.

Our destination that day was Kasane, a small town fairly close to the border. When Brett stopped the car and "Ice, Ice, Baby" slowly died out, I had my only clear thought that day. In my condition there was no way I would have a good night inside a muggy tent. Most likely it would just make me feel even worse. The next activity on our itinerary was to spend several days in the remarkable Okavango Delta. I would do everything I could to get better rather than risk missing out on that.

I had Brett take me to a nice hotel. My only requirement for the place was that there had to be an infinite supply of ice cubes there. Ice cubes are underestimated as medicine. I don't know how or why it works, but every time I get food poisoning or something that feels like it, I always seek out places where I can have a soft, nice bed to lie down in and a steady supply of ice cubes. I'll stay in that bed and chew on those ice cubes until suddenly I'm all well again. Places like that usually come with daily cleaning of the room, so in the unlikely event that the cure doesn't work, someone will probably find me before I die. This way I have been able to recover from complete misery to being in good shape many times, and

rarely has it taken me more than twenty-four hours. I don't know what the secret is. Maybe it's the cooling of my intestines, or maybe it's the heat from my body's reaction to the ice cubes. I don't care, it just works. If I still don't feel better after a couple of days, I will of course see a doctor, but that has almost never been necessary.

Brett's choice was a nice safari lodge, although he almost dragged me out of there again when he heard what they charged for a room. But they guaranteed as many ice cubes as I could possibly want, so I was determined to stay. For 451 pula, of which one pula was the government tax, I got a superb room in delightful surroundings. Or at least that's what it said in the brochure on my bedside table. I never made it over to the windows to check out the view. I ordered two buckets of ice cubes, a selection of fresh fruit, some Coke and soda water, and then I started recovering.

After chewing on ice cubes for a few hours I felt strong enough to allow something more substantial to enter my digestive organs. My first attempt was a can of Coke. The results were disappointing. An explosion of sugar and caffeine escaped from my nostrils less than two minutes after my experiment commenced.

A new attempt a little bit later transformed half a pear into a massive number of fast-flying pear piece projectiles covering almost the entire surface of the bathroom mirror. You see, I made the tactical error of having a look in the mirror to see if I looked better or worse than I felt, when I really should have continued to keep my head inside the toilet bowl.

One thing was certain. A tent a hundred metres from the nearest toilet and water source would have been the wrong place to be for me right then.

All I was able to consume as the evening progressed were the ice cubes. I crunched my way through the two buckets and two more, all the while lying in bed watching CNN cover an election in Germany. Encouraged by the celebrations of the winning party I tried my luck with an orange. My body seemed to accept it. A number of ice cubes and another orange later I was fine again. And thank gods for that, it was now



past four o'clock in the morning. I had seen Germany's new chancellor give his victory speech at least fifteen times, and soon Brett would come and take me back to the others.

I showered and washed the bathroom mirror before I checked out. At six I was ready outside the hotel. No one came. Six thirty and seven passed. Still no Brett. I was beginning to worry. Had the others gone sick as well? If so, how would they cope without ice cubes? I had no way of getting hold of them, so I just had to stay put.

Close to eight o'clock the car finally came up the hotel driveway. I was slightly surprised to see that Brett was wearing only his underwear. There was something frantic about his eyes, and he was bleeding from slashes and wounds on his arms. Furious, he explained that during the night a gang of rogues had robbed him and the rest of the group. The bandits had silently come on rafts from across the river. On the other side of the water was Namibia's Caprivi Strip, an area known as a hiding place for ruthless Angolan guerrilla soldiers.

In the darkness they had taken all they could pile up on their rafts, and then disappeared out of the reach of Botswana's police. The loot was almost everything in "our" camp, except for the tents, the minibus and the clothes everyone had been wearing. Which wasn't much, as they had all been asleep when the thieves arrived.

Oh, and the robbers also left a Celine Dion cassette in the car. "So they can't have been all bad guys", Brett concluded. I wasn't sure what he meant. Were they good guys, since they let us keep the cassette, or were they just sensible guys with taste enough to leave it behind?

Only Brett had instinctively tried to resist the robbery. Fortunately he had surrendered after a few cuts from a big knife, so only his pride had been seriously wounded. All the others were unharmed, although they were of course quite distressed. No one had carried much cash or valuables, and they all had travel insurance. Still, that would not be of much use until we returned to South Africa, and now we suddenly lacked a great many things.

I almost felt bad for having gotten sick and staying the night in a luxury hotel. My gut feeling had saved me, so to speak. Fate wanted it that way. Now I could at least help the others out, by paying for everything we needed from shops in Kasane when they opened. Stuff like clean underwear and sedatives, among other things.

Everyone agreed that we should continue our trip more or less as planned. We found everything we needed to continue, except for a new music cassette with "Ice, Ice, Baby" on it. Our main challenge was to convince the local police that we deserved any help and understanding from them. Brett tried to get the necessary papers to allow us to continue through Botswana. All the police gave us was one day to get out of their country. Neither were they willing to send anyone into the bush to see if they could find the thieves. Fighting the Angolan guerrilla wasn't high on the police's agenda, understandably. Too bad for us, but there simply wasn't anything they could do, they said.

Brett called his boss in South Africa. The message was clear. We should proceed according to established routines for incidents like this one. I have to admit that I wasn't entirely happy to learn that they actually had a contingency plan for what to do when a tour group is robbed of all its possessions. How often did this happen? I still gave Brett money to buy enough petrol to take us to Maun, a town in the outskirts of the Okavango Delta. Our trip into the wilderness was already paid for, and all the stuff we needed to go was waiting for us in Maun. When we returned from the Okavango, Brett would again go to the police and claim as credibly as possible that we had been robbed of all our belongings while in the delta. The local police should give us a new 24 hour deadline for getting out of Botswana, and by then that would be exactly our plan anyway.

When you know the ways of Africa, there's always a pragmatic solution to any problem.

Despite Celine Dion being the only audio entertainment available, the eight hundred kilometres from Kasane to Maun passed by quickly. Even without official papers Brett talked us smoothly through the checkpoints along the way. All the roadblocks were manned by men with tall hats, but

in the presence of Brett they immediately lost every bit of authority and self-assurance that the hats had been designed to give them.

Maun is the only city I know of where wild donkeys actually have displaced the stray dogs from the streets. They were everywhere, nibbling on flowers, garden plants, litter and whatever else they could find that was even remotely edible. No one in Maun seemed to find this the least bit weird. The local campsite was the only place not plagued by donkeys, as it was located in the middle of a large crocodile farm. The only donkey I saw there was extremely bloody and distributed into five big buckets, waiting to be dinner for a group of big-mouthed reptiles.



*Stray donkeys outside a business centre in Maun, Namibia*

We had not come all this way to see Maun, but to experience the wetland area to the north of the city, the Okavango Delta. Where the river Okavango goes to die. The river has its source somewhere in Angola. Having flowed 1,500 kilometres or so through Angola and Namibia it reaches Botswana, where it encounters some serious trouble.

It's a large river when it leaves Namibia, carrying about a thousand cubic metres of water per second, enough to put it among the hundred largest rivers in the world. But then something happens. Once upon a time, tens of thousands of years ago, the river used to flow into a lake that

happily accepted any water it was offered. But as millions of tons of gravel and sand was brought with the water into the lake, the lake slowly dried up. So now the water desperately tries to find somewhere else to go. But there's only sand in every direction. The result is the Okavango Delta, a large wetland area. It's northern part is a labyrinth of rivers, marshes, lagoons and islands, wet and full of life, both above and below the surface of the water. The water gradually evaporates as the water streams south towards the Kalahari Desert. In the end even the toughest water molecules succumb to the desert heat, and from then on it's just sand and stones.

I had really looked forward to seeing this unique ecosystem with my own eyes. Finally it seemed as if I was actually going to make it there. Then we stopped at a car park in front of a pharmacy in Maun. Brett needed malaria medicine. Not as a sensible thing to bring on a journey into the heart of malaria-land, but because he was in the middle of a malaria outbreak. "No worries", he said, "this happens to me all the time", as if he had just not eaten enough oranges lately, and now he was going to get some vitamin C to remedy that.

Getting his medicine without a prescription turned out to be a bit of a battle with the chemist. The guy who was taking us to the delta shortened our wait by telling us about the city. Maun used to be a tiny flyspeck on the map, home to merely fifty souls. Then ecotourism arrived. In just a few years Maun grew to a population of some thirty thousand people (and countless donkeys), of which three thousand were whites. Pretty much everyone now worked in the tourist industry. (Not the donkeys.)

Thanks to this, the city had by African standards become rich. The majority of its citizens still lived in basic mud huts. The explanation was partially to be found around us, in the many furniture dealers in the city centre. They heavily advertised the option to buy furniture by paying for it in a number of small instalments. In much the same way that many Westerners don't realize that even when you pay with plastic, you still must have the money, people in Maun bought more expensive furniture than they really could afford. They ignored the important detail that even when you pay just a little bit at a time, it can still be expensive in the end. So even though they made relatively good money from their jobs, most of

it went straight to the furniture dealers and their debt-collecting partners. The result was a city where a few were wealthy, while the rest lived in houses built from empty beer cans and mud-based bricks.

The previous year Maun had for three consecutive days held the not so prestigious title of "Hottest inhabited place on Earth", with 52, 52 and 53 agonizing degrees Celsius. Not that the temperature itself was a major problem. But combine heat like that with the strong winds that often appear in Maun, and you will feel the problem. Whirling up dust and sand from the dry ground, the blowdryer wind can make life in Maun pretty miserable, both in- and outdoors.

Brett finally returned. He looked worse than ever, but it was impossible to persuade him to stay behind. He didn't trust our guides in the delta, he said, not exactly cheering me up. So we started on the last bit of the journey that could be done by car. We drove north through a flat and dry forest, bringing with us malaria, Celine Dion and the works.

At eleven o'clock we reached the end of the road, just as the heat from the sun became unbearable. From there on we had to become waterborne in order to go deeper into the wilderness. Our vessels would be mokoros. The mokoro is said to be Africa's answer to Venetian gondolas. If that's the case, my suspicion is that Africa didn't really understand the question. Okay, so mokoros do float, most of the time, and they are propelled by punting, but that's really all they have in common with gondolas.

A mokoro is a dugout canoe, carefully manufactured from a single sausage tree or ebony tree. At least that used to be the case. It takes a hundred years for those trees to become proper mokoro material, while a mokoro can only be used for five or six years before it rots away. To avoid cutting down all the trees, they're now sensibly building fibre glass mokoros as well.

In a mokoro you have to sit perfectly still, so as not to bring the mokoro punter out of his balance. He will usually be standing in the back of the boat, slowly and steadily navigating the mokoro through the shallow water. But he's unlikely to remind you of the well-fed, smiling gondoliers who sing "O sole mio!" while weaving through the waterways of Venice. Instead your captain will be sort of concave and silent, only

likely to yell “Mama mia!” if there's some rustling in the vegetation, a possible warning sign of incoming hot-headed hippos or crocodiles with a craving for meat.

In my head, going for a ride in a hollow tree trunk through a green jungle had seemed incredibly tempting. In reality, with the strong sun and the warm wind, it was difficult to enjoy having to sit still and watch a forest of reeds slowly glide by. What it was like to stand in the back and work hard to bring the boat forwards I do not know, but I doubt that he was having any more fun than me.

Most of the time all I could see was grass and sky. If I concentrated, I could also glimpse a wading bird here and there. I was dying. A rebuke hit me from behind every time I put my hand into the fresh and relatively cool water. The captain of the mokoro would not allow anything that could lead to us both becoming crocodile snacks.



*Well-worn mokoro captain*

It took a couple of hours to reach the islet that was to be our base for the next few days. The heat kept increasing. The conditions didn't encourage much activity, and having Brett lying unconscious on the ground didn't improve the situation either. All the cold drinks we had brought were gone after just an hour. We still had more than 48 hours to kill before our scheduled return.

We whined about the heat for a while, and then about how Brett could be so inconsiderate as to let himself get malaria. After enough whining we were allowed to walk a bit upstream to go for a swim. The permit came from the new guy in charge, a jungle guide who for some reason was named C Company. Maybe he used to be an officer in some army. I don't know. His clothes had definitely been at war with someone or something.

Before I left for Africa, I had solemnly sworn to myself that no matter what happened, under no circumstances would I allow my body to enter freshwater in the wild. The consequences of bathing in African lakes and rivers can be rather dire, both in the short and the long term. Crocodiles and diseases are potential threats almost anywhere.

In the Okavango Delta, it was simply impossible to keep that promise. The air was way too hot and the water way too refreshingly cool. Besides, according to, well, those in my group who wanted to go swimming, the water in the Okavango had been continuously on the move since it fell down as rain somewhere in Angola. So in theory the water should not contain any intestinal worms or bilharzia. I rationalized my swimming by saying to myself that in any case I would have to drink the water, as everything potable we had brought from Maun had already been consumed. And who knew for sure whether those purification tablets we put in the water actually worked? If I was going to get infected by worms anyway, I might as well get some pleasure from it.

After the swim we lay down to dry in the sun and the wind. It took almost thirty seconds. All dry, we were ready for our first safari walk. C Company and his assistant, Tommly, guided us. We saw giraffes, elephants and baobab trees within a few minutes walk from our camp. If only the sun would calm down a bit, this could be a very nice place to visit.

Evening came. It was still hot. Too hot for most activities, including eating a full meal. All I could manage was to nibble on an apple and slowly drink water. The night brought intense jungle sounds. Especially prominent in the evensong was the choir of amphibians, ranging from the squeaking of the smallest frogs, to the grunts and roars of large toads.

The sky never turned completely dark. Maun was close enough for its light pollution to reach us. Even though it had taken a long time to get there, we still had not moved that many kilometres away from civilization. It was difficult not to think about the cold drinks available at the source of those lights. So close, yet for all practical purposes so impossibly far away.

I had an interesting conversation with Tommly. He had no mosquito repellent and no t-shirt, so he desperately tried to make me provide him with both. It wasn't until the last night in the delta I realized that he had no tent, so he certainly had reason to worry about being bitten by mosquitos at night. I covered him in mosquito repellent, but my t-shirts I did not wish upon anyone. After repeatedly having been exposed to humidity in the shape of mist from Victoria Falls, sweat from me and water from the river without being laundered in between, they were now more hygiene hazards than garments.

Tommly was 23 years old, and his parents wouldn't let him marry until he turned 28. This caused Tommly much frustration. He released the energy from his pent-up lust and desire by erecting houses instead of something else. Now he owned two and a half houses, but only one t-shirt. It seemed a bit strange to me. In my country people in general have more t-shirts than homes.

During day two in Okavango, Brett finally regained consciousness. "My mouth is so dry, I swear I could feel camels wandering on my tongue this morning", he said, and with that he was his old self again. This made it easier to relax and enjoy some good walks around the camp.

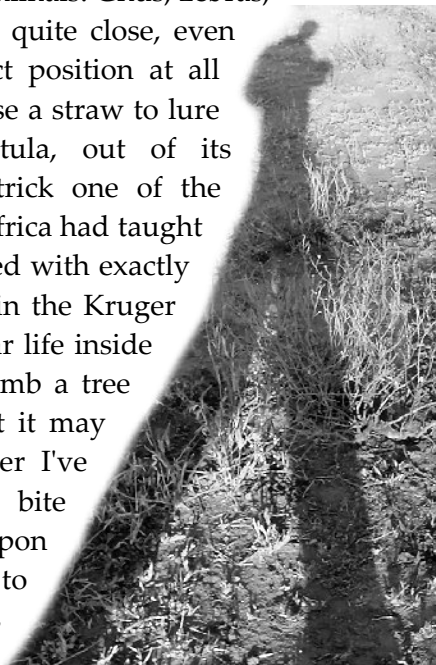
We didn't see many animals, however. I don't think the reason was a lack of animals around. A more likely explanation was the behaviour of a Czech couple in the group. They were unable to walk more than ten steps without having a proper meal first, so our morning walks had to wait until they officially had finished breakfast. By then most of the animals had left the open fields where we could have seen them, and spent the rest of the day hiding and resting in the dense vegetation.

Neither did it help much that when the Czechs finally were ready to go, they always wore matching sportswear in screaming pink, yellow and light blue colours. As camouflage I think the clothes would be more useful in the night clubs of Prague than in the Okavango Delta. Furthermore, the Czechs couldn't stop chatting to each other while we walked, except for those embarrassing moments when they decided that it was time to stop to fondle and kiss each other intensely. I suspect that beings of any species with a more developed sense of smell than us, in



other words every animal in the Okavango, could sense the scent of fresh Eastern European body fluids from miles away. I build this assumption on the way their tent shook and jumped whenever the Czechs were inside.

Little by little we still did get to see animals. Gnus, zebras, kudus and jackals allowed us to come quite close, even though they of course knew our exact position at all times. I was also given permission to use a straw to lure a baboon spider, an African tarantula, out of its subterranean hiding-place. It was a trick one of the Bruces on the walking safari in South Africa had taught me. The ground in Okavango was dotted with exactly the same kind of holes as the ground in the Kruger area, so I figured there had to be similar life inside them as well. C Company chose to climb a tree while I fished spiders, so in retrospect it may not have been a very good idea. Later I've learned that the baboon spider can bite through shoes and inflict paralysis upon people. I think I almost managed to demonstrate that in Botswana, but I was lucky and got away with it unharmed.



The most exciting walk we did was the one where we almost saw a lion. A herd of zebras we followed simply refused to move away from the plain and go into the forest, no matter how close we got to them. This could only mean one thing, C Company said, namely that inside the forest there was something that neither man nor zebra should approach too closely. Baboons in the trees were screaming as well, another telltale proof of a predator's presence.

We carefully made our way in silence, trying to locate the lion or lions. Suddenly Racheal from Australia realized what we were doing. Up until that moment she must have thought we were on a botanical excursion of some kind. "What the hell are we doing slinking through the bush with dangerous animals all around us?! We haven't even brought a weapon! I'm going back to the camp at once!", she howled hysterically. The nearest

lion was probably in a neighbouring country before the echo from that verbal volley died down.

On our last night in the delta, the rain that had been hiding in the hot and humid air finally came out, bringing violent winds with it. To avoid being blown away, I invited Tommly to sleep in my tent that night. Otherwise he would have slept under a mokoro. He was skinny, but it worked. The extra ballast ensured that next morning I woke up fairly close to where I had fallen asleep the night before.

The rain had cooled the air to an almost comfortable temperature. So when I returned to Maun and at last got the cold Coke I had been fantasizing about for the last couple of days, it tasted less heavenly than I had anticipated. Maybe I had just gotten accustomed to the additives in the water in the delta. Still, it was undeniably nice to be back in civilization and once more be able to shower in transparent water.

My clothes badly needed to be washed, so I brought all my mouldy socks, t-shirts, underwear and whatnots to a water post. A security guard came over to talk. He had only one arm, and over his only functional shoulder he carried something half gun, half cannon. I didn't ask about his arm. After all, we were in the middle of a crocodile farm, so it was much more fun to guess where his arm had gone.

He started talking about his missing limb anyway. About how it hurt all the time, and about how nice it would be if only he had some medicine to relieve him of the pain. Maybe I had some? Could I give it to him? No one in Maun talked to me unless they wanted me to give them something. My journey was close to its end, so I willingly parted with some of the medicine I carried. It makes no sense to return home with a backpack full of stuff that is needed immediately by someone right where you are.

In Pretoria I had heard about a tour of southern Namibia. It was to begin in the capital, Windhoek, in three days, and I wanted to be on it. I didn't feel like travelling more than a thousand kilometres in the wrong direction through the desert with a party of backpackers lacking backpacks as well as essential papers, just to catch a flight from Johannesburg to Windhoek.

Instead I decided to try finding a way to go there directly. Without a tent, my only option for accommodation in Maun was a fairly expensive hotel. After roughing it in Okavango, I didn't mind a bit of luxury. It would still cost less than the plane ticket I saved. Besides, I really felt like spending a couple of days being lazy and curious and wander up and down the peculiar streets of Maun. Windhoek was just 600 kilometres to the southwest, and there *was* a road through the desert. As long as there's a road, there's usually some kind of transportation on it as well.

My last minutes with Brett and the bunch were spent driving to the city centre. Less than nothing happened there that morning. Silence prevailed inside the car as well. Close to every man in Maun had left town for the weekend to participate in a river fishing festival somewhere else. So it had been exceptionally good conditions for hunting females in the city bars the previous night, and certain visitors to Maun had made sure to take advantage of the situation.

The only sound in the car was some sort of howling coming and going in sync with a blinking lamp on the dashboard. No one knew what the vehicle was trying to tell us. Since I was leaving the car anyway, I merrily suggested that maybe it was the donkey radar that suddenly had started working. An unusually grumpy Brett declared my theory baloney.

Then I was on my own again. Luck helped me find a way to get to Windhoek in time. It turned out that there was one and only one way to travel between the two cities, on a minibus leaving once every fortnight. The next one would leave in two days, which was perfect timing. I bought a ticket to Windhoek, and then I was ready to explore the mysterious Maun.

The most striking sights in town were the Herero women, or to be more exact, their clothes. In a hot and dry climate like Maun's, you would expect to find people wearing not much. Here the case was almost the opposite. They didn't dress like Eskimos, but that would be the next step up the ladder. Starting from the top, covering the head they wore huge, cow-inspired creations, distinctly horn-like. Body, arms and legs were covered in large dresses with crinolines beneath. Plain, one-coloured dresses were definitely out of fashion. It seemed like every woman had

her own pattern, with dress and headgear matching nicely. It must be a terribly hot way to spend life in the desert. Especially a desert that at times is the warmest place on Earth.

The background for the paradoxical way of dressing is a piece of German missionary history. When the missionaries arrived in Namibia during the Victorian age, they met the Herero people who walked around practically naked, both men and women. The missionaries saw that this was not good, scorching heat or not. The Germans immediately dressed the local women up in decent stuff from the wardrobes of their own wives, the hottest haute couture of Europe at the time.

Now, the strange thing is that the Hereros didn't mind this at all. Actually they loved the style, if not the colours and the patterns. Not completely satisfied, they augmented their new clothes with traditional colours and jewellery, and soon they had found a way to dress that was acceptable to both the Germans and to themselves.

That the Europeans since then have moved on to new fashions, many times, has not affected the Herero. The result is that when you visit certain towns and villages in northern Botswana and Namibia today, you may feel like you have entered a world that never recovered after the movie "Gone with the Wind".

Myself I had trouble with getting over a bakery with a large sign outside, reading "The Biggest Selection of Germ Specialities". Fortunately there was an explanation. An air vent had devoured two letters. It should have read "German Specialities". Which made *slightly* more sense.

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I've never been drunk, but in Botswana I found out what it must be like to pay through your nose for a drink in order to potentially have something else entirely come out through your nose later. Never have I paid so much to get as sick as I did one morning in Maun. Alcohol was supposedly not involved, but when I chartered a plane to see the Okavango Delta from above, some of the pilot's manoeuvres made me slightly uncertain about that.

Renting a plane wasn't as extravagant as it may sound. I split the bill with a French guy, Thierry, for an hour's flight in a small Cessna tin with propellers. Pilot student Sean wasn't exactly paid well to temporarily be responsible for our lives. The airport was crowded with future pilots, all of them close to graduation. Or to utter failure, of course. All they needed were more hours in the air to get their certifications. This made renting a plane there relatively cheap.

The flight started with a nice and easy take-off. Sean proudly turned around and looked at Thierry and me. In hindsight, I think it may have been a mistake to flash an acknowledging smile back at him. Encouraged by the smile, Sean proceeded to phase two in his campaign to impress us with his piloting skills. All of a sudden we witnessed a show of aerobatics. I usually enjoy those, but this time I was inside the aircraft, and that made a huge difference.

Outside the windows I could see giraffes and elephants, buffaloes and gnus, kudus and impalas, as well as a few eagles who seemed rather anxious to get out of our way. Every time I saw an interesting animal, I prayed that Sean wouldn't see it too. If he did, he would pull the plane through a madman's loop to get as close as possible to the poor creature. We would circle the animal's head a few times, like an annoying fly, making me feel five times heavier than usual. Then we would move on to the next animal.

I was mainly interested in seeing the big picture, how the Delta's different parts all fit together, something I had figured would be easiest to do from above. Sean, however, seemed to think that I was there to learn as much as possible about the length of the nostril hairs of the various species. At times we flew no more than four or five metres above the tree tops and the reeds growing in the water, and we made a sharp turn every twenty seconds or so. The fatiguing flight made sweaty summer vacations in the back seat of a car on endless roads through Swedish Lapland seem like a distant and beautiful dream.

My aerial ordeal finally ended. I staggered to the pilot school office where without a word I handed over the money for my flight. Quickly I found the nearest restroom. And sat down. For a long time. I moaned and

groaned as I sat there shaking. The vibrations from the engines on the plane wouldn't let go of me. When eventually I got rid of my double vision, I walked back to the hotel and went straight to bed. Late in the afternoon I woke up and realized that my stomach had started behaving as some kind of soup dispenser. There was only one thing to do. I immediately ordered two buckets of ice cubes and got ready for my cure against anything.

Obviously, the next morning I was fine again. The rest of my time in Maun I walked around and watched people and donkeys. I never got tired of that, but soon it was time to go to Namibia.

It was the 30<sup>th</sup> of September, Botswana's Independence Day, a national holiday. The only working man in the whole country was the driver of the minibus that I and two others were sitting in, bound for Windhoek. The streets of Maun were deserted. Most people in Botswana were still in bed, suffering from hangovers, the driver explained. And he was happy about it, as it meant he could drive as fast as he wanted without having to worry about killing anyone or being caught speeding. He just had to look out for the cows, donkeys, goats and horses that kept crossing the road in front of us.

We made a few short stops. The driver added to his income by taking on unofficial passengers, after having asked us whether we minded if he did. Of course we didn't mind, there was room for much more than three passengers.

The Namibian border officials gave me permission to stay in their country for fourteen days without even asking what I would do with them. At first sight Namibia seemed identical to Botswana. The border between the countries is a perfectly straight, vertical line on the map, at one point suddenly moving exactly one degree to the east.

There's nothing about the geography that separates the two countries, it's just the border the colonial powers decided on when Africa was dissected, historically speaking just a moment ago. The only noticeable difference from Botswana was that the ground slowly began to rise towards the west, and the signs along the road now hinted at a slight German influence. A war cemetery from a battle between the Herero and

German troops was signposted "Schutztruppe-graben". Later on we drove along the Bismarck River and passed Hotel Midgard.

We reached Windhoek after three hours of steady climbing. The capital of the country was so small and secluded that I didn't even see it before suddenly I was right in the middle of it. Even though there were a few tall buildings and wide streets, they were all concealed by the surrounding hillsides, at 1600 metres above sea level. Some buildings had German-like features, but it wasn't as striking as I had imagined it. Most of the city seemed well maintained and modern. It had American junk food outlets as well as local imitations of them. On our way through the centre, for the first time since leaving South Africa I saw a Chinese restaurant, a mini golf course and a bookstore. Between the buildings were well tended gardens and parks. There was even toilet paper in the public restrooms! I had safely returned from the third world.

The transition back to civilization wasn't too noticeable. At the hostel, appropriately named The Cardboard Box, all beds were taken. They offered me to stay in a tent in the backyard. I was happy to accept, since already the next morning I was leaving Windhoek to see southern Namibia, on a tour run by a company with offices next door. I walked over to them and handed over all my remaining cash to an enthusiastic blonde, who in return gave me a tour voucher. I was all set for the desert.

I had been lucky to get to Windhoek in time, and even luckier to actually get a ticket for the tour. With me, the tour was fully booked. My group included three Germans; a hyperactive girl who claimed her name was "Little Swan", a guy who had shaved off half of each of his eyebrows, and his girlfriend, who frankly was too fat to fit inside the car. We all had to push together to get her inside.

Then there were four Brits. "Thank God, we outnumber the Germans!", as they said. Two of them were cheerful bachelors who had travelled through Africa like this for months already. The two others were much older, a married couple who had never pitched a tent before in their lives, but who were open to experimenting with anything. Before we parted, I had learnt a great deal about how they spent life in retirement manufacturing LSD and explosives in their attic at home, using recipes

they found on the Internet. Our group of ten was completed by me and a Spanish couple, who weren't Spanish at all, but Catalanian, they insisted.

We had been given Elke to lead us through the desert. Moses himself couldn't have been a better fit for the job. Even though she was a she, you would have to search for a long time to find a more masculine man than her. A real toughie, she navigated gravel roads like a goddess, she scolded and swore like an old sailor and when she got agitated, she threw orders at us in German rather than in English. Which was a lot of the time. If at all possible, I felt even safer under her command than I had done with Brett.

It took us some time to reach the promised desert. Outside Windhoek the scenery was at first just your average dry mountains, soon followed by the kind of semi-arid land that had surrounded me all the way from Botswana. The ground was part sand, part stones and part severely dehydrated bushes. The plants led a tough life in the harsh climate, but they were able to survive thanks to the more or less annual green weeks held after short periods of intense rain.

After a long stretch of bumpy road we reached a mountain pass. Far in the distance we could finally see straight into a red desert, a land completely covered by the rounded forms of sand that for all practical purposes had been there forever.

We didn't reach the red sand that day. Instead we drove down from the pass to a grass-covered plateau and camped in Sesriem, the last populated place before the Namib Desert. "Namib" is a word borrowed from the language of the Nama people, and it means roughly "large, dry plains". That's a more than adequate description of most of Namibia in general and of the land around Sesriem in particular.

The landscape was simply gorgeous, with an unblocked view towards the horizon in every direction. Mountains in the distance were blushing red, apparently in the process of being conquered by even redder sand dunes. Above me the sky loomed a deep blue and was cloudless all over. The great plains around me were covered with bright yellow grass that waved in the wind. The grass hadn't showered for months, but it still smelled fresh as it turned into gold with the sun approaching the horizon.



The national tree of Namibia is the camel thorn tree, an acacia. With their yellow flowers and evergreen leaves they stood scattered across the plains. Each of them seemed lonely, surrounded by grass only, destined to never be part of a forest. They survive only because they have the ability to dig their roots up to sixty metres down, where they can find ground water. During the period when South Africa administered Namibia, the national anthem was a slightly rewritten old Nazi marching song, starting with the line "Our land is as tough as a camel thorn tree". The tree seems able to flourish in even the toughest surroundings, so it's a good and patriotic thing to sing. Still, it *can* be brought down.



*A camel thorn tree in Sesriem*

Surprisingly, the only real threat to the camel thorn tree is a tiny bird. Or rather a whole lot of tiny birds; the social weavers. These avian conquerors join forces and form large bird communities, and they build nests together in the trees. Actually, "nest" isn't the right word. What they build using only thin straws of grass eventually turns into giant tenement houses for birds, with room for hundreds of feathery families.

The construction is both a great place to hatch their eggs and to escape the midday heat. Despite their name, the birds do not weave the straws. They thatch, packing the straws tightly together into robust walls, exactly like people in Europe have done for centuries when building straw roofs on houses. A large communal nest can have a hundred entrances and exits, a volume of more than fifty cubical metres and a weight of more than a ton. Under that pressure even a camel thorn tree may collapse if it's old and tired.

Sesriem is the most popular base for trips to the country's main attraction, Sossusvlei, the very heart of the Namib Desert. We planned on being the first visitors to the national park that day, so that we could enjoy the sunrise from the top of a dune without too many others around. To do that, we should be on our way at half past five in the morning at the latest.

Unfortunately, when the rest of the group was ready to go, the elderly English couple was still inside their tent, performing loud and saucy experiments, presumably based on something they had found on the Internet. We were delayed, but Elke knew how to fix it. She just had to drive even crazier than she had done the day before. Instead of actually breaking when she should have, she just yelled "Bump!" whenever she saw an obstacle we would hit, whether it was a brand-new dune, a small to moderate sized animal or just a stretch of bad road.

After thirty minutes or so we arrived at Dune 45, named for its location forty-five kilometres from the entrance to the Namib-Naukluft National Park. Thanks to Elke's aggressive driving, we were there in time for the sunrise, although most of us left the car with our heads full of brand new bumps and dents. Elke pointed to the mother of all dunes and said "Climb that one, you pathetic group of puny, whimpering softies!" Most of that she said only through the tone of her voice, but I heard it.

I obeyed, of course, and soon I was almost two hundred metres closer to heaven. Behind the enormous dune there were numerous even taller pieces of sand art. The astronomer Carl Sagan used to say that there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on our planet. I seriously doubt that he ever visited Namibia.

It was a cold morning in the desert, but trudging up the loose megadune warmed me up. I was the first to reach the top, but when I turned around and saw fifty advanced apes with clothes on moving in on me, I decided to head for a peak another few hundred metres away. There I sat down, far enough from the others that the only sound I could hear was the gentle whistle of a lazy wind that wound its way up the sides of the dune I had climbed.

The sun also silently came up, and the sand soon changed from grey and cold to fiery red and more than warm enough. Bushes became intensely green and the sky infinitely blue. I felt small in a big world. Like in a children's book the colours were all vivid, and like a child I let myself be fascinated by them. For a long time I just sat there, admiring our planet for all it can do.



*Ancient, gnarled trees in Sossusvlei*

Although incredibly scenic, the dunes are only half the fuss about Sossusvlei. The vlei part is also interesting in all its extreme barrenness. A vlei is a South African notion, describing a lower-lying area which

through at least parts of the year is a marsh. Different from South Africa, in Namibia there can be decades or centuries between the wet periods. And when they occur, it usually doesn't take long before the water sinks through the sand into large underground lakes. In Sossusvlei I could see proof of the water's occasional visits in the shape of large, white, mud-like pools, all dried up and with decorative cracks all over. During short periods in the past this had been the bottom of rapidly dying rivers following short, intense rainfall in the desert.

Black, sandblasted tree trunks stood evenly scattered across the vlei surrounded by a red sea of wavy sand. The trees silently told the story of an age of longer-lasting wet periods, centuries ago. The ancient and extremely photogenic skeletons are often used in movies and commercials, valued for the way that just by looking at them, peace will come to your mind.

These were amazingly beautiful surroundings. Yet I politely, but firmly declined when later that day I was offered a chance to see the area at sunset from a small aeroplane. I had learnt my lesson in Okavango!

A long day in the minibus followed. Between Sesriem and Aus to the south there are only 250 kilometres as the crow flies, but the distance more than doubles when you must follow the road around the edge of the desert. The initially alluring mountains and golden plains transformed into a monotonous landscape. For excitement I had to resort to watching Elke fall asleep behind the steering wheel every now and then. Strangely that coincided with when the car hit the fewest bumps.

It was tempting to imagine that the name "Aus" had a German origin. Maybe once upon a time a group of immigrants came there and saw that the place was a true hell. Maybe they said to each other "We'd better name the place so that people understand that they are better off staying away from it", and then they chose the German word for "Get lost". But no, Elke offered a different explanation. "Aus" is a simplification of a word from the language of the natives, the Khoikhoi, meaning "Land full of snakes". I couldn't see much practical difference between my fiction and Elke's fact.

Aus was magnificent despite its alleged abundance of reptiles. For two nights we stayed in a small cabin in Geisterschlucht, which roughly translates to "Ghost Valley". Only a narrow opening between two mountainsides allowed passage from the cabin back to the real world. Outside the hidden valley lay a vast, open landscape dotted with dramatic mountains. The only trace of human activity there were some faint, straight lines across the plains, remains of old roads or railway tracks. An ageless Wild West kind of atmosphere prevailed.

I spent the afternoon exploring the nearby mountains. The view of the plains from the highest peak caused me even more respiratory trouble than the climb up there. "Almost better than DVD", as the Spaniard I dragged up there so poetically put it. The mountain was rounded and rust-coloured, as was the landscape below. In the clean and clear air I could see details in the scenery several kilometres away.

We continued our tour, and after a good month of deserts, dry season and eternal salt plains, it was thrilling to come to Lüderitz and see the ocean again. I had not noticed how much I missed it, but when we parked near the harbour, I simply had to walk down to the rocky beach and put my hands in the sea. The water was refrigerator cold. As was the air, which also carried exactly the same scents as the coastal air does in the part of the Atlantic where I usually spend my days. When I closed my eyes, tasted the salty air and heard the sounds of shrieking seagulls and swearing fishermen, I might as well have been in Norway.



*A street in Lüderitz*

The main attraction in Lüderitz was a boat trip to a bay that was home to colonies of penguins and seals. I suspected that the experience probably didn't exceed Antarctic standards, so I chose to stay on land and explore. Lüderitz was a small town of about ten thousand people. They seemed to lead good lives there, although many buildings showed signs of old age.

Most houses in the main street were built according to German building traditions. The town library was a "Lesehalle" and the school's gymnasium a "Turnhalle". If the locals had not favoured turquoise, pink and other pastels on their houses so much, and the locals themselves had not had faces of also, well, rather uncharacteristic German colours, Lüderitz could easily have passed as a town on the North Sea coast.

While the streets seemed safe enough, an apparently angry and voluminous man in front of the church stopped me from seeing the distinctly German building up close. The long line of black, scowling people in front of the liquor store waiting for it to open at nine in the morning was also disturbing. Something was rotten in the state of Namibia.

To avoid thinking more about that, I walked out of the town centre towards what had looked like an old cemetery from the minibus. On my way there I walked by the decidedly most well-kept building in town; the prison. Just past it I found the graveyard. It was an unusually sad version of the kind. At the entrance many small tombstones marked the resting places of numerous infants and children, their dates of death spread evenly throughout almost the entire twentieth century. Lüderitz has always been a tough place to live, and often to die.

There were no settlements in or near Lüderitz before the Europeans arrived in Namibia. Even after the Germans established their colony, South-West Africa, and constructed the harbour of Lüderitz, at first nothing much went on there. Sometimes the Germans would sell guns to the natives, at other times they used the guns to fight them.

In 1908 a railway line was built on the dry and useless land near Lüderitz. One day a man working on the railway found a stone that shone exceptionally bright in the sunlight. It was so beautiful that he

showed it to his boss. The manager quickly realized what the worker had found. He quickly acquired a licence to prospect for diamonds in the Lüderitz area.

Diamonds were simply lying around on the ground in the desert, waiting to be picked. Rumours about the phenomenon spread quickly, and a diamond rush began. Fortune hunters arrived from all over the world. Lüderitz became a big city for its time. As usual, the people who made fortunes were the ones who sold services and equipment to those trying their luck at finding diamonds. The prospectors had no money, just the diamonds they found, and the shopkeepers and the prostitutes were happy to accept them as payment. Harder a currency you will never find.

The search for diamonds was a chaotic business. Many were of course tempted to just "go for a walk" in the area and maybe accidentally happen upon a diamond or two on their way. Those who owned the rights to prospect were not too modest to tell others off and explain whose diamonds they were. If necessary, they didn't hesitate to fire guns at the intruders to make their point.

In the fall of 1908 the German authorities established a "Sperrgebiet", a forbidden area, of about twenty-six thousand square kilometres. No one was allowed to be there without explicit permission. Helped by the tumults caused by World War I, all the prospecting rights gradually came under the control of one company, the De Beers Group. Even today De Beers is the world's largest diamond mining and distribution company. Just outside Lüderitz the company set up diamond mining facilities and administration offices, and the company town Kolmanskop was built for the workers. It had its own school, police station, hospital, bakery, soft drinks factory and everything else the European mine administrators and their families needed.

Almost a hundred years later, the forbidden area continues to be off limits to the public, and large amounts of diamonds are still found in Namibia. These days most of the diamonds are not just picked up in the desert, but found in sand that is "vacuumed" from the sea floor just off the coast. Kolmanskop has turned into a ghost town and is not at all a diamond any more.

In 1956 Kolmanskop was closed down and left to itself and to the sand. A small museum had recently opened in the remains of the town. What was most interesting about it wasn't the history of the town itself, but that it offered a chance to see what will happen to a town if you put it in a desert, you stop sweeping the floors and you leave some openings in the roofs and walls to allow the sand to come and go as it pleases. Every room in every house contained sand, and lots of it. In some cases it filled the rooms completely, all the way up to the ceiling. Seeing this place made it easier to understand how so many grandiose cultural treasures have disappeared into the sand, like in Egypt.



*A sandy toilet, for people or for cats?*

It's unlikely that those who had to move away from Kolmanskop regretted it. The nearest source of fresh water was a hundred kilometres away. The people mostly drank treated sea water, which probably tasted at least slightly better after having gone through the soft drinks factory. The heat and barrenness of the desert couldn't be changed, but the households received a chunk of ice every day, just enough to keep a small old-fashioned refrigerator running at a suitable temperature.

To the miners it probably didn't matter much where the mine was located. They had a hard time anyway. The management did all it could



to stop the workers from stealing diamonds. One way they minimized theft was by letting every shift in the mines last for six months. The mineworkers had to stay either inside the mines or in the dormitories nearby during this whole period. Towards the end of the "shift" the workers spent a week in a special quarantine area. There they had to swallow engine oil every day. As you can imagine, that really got their digestive systems going. This way the mining company could rest assured that no worker's stomach contained any diamonds when he left the camp.

I rounded off my visit in Lüderitz by eating a pizza that was only slightly less oily than the quarantine meals served to the poor miners in the past. The pizza was ordered as lunch, but by the time it arrived at my table it had become dinner. Which was fine. Our guide, driver and cook Elke was sick. The evening meal back in Geisterschlucht was therefore limited to some bags of potato chips and lumps of cheese.



*These two horses will never see a meadow*

We ate while we watched some of the two hundred wild horses that live near Lüderitz. It seemed as if they based their survival in the semi-desert on standing as still as possible next to a water hole that some friends-of-the-animals organization had provided. Not that there was much else a horse could do there. Presumably the animals were still in shock after having become shipwrecked there a hundred years ago on their way from Europe to Australia.

Another long day on the road followed. We drove all the way down to the Orange River, which was just dirt brown, believe it or not. The river is also the border between South Africa and Namibia. To understand how dry Namibia is, you need to know that the next river that actually has water year-round is the Kunene, more than twelve hundred kilometres further north. Incidentally, that's where Namibia ends and Angola begins. Being a meteorologist in Namibia is the easiest job in the world. All you have to say is that it will be sunny and dry, every day.

The road along the river was good. This didn't improve Elke's mood, which already was bad because she was sick. She didn't brighten up until she discovered a sign that said "Ai-Ais 4WD", which indicated a short cut to Ai-Ais for four-wheel drive vehicles only. Since we were heading for the Ai-Ais, and our car only was a two-wheel drive with not particularly good tyres, this seemed to Elke like an excellent alternative. Soon she was driving like a savage up a dry riverbed through a valley that probably only saw people once a decade or so. This had better go well.

Of course it did, and we arrived at the Ai-Ais campsite long before dark. The place was called Ai-Ais because that's what the Damara people call hot springs. And the springs were indeed hot. Maybe it's an onomatopoeic word. The first thing that comes to your mind when you put your hand into the just short of boiling water is exactly a loud "Ai-ai!" I'll leave it to a greater expert on African tribal languages than myself to confirm this theory.

Nearby was the Fish River Canyon, a deep and narrow river valley. It was impressive, but unlike what most Namibians will have you believe, it isn't the second largest in the world after Grand Canyon. For that matter, Grand Canyon isn't even one of the top three deepest canyons in the world, although it is no doubt the most famous one. I had no problems with keeping my mouth shut and let Elke's national pride bloom. The view from the edge of the canyon was spectacular.

Typical of great canyons, Fish River Canyon suddenly just appeared in front of us, seemingly out of nothing. We had been driving across a completely flat plateau for quite a while, when suddenly this crack in the surface of the Earth blocked any further progress. Far below we could see

how it had been dug out, and how it still was made deeper. Water in motion is a mighty force.



*A panorama view of the Fish River Canyon as seen from the east rim*

We didn't get much time to admire the view. Elke planned on moving us quite a bit further north that day. Our last night on the tour was to be spent in Keetmanshoop, a town that at first glance seemed to have more petrol stations than people. When we stopped at one of them, the car was immediately surrounded by a group of begging Khoikhoi children. They pointed to their stomachs, made faces and said "Unnghry meee".

The strange thing was that it was only to us they declared their distress. They ignored five other cars with local drivers, even though the people in them certainly looked like they could spare some change. Maybe that's just the way it is. The retired couple from England gave them a bag of potato chips, which the children immediately started fighting each other for. They behaved like greedy seagulls, battling so intensely that they completely forgot to say thanks.

Our campsite was on a combined farm, botanical gardens and zoo. Wandering all over the place were a group of warthogs, three tame cheetahs who could safely be patted while they had a kudu for dinner, a pack of social meerkats, prancing peacocks, talking birds and a dog. The poor terrier desperately fought for attention in the large menagerie of exciting animals. He was doomed to lose, but he really tried everything; balancing on his rear legs, dribbling like a baby, jumping up and down on a trampoline he may very well have constructed himself. The dog even recited sonnets by Shakespeare, all in vain.

My last night in a tent I spent sleeping outside it. In the desert no bloodthirsty insects were on night patrol, and this was my last chance on this trip to enjoy a really bright, southern, starry sky. The end of several weeks of mainly camping outside was coming, and in just a few days I was flying home.

After having lived so long in tents and hostels, I had gradually stepped down the amount of time I spent on caring for my appearance and personal hygiene. I was starting to see how crocodiles, rhinos and various other inhabitants of Africa could be tempted to outsource certain cleaning tasks to willing birds and beetles. In the profusion of experiences, colours, tastes, sounds and to me new rules for how reality works in Africa, it had been all too easy to forget the incredible satisfaction that can be derived from having access to a hot shower every day or to be able to put on clothes that don't smell of *anything*. I don't mind civilized conditions, but I *do* appreciate being reminded that I'm not completely dependent on all the convenience that surrounds me at home.

Still, I started adapting to life in Norway that very evening. Mysteriously, a Norwegian bottle of soda pop appeared in a seldom visited corner of my backpack. When I finally finished it, it must have been one of the most well-travelled soft drinks ever to have fizzed.

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Five hundred kilometres later I was back in Windhoek. In the matter of a few hours I had cleaned my body as well as my clothes, and I had secured a seat on a bus to Cape Town leaving a couple of days later. Now the only thing left for me to do in Namibia was to explore its capital.

A museum would be a good place to begin, I thought, so I made my way to the National Museum. Originally the building had been used as headquarters for the German forces put in Africa to fight on behalf of Otto von Bismarck. This was sort of fitting, as getting through the building without falling asleep was quite the battle.

Maybe it's an extenuating circumstance for a national museum that the city it's located in is barely a century old, and that the nation itself formally hasn't even become a teenager. Still, I felt that for this museum

that was not excuse enough. Apart from some settler carts, old clothes and farming equipment, the whole place was an embarrassing praise of the president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma.

During his thirty years in exile, the man had led the political party SWAPO, previously as a liberation organisation in the struggle against South African control. When Namibia finally achieved independence, Nujoma was the obvious choice for president of the new republic. As was he in the election four years later, and, thanks to a last minute change made to the constitution, once again in the third presidential elections.

I suspected that unless he stepped down soon, another liberation organisation would have to be formed. Another change to the country's constitution was suggested ahead of the fourth elections, but in the autumn of 2004 it turned out that Nujoma instead chose to stay in control by ensuring that one of his own staff members became the next president. Anyway, in the long term we can only hope that someday the museum will offer a more varied display. At least *I* hope so.

Another branch of the National Museum was located nearby and was dedicated to the natural history of Namibia. Only the zoological department was open. In a country with an amazing biological diversity you would expect a fascinating display of the lives and behaviour of animals. But no. The section could only be categorized as "moth-eaten, stuffed animals", and was a depressing sight. All the animals were badly in need of maintenance, and most of the signs next to the animals said that in the year 1900 there were lots of species *x* in Namibia, in 1980 there weren't many of them left, and today they were pretty much all gone.

The National Gallery? No comment.

Giving up on the museums and galleries, I just walked around in the streets instead, marvelling at the ongoing flowering. Jacaranda trees dominated most streets, presenting a purple foliage I had never seen before. As I walked, I took note of the street names, trying to figure out what kind of heroes Namibia had. The streets were all well-kept, but I was a bit surprised to see "Fidel Castro Street", and I was simply astonished by "Robert Mugabe Avenue" and "Göring Straße". My thoughts from the National Museum returned.

A look in the leading local newspaper, Windhoek Observer, confirmed my impression of Nujoma being fully in charge of Namibia, down to the tiniest detail. In a letter to the editor a representative from an opposition party complained about Mister Two-In-One President and Minister of Broadcasting, Sam Nujoma. A few days earlier Sammy had forbidden NBC, the national TV station, to broadcast any foreign TV programs containing elements of sex, violence or anything else that could damage the morals and ethics of Namibians. Scheduled programs of that nature were immediately to be replaced by either programs about Namibian animals or, preferably, about SWAPO's history and fight for Namibia's independence.

The author of the letter didn't criticize Nujoma for stopping trashy TV programs. Her complaint was that the real reason for Nujoma's prohibition had been concealed. "To make NBC a boring channel to watch, will only make people want to buy satellite dishes and channel decoders. This they will have to buy from the only company with a permission to sell such items. And who owns this company? Exactly, that will be SWAPO, Nujoma's own party!", she whined.

The concept "democracy" can be difficult to explain.

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The bus ride to Cape Town would take twenty hours, my ticket said. Granted, there was some distance to cover, but I still thought it a rather pessimistic schedule. I gained more faith in it when after only an hour we made a meal stop. The passengers ate as if they had not seen food since Christmas, and then we continued. After sundown the air conditioning was turned on. We were in for a long and ice-cold night, as is usual in long distance buses in countries where the day temperatures can go really high. Being a seasoned traveller, I had of course put on almost all my clothes in anticipation of the big freeze.

Not only was I bus-smart, I was bus-lucky as well. In the seat lottery I had won big-time, as I shared a double seat with a tiny South African-Indian girl. For all practical purposes I had two seats to relax in. In my excitement about this I was unfortunate enough to spill a large cup of Coke on the poor girl. Fortunately, when her grandmother came over to

bash me for having ruined her grandchild's Sunday best, I managed to put the blame on the bus and its capricious movements.

When the sun returned in the morning, the desert had disappeared. We were in South Africa's Namaqualand, and I recognized several inhabitants of the Cape floral kingdom from my visit to the botanical gardens in Cape Town. After having been surrounded by monotonous desert for so long, it was tempting to spend a few days hiking in these mountains. They seemed to be having a fancy-dress ball, all covered in a wild, exploding flowering of yellow, red, purple and blue spots. Unfortunately all I had time to do was to enjoy the view from the bus.

There was only one thing of importance left to do in Cape Town before I was done with the place. Even before arriving in South Africa I had been uncertain about whether or not I should visit a township. My head was full of arguments both for and against doing it.

A township is what the South African government more neutrally calls "informal settlements", the shanty towns surrounding just about every city in the country. All over Africa slum areas are growing incredibly fast, attracting people from rural regions looking for jobs. Yet a township can under no circumstance be considered an attraction, neither for tourists nor for its inhabitants.

Actually, if I was to believe the white South Africans I discussed the matter with, visiting such a place was more likely to end in a tourist elimination than in a tourist attraction. No one could understand why I wanted to go there. They told me stories about white people who had lost their way and literally ended up in townships. In most cases the lost ones were never again seen or heard from. If the black people's accumulated hate against the white man has a centre, that'll be in the townships. The struggle against apartheid was organized and run from there, and it is there, more than ten years after apartheid was abolished, that the anger of still having to live in unworthy conditions remains strong. The general feeling among the people in the townships is that South Africa's new government has forgotten where it came from.

Even though it's not something you should do on your own, visiting a township does not at all have to be a reckless thing to do. Many more or

less ideal organisations offer safe, guided tours through the settlements. The proceeds from these tours often go directly to those who need it the most, which in itself is a good reason for going. I didn't doubt that visiting the poor people would be the right thing to do for *me*, but I was concerned about how the slum dwellers would feel about it. Would they think it was good that someone was interested in their lives? Or would it bother them to be seen in their poverty?

My nightmare was to visit a township with a group of obese Americans who thoughtlessly would point their expensive cameras at anything and anyone. Maybe they would say "Oh my God! How sad! How terrible!", oblivious to the fact that "the poor bastards" understood every word they said? Merely the thought had been enough to stop me from visiting a township until then.

In the end a visit to the South African National Gallery helped me decide to go. In my own country's national gallery most of the wall space is dedicated to paintings depicting national pride, beautified depictions of Norwegian scenery and glorified portrayals of pioneers, hard workers and religious personalities. Not so in South Africa. To me the whole museum looked like an endless row of desperate criticism of society through themes like poverty, misery, AIDS, violence, civil war, police brutality and pessimism. That's when I realized that if I was ever to even begin to understand what made a nation fill its gallery with stuff like that, there was no way I could avoid visiting a township.

I was picked up from the hostel by Karen. She was a classic, white through and through well-meaning hippie with a flower power minibus. Johanna from Scotland was already in the car, and that was it. We were the whole group going to the township that day. Johanna had no camera, and the questions she asked Karen showed that she too really cared about the impression we would make on the locals. I relaxed and actually started to look forward to the experience.

As we left Cape Town, Karen gave us a short history lecture. While the apartheid policy had been in the making for a long time, she said, it wasn't until after World War II it acquired the shape it then kept until the whole system broke down around 1990. The right to vote was taken away



from both black people and from coloured people, meaning mainly the descendants of Malaysians and Indians brought to South Africa to work for the Europeans. Large parts of the black population, those who weren't "useful" as cheap labour, were interned in a number of homelands, as described earlier. The intention was of course to efficiently keep them under tight control.

In the Cape Town area there were many coloured people, and they had obviously no homeland they could be sent to. The South Africans took advantage of this by increasing the antagonism between the black and the coloured populations. A law was introduced, saying that a black person could only be given a job if there were no coloured person available to do it. So just a few jobs were given to black people, and outside the homelands there was nowhere unemployed black people could legally live. Some jobs still went to the blacks, particularly in the case of tough and dangerous tasks in heavy industry, mining and fisheries. Barracks of a special kind were built to house those workers. Each had room for sixteen men, who had to share one shower, one toilet and a small kitchen.

For various reasons, many blacks didn't want to stay in their appointed homelands. Many of them chose to return to the "white" cities, either because it was easier to hide there, or simply because that was where they had always lived. Lacking places to stay legally, they built their own towns using tin plates, plastic sheets, rocks and branches. They had no access to clean water, firewood or electricity.

Every year the police arrested more than a million people for illegally residing outside their designated homelands. Over and over again the police demolished the townships using bulldozers. A few weeks later the shanty towns would be back in place. There were simply so many poor and desperate black people that the police could not stop them.

Towards the end of the apartheid regime, both to save money and to please USA and Europe, the government suspended the regulations that had prevented the blacks from moving freely around the country. The men, who until then had lived away from their families, brought their wives and children to live with them in the barracks. Instead of sixteen people in each barrack, now up to sixteen *families* shared the facilities.

Clearly this couldn't last. Many moved out of the barracks to build new homes in a township, triggering a tremendous growth of slum areas. Today nobody knows how many people live in townships in South Africa. The infamous Soweto township in Johannesburg is home to two, three or maybe four million people. In the Cape Town region the largest township is Khayelitsha with about a million inhabitants.

The township we were to visit was in Hout Bay, south of Cape Town. Most people there were unemployed, Karen said, so the money we paid for the tour made us popular guests. Besides, no one in the township felt anger towards white people in general, only towards white *South Africans*. Since everyone "knew" that a white South African would never go on a township tour, they also knew that we had to be foreigners. And foreigners were treated well, like honorary guests, Karen claimed. I still felt like an intruder and completely out of place when Karen turned off the highway and took us into the miserable township. My only comfort was that hopefully my money would contribute to improving the situation for the people there.

Hout Bay was South Africa in a nutshell. On the sunny side of the bay a large number of luxurious villas and multi-star hotels could be seen. Below them a marina was full of well-kept leisure boats, some large enough to be classified as small ships. In the shadow of the hill on the other side of the bay there was a different kind of ship, the township Imizamo Yethu. Karin introduced us to Siphiwe Cele, where the "Siphi" part was a click I could never reproduce properly. Siphiwe was too old to work. Instead he coached the African Brothers football team, who lost all their games. He was a Rastaman with thick dreadlocks, and his eyes muttered "Hello, I've just enjoyed some marijuana, peace on us." Actually, he said it with his mouth as well. As some sort of unofficial chieftain of the neighbourhood, he would follow us around to make sure nothing happened to us.

We started by having a look at his living room. It filled his entire house, and also functioned as a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, office and tool shed. He was privileged to have a communal toilet and a water source located right outside his house. Among his most precious belongings was a TV, but I never found out whether he was a chieftain

because he had a TV or if it was the other way around. He got electricity to operate it from a box on the wall. For a few rand he could buy a card with a code he entered into the box to give him electricity for a few days. The exact number of days depended on how many football matches were broadcasted during those days.

Norway was an unknown concept to him, but he knew everything about several Norwegians who had played for Manchester United.

A stroll through the neighbourhood was a mixed experience. People may have been unemployed, but they all seemed to be in activity. Some were doing the laundry, others extended their sheds. A fellow had his head deep inside a car engine, but he looked up and murdered me with his eyes when Siphiwe in a language I don't speak said to him "Oy! There's a tourist here, straighten up your back and greet him politely!"

Some kids took turns stretching their necks around a corner to look at us. They smiled, waved and laughed at Johanna and me when we looked in their direction. I walked over to them. They were busy working. It was sheep head day. Along the street a number of sheep heads were lined up. Old women burned off the wool using glowing hot iron rods. When the sheep heads were sufficiently bald the children cleaved them with large knives and put them on a barbecue-like contraption. A butcher had given them the heads for free, so this was cheap and good food. On the next corner some men brewed beer from corn meal in large oil drums. Not particularly tasty, I suspect, but very cheap and I'm sure drinking it resulted in much temporary happiness.

I felt more than just *slightly* uncomfortable when I saw how little the people there actually owned. My discomfort disappeared when we were taken inside a kindergarten. Like every child should, the children looked happy. They had not yet learned about everything they lacked, so they just ran around laughing and playing. For some reason almost all of them were boys. That's just the way it is, Karen said. I wasn't sure how I could make the day better for them, but pulling out fifty balloons turned out to be a nice try.

My camera was in my daypack, even though I had not planned on using it in the township. But when Karen said it was all right if I wanted

to take some photos in the kindergarten, I brought it out. It was a digital camera where you could see the photo immediately after taking it. The children went wild. The result was a number of photos of wide smiles and a promise to mail them paper copies of the photos as soon as I got home. Such promises are easy to fulfil.

We were also dragged along to a newly opened building that was part church, part library and part educational institution. On Sundays there was a service, and the rest of the week adults could come there to learn various handicrafts. They had yet to become skilled at making anything at all, but they still insisted we should buy their masterpieces. In the library the selection consisted mainly of brochures with information about AIDS and HIV. Unfortunately they didn't seem to have been opened at all.

Before we returned to Cape Town I chatted a little with Sipihiwe about other topics than football. His impression was that most people both in the townships and in the cities were pessimistic about the future. Of course he was glad that the former apartheid regime was gone, but he found that it had only been replaced by a new kind of divided society, a division between those who have and those who haven't, without regards to race or skin colour.

Several years had passed since Imizamo Yethu last saw a visit from a politician of any colour. The people in the township felt they had been forgotten. But Sipihiwe understood what had happened. More or less overnight, a large number of people had gone from being the radical opposition to suddenly being in power, for the first time ever. It was almost too good to be true, so "of course" they would take advantage of the situation, enriching themselves and forgetting about everyone else. After so many years of suppression it seemed unbelievable that the new situation could last. Sipihiwe just wished that soon someone would realize the responsibilities they had been given.

After the suspension of the strict apartheid travel regulations, the population growth in the slum areas led to increased violence, crime and starvation as well, Sipihiwe said. Yet he thought that the main problem was alcohol abuse and all its side effects. I couldn't help but ask whether smoking dagga was not a problem too? "No, not at all. It is our culture, no

one can take that away from us", he replied. Karen agreed intensely. I wasn't convinced. The cannabis plant is not native to southern Africa, it must be cultivated by people to thrive in the region. The custom of smoking marijuana came to that part of Africa fairly recently, brought either by Arab traders or by Europeans returning from Asia. To those alive today, dagga has of course "always" been there, but it doesn't have ancient roots in the area.

I didn't push the matter any further. Instead I thanked them for having me and told them that it had been a fantastic day. This was not entirely true. I now had even more questions and mixed feelings about it all than I did before the visit. At least I felt that I had learned something about what went on in South Africa. That can never hurt.

Half an hour later I was in a restaurant at the Waterfront shopping mall in downtown Cape Town. There I could pick from cuisines from all over the world. I couldn't eat much. It simply didn't feel right.

When I returned to the hostel it had been possessed by a French school class, apparently from a special institution for children with abnormally powerful vocal chords. The location of my room, next to the shared bathrooms, was no longer ideal. A long evening with the hallway outside full of jet-lagged French kids waiting in line to shower, singing both in and out of the shower, was closely followed by a morning with the hallway outside full of singing and yelling French brats.

So I got up unusually early on my last day in Africa. It was a Sunday, and I spent it walking through a city with few people and no cars in it. Cape Town's main roles are as a financial centre and a tourist destination. When the banks are closed and the tourists are still asleep, it's a pretty dead place.

I walked through Bo-Kaap, formerly called the Malay Quarter for all its Arab and Asian elements. There I found richly coloured mosque walls with minarets inside and veiled women outside them. To me this was yet another unexpected side to Africa, a continent where the series of surprises simply refused to end.

Down by the railway station the old city fortress lay dormant. In its 350 years it had never been challenged by an enemy. It was a quiet place, but the peace ended right outside the walls. A large colony of street kids had formed on the lawn there, using it as a base for bathing in the fortress moat and performing pickpocketing skills of the highest class on selected passers-by.

The fortress was still military ground, and after a while a group of soldiers came marching to expel the young occupants. The children knew how to handle the situation. The oldest girls, teenagers, went to the water and undressed. Naked they washed themselves and their clothes. The soldiers enjoyed the view for a while, and then just walked away. The children cheered and continued sniffing glue from their plastic bags early on a Sunday morning, well on their way to a correspondingly early death.

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Packing went quickly after I donated my hiking boots, medicines and what I had left of clean and whole clothes. The hostel would pass them on to organizations helping poor people in and around Cape Town. To bring all your stuff home and put it away into already packed drawers and closets makes no sense when you're leaving a place like Cape Town.

Delighted about having gotten through southern Africa without being robbed, I decided to treat myself to a taxi ride to the airport. The driver, Michael, asked me what I thought about his country. I answered honestly that I had been pleased to see many beautiful and impressive natural sights, but that I also was a bit put off by the social problems in the country. Abolishing apartheid had for a large part of the population not led to much improvement in their everyday lives, the way I saw it.

Michael agreed partially, but told me his story to show me that I might be judging things too quickly. Until 1992 he had worked for a family business. He would not tell me exactly what the business was, so maybe it was something you couldn't do without taking advantage of others a bit more than you should. Anyway, until the old regime fell, the business had been good, but with the apartheid government gone, the revenues quickly crumbled.

The company went bankrupt. Michael became depressed and started drinking too much. In rapid succession he lost his job, his house and his family. Soon he was a beggar on the streets of Cape Town. Never had he heard of something as absurd as a white beggar, until suddenly he was one himself. To him the world had become a true hell. He found himself at the very back of the line for any kind of help, and it cost him many a beating and much abuse to learn how to survive in his new life.

For several years he lived in parks and alleys, until one day he got the chance to work again. A relative who felt bad for him arranged a part-time job as a stevedore at the airport. Michael pulled himself together and managed to keep the job. Slowly he saved enough to buy a car, and he put money in the right pockets to get him a permit to work as a taxi driver. He figured it was the natural thing to do. After all, few people knew the streets of Cape Town better than him.

Michael had been driving the taxi for two years now, while still working many hours a week lifting luggage at the airport. He had bought a small apartment with an ocean view, where he lived with his girlfriend. The future looked good, and if *he* could pull himself out of the misery he had been in, well, then South Africa should be able to do the same.

"I really hope you're right", I said, and there and then I even thought it possible for the first time since I came to Africa. Maybe it was because he sounded so convincing, or maybe it was because I was going home, making South Africa none of my business again.

At the airport I weighed myself. The luggage scale revealed that some ten percent of me had chosen to stay in Africa. The eight kilograms that had disappeared were presumably mainly fat, sweat and to a certain extent tears and vomit. I had certainly not left my heart behind. To me, Africa was still very much a stranger.



*Three African landscapes*

*Sand in Sossusvlei (Namibia), me in Aus (Namibia), Mbhektwa on Sibebe (Swaziland)*





## Summer in the Pity

Many people say they want to go to Russia in general and to travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway in particular, although they usually know little about both the country and its trains. Often, I guess, they say this with such conviction because they know that the journey will never take place. Others actually believe that they want to go, often because they confuse the Trans-Siberian Railway with the luxurious Orient Express famous from the Agatha Christie murder mystery. They both move on rails and connect east and west, but unfortunately that's all they have in common.

So why did I go? I guess it just seemed like it was time for me to see the eastern parts of Russia. To get an idea of the size of the vast country, I wanted to travel across the whole thing, and properly. This meant two things. First, that I would spend enough time to do it thoroughly, and second, that I would stay on the ground, travelling the full length of the

Trans-Siberian Railway. The classic train journey stays inside Russia all the way, as opposed to the Trans-Mongolian and the Trans-Manchurian services. Those two only pass through half of Siberia before they turn south towards Beijing through Mongolia and China.

My plan was to begin my journey where most people end it, in Vladivostok, the largest city on the Russian east coast. While I didn't know exactly how far away Vladivostok really was, I guessed that it would be easier to time my progress through the country if I started out at the remote end. The entire time I would be moving towards an increasingly civilized Russia, towards the predictable Europe that Moscow at least in my head was part of.

Even before leaving Norway I figured out that Russia was different from most other countries. For one thing, the Russians seemed less than eager to have visitors. Unless I was content with staying just for a weekend and to spend it inside the cities of Moscow or Saint Petersburg, I would have to apply for a visa. I had visited more than fifty countries and never before had to get a visa. Pay for a stamp at the border, yes, I'd done that, but to apply for a visa well in advance? Never. To ensure maximum inconvenience I couldn't even apply for a visa without first having been invited to the country by someone in Russia, as if it was an exclusive club. I didn't know anyone in Russia, so the easiest option for me was to be invited by an expensive hotel. In contrast to the official authorities, *they* were more than happy to have some dollars come visit them.

A return ticket to Moscow was easy to arrange on my own. An invitation to Russia, a visa, a one-way flight to Vladivostok and a flexible train ticket back to Moscow seemed more of a challenge. I decided to let a travel agent help me. I went to see a company that appeared to be Russia's official visitors bureau in Norway.

A tiny babushka that looked stereotypically Russian sat behind a desk. Her hair was grey, but except for that I was certain it had looked the same at least since Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space. Her face was covered with multiple layers of make-up in a wide range of garish colours. She embodied Russia the way I imagined it, so I was convinced these people knew how to get things done in Russia.

Unfortunately my first impression was wrong. It soon became evident that the only thing there that had anything to do with Russia, was that just like in Russia, nothing worked the way it should.

I wanted to leave in the middle of July, so I went to the travel agency in May. "Sure, we can arrange all this, but since you're not leaving anytime soon, it's better if you return in a couple of weeks, and then we'll have a look at it", she said, letting me understand that my request was simply not worthy of her time yet. "Oh, and don't try to apply for a visa on your own. Unless you get everything right there will just be a lot of trouble with the embassy", she warned me. I should have realized that she only knew this because she rarely got anything right.



Two weeks later I went back. I brought my passport, a copy of my plane ticket to Moscow and the route and a schedule I wanted train tickets for. I felt good, happy to be almost all set for a new adventure. When I arrived at the office, the woman was yelling into a phone at some unfortunate policeman. She had just found out that an employee had stolen a *lot* of money from the company, and now the scoundrel had disappeared. Fate desperately tried to tell me that this place was nothing but trouble, and that I had better go somewhere else. Arrogantly I ignored the message.

I waited a week before returning. My passport and other papers were lying on the desk exactly where I had left them. This was actually rather impressive, given the disorganized mess of a desk, but it certainly wasn't a good sign. The woman had not even booked my plane ticket to Vladivostok. Now my departure was so close that I couldn't get the least expensive tickets any more. Instead I had to pay the standard fare, and I had to pay in cash. This travel agency didn't meddle with credit cards or any such modern-day foolishness. It began to dawn on me how easily the ex-employee could help himself to the company's money.

Another week passed, and once again little had happened. They *had* put a new man on my case, but all he had accomplished was to make my passport disappear. I joined him in searching for it, and in the end we were able to retrieve it from beneath a coffee cup and an apple in a box for paper to be recycled. My plane ticket had become even more expensive since my previous visit. The original plan had been to fly with KrasAir, but they had lost the phone number to the airline, so they put me on Aeroflot instead. I wasn't too unhappy about the lost number. "KrasAir" didn't sound too good to me. It's pronounced in a way that can't possibly be good for business, although I'm sure they meant well when they named the airline after the city Krasnoyarsk (yes, that's "crash-noyarsk"), in the middle of Siberia.

I refused to leave the travel agency until at least the plane ticket was irrevocably arranged. On the umpteenth ring Aeroflot answered the phone, and a not particularly cheap seat on one of their domestic flights was reserved for me. I still couldn't have the actual ticket, since the travel agency was unable to pay Aeroflot yet. Because of ongoing investigations related to the theft from the company, the bank wouldn't let them transfer money electronically. Instead they had to walk over to the Aeroflot office and pay in cash. And that was not possible right then, as they had spent the money I had given them the week before on something else. They told me not to worry, next week everything would be okay. No, really. Oh, and the hotel reservation and invitation I needed was also almost ready. Or at least they assumed that there had to be a hotel somewhere near the airport, and that it would be willing to receive a paying guest.

Only two weeks before my departure exactly nothing of what I had asked the travel agency to arrange was in order. During the nights I had strange dreams. I will not go into lengthy details, suffice it to say that they included Alsatian dogs with long, pointed teeth dripping with blood, angry men in uniforms and an ugly, red stamp in my passport.

The travel agency had still not found the money to pay for my plane ticket, but they *had* come up with a plan that should get me a visa to Russia a reassuring two days ahead of my flight to Moscow.

As for my train tickets, it seemed that my travel agent was still struggling with finding the Russian word for "train". Their expert in Moscow had not answered the phone for weeks. Their only way to get in touch with him was by fax, and his replies were as open to interpretation as the Bible itself. But they had found a hotel for me! Literally! The price I was quoted indicated that they had reserved the whole hotel just for me. At that price I would expect an invitation with golden letters on it. I turned down the offer. I was staying there for just a few hours overnight. If only I had not needed an invitation to this exclusive party of a country, I probably would have opted for sleeping on a bench at the airport.

All in all, I had pretty much given up on the whole thing. Less than a week before departure I went to see my travel agent again and was just met by a notice on the door saying "Closed due to illness". I couldn't help but laugh at the way this was going, when for the first time in my life I tried to use a travel agency instead of handling everything myself.

When I returned the next day the office was open, but my man wasn't there. Instead the Elephant Man had installed himself at his desk. The strange creature had found a hotel for me, close to the airport, for a hundred dollars per night. Now, that summer a hundred dollars was just half a month's salary for the average Muscovite, so this clearly was a bargain. The reason it was so cheap was that the hotel didn't have hot water, Dumbo guessed.

While I paid up, I asked Elephant Man if he had just started working there, since I had never seen him before. It turned out that he *was* my regular assistant after all. A friend of him had accidentally smashed his head into a wall, resulting in a cut above his right eye and a dramatic

swelling of the head. Quite possibly a direct consequence of him having offered to arrange a vacation for his friend, if I should venture a guess. "And that swelling of yours is *nothing* compared to what I will do to you if my tickets aren't ready by Friday!", I told him, hidden inside a cough.

My visa was also finally ready. Except it was a ten day visa, and I planned to stay in Russia for a month. "No worries", Tantor said, "I know the people at the embassy. They will change it for me".

The next day the visa's validity had actually been changed into thirty days. Not for the days when I was going to be there, but at least we were getting closer. So, back to the embassy it went. The good news was that Mister Lumphead had somehow managed to scrape together enough money to get my ticket from Aeroflot. Things were starting to look not exactly good, but definitely better.

All the complications demanding my close attention were almost worth the hassle towards the end, as it allowed me to see how the travel agent's head developed. It was fascinating to observe it growing ever larger. I just hoped my tickets would be in order before the thing burst.

On the last working day at the embassy before my departure, finally just about everything had been sorted out. I had my invitation and my visa, an insanely expensive bed in Moscow and a one-way plane ticket to Vladivostok. My train tickets were still stuck in a parallel universe. "Errm, if you're used to travelling, and you speak Russian, I'm sure you can arrange that on your own. Or do you still want our man in Moscow to handle it for you?", asked the man whose head now most resembled a potato on steroids. I quickly grabbed my papers, claimed to be fluent in Russian with traces of a Ural dialect, and I ran out of there, never to return.

All I had achieved through a dozen trips to the travel agency was an overpriced hotel room, an expensive plane ticket and "assistance" in driving both the visa department at the Russian embassy and myself to the brink of madness. But at last I was ready to go!

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Considering the mess my helpers in Oslo had caused at the embassy, I couldn't believe how smoothly I was admitted entrance to Russia. Two middle-aged women in rifle-green tweed uniforms looked uninterested at my passport and at me. We were both stamped, respectively with a date and as a silly person from the West, and then I was in Russia.

The next month was all weirdness and surprises. One by one, a long row of possibilities and obstacles presented themselves. But I got off to a good start. "Thank you for your custom!", the cash machine at the airport cheerily stated as I pulled my first Russian roubles out of it. Maybe it thought I would use the money to pay customs. It didn't matter. I had a thick wad of money, and with it hidden deep inside my pocket I walked into a realm of surrealism.

Having forced my way through a living wall of taxi drivers who on average estimated the distance to my hotel to be about one hundred kilometres, I saw it. The hotel was located less than two hundred metres away from the airport terminal. Not that there's anything special about the taxi drivers in Moscow. The same astonishing ability to misjudge distances can be found in any place where there are people who think they have too little money and who own or have borrowed a driving licence.

Entering the hotel was like walking into 1974. Dark faked wood panels covered the walls, the tables and the check-in counter. A voice full of nostalgia crackled out of a radio. Two blonde women sat behind the counter, clad in uniforms similar to those worn by the immigration officers. Three moustached, stout men wearing their shirts with the twenty-eight upper buttons unbuttoned sat deep in a sofa, working hard on filling the room with smoke using just cigarettes.

As I entered, they all stopped whatever they were doing and looked at me. They quickly gathered that I wasn't there to collect protection money for the mafia, so they went back to apparently doing nothing.

No one seemed to think I had come there for any particular reason. I looked from one check-in officer to the other. They just ignored me. I had probably missed my chance when I didn't demand a room immediately.

A notice on the wall was the only information there in English:

***Dear guests!***

*In connection with prophylaxis works to reduce the infection,*

*hot water in the hotel will be switched off from July 2 to July 30.*

*The administration apologizes for temporary inconveniences.*

So it *was* true. The hotel didn't have hot water, not even for a hundred dollars a night! To reduce the infection sounded like a good idea (to *eliminate* it would be even better), but it would be nice to know exactly what kind of infection we were talking about. Were they trying to stop the Western personal hygiene imperialism? Which illnesses could actually spread through hot water at all? I tried to remember what I had learned about strange diseases before my trip to Africa, but as far as I could remember, none of those should exist in hot water pipes in Russia.

I never found out about the infection. Suddenly one of the blondes came over to me and demanded to have my passport. Since "Passport, please!" was the universal reply to any question I asked her, in the end I gave it to her. Soon thereafter I had a Russian hotel room at my disposal.

The hot water was definitely nonexistent. The cold water, however, was extremely cool and fresh. I forced myself to take a quick shower. It was useful. It made me instantly understand how the Russians must be feeling after all the ordeals they had gone through during the previous eighty years or so.

Staying in a Russian hotel is never an existence void of worries, but at least this hotel came with a list of rules to follow in order to make sure that I wouldn't trouble the hotel. According to the rules, in the original wording, I was *not* allowed:

- To let outside persons stay in the room in the guest's absence or to leave the key with them.



- To leave open running water taps and windows, to leave electric appliances and lighting switched on.
- To keep in a single room more than two pieces of luggage each exceeding 170cm as a sum of three dimensions, as well as to keep fire hazardous liquids and environment-polluting things.
- To keep in the room animals without adequate documents or without the Hotel Administration's permission.
- To use electric heating devices.

On the other hand, they *did* generously offer a number of free services:

- Waking up in the morning
- Calling first aid
- Use of first-aid kit
- Delivery of letters into the room upon their arrival
- Needles
- Threads

Not necessarily in that order, I assume, but it was nevertheless awfully nice of them. Imagine, all this for only a hundred dollars!

Most of the rules made some sort of sense, but as the room stunk intensely of ancient mildew, I took the liberty of opening a window slightly. After having audibly witnessed two jet planes race their engines, I surrendered to the mildew and battened down the hatches again. The guy at the travel agency wasn't kidding when he said that this was the hotel that was closest to the airport.

To avoid going moldy myself, I decided to go for a walk. In the corridor a woman refused to let me leave the floor until she had seen my passport. Just moments ago I had with great effort put it in the safe in my room, meaning behind a loose wall panel under my bed. But like everybody else, I had better do what the woman in the corridor, the dezurnaya, told me to. I went back to my room to get my passport.

People who visited Russia while it still was part of the Soviet Union, often remember very little from their stay other than that they were continuously offered vodka. Something many *do* remember and will tell you about, is something like this: "And do you know, at the hotel there was a KGB agent posted in the hall to keep track of me at all times!" Since the "agents" are still sitting there years after Russia became a free country, sort of, it's time to put to death the myth about the agent in the hall.

In Russian hotels there is a tradition for having a person on watch on every floor. Usually it's a woman, and her job title is *dezhurnaya*, the floor manager and absolute ruler of the guests. Stay on her good side, and you will always have access to toilet paper, towels and other necessities. If asked kindly, she will walk in on your neighbour and beat him up if he's noisily drunken or just snores really loud. Often it's a grandmother figure sitting there, but *dezhurnayas* come in all ages and shapes. They don't have much to do, as the cleaning tasks are left to others. So to me the unfortunate women were ideal guinea pigs for my attempts at speaking Russian. They were usually so bored, that even listening to my nonsense seemed to brighten their day.

Having retrieved and presented my passport I was let out. I even got a "Shilayo ospyeha!", "Good luck", from her. She must have understood that I was new in her country, even though I had dressed as grey as possible and did my best to look dejected and depressed, just like the locals.

I craved food. There was a café in the first floor, but it seemed impossible to get any service there. A sign claimed it was open 24 hours a day, except for an hour around noon when there was a "technical break". Maybe the break was there so that the café workers could go for lunch? It wouldn't surprise me. At any rate, in reality they seemed to have an everlasting break, as there were no one there. The absence of cooking may very well have been a result of the mysterious infection lurking in the nooks and crannies of the hotel. I couldn't care less. I was hungry.

A return to the airport terminal became my rescue. For a few roubles I bought a warm Coke and a cold meat pie from a kiosk there. I took a detour on my way back to the hotel to see a bit more of this strange

country. A typical Russian church with bulbous cupolas in the distance lured me towards it.

The only piece of Russian culture I encountered that evening was the mafia. To be precise it was the mud splash mafia, a horde of drivers using their tiny tin cars to systematically transfer water from puddles in the streets onto any innocent pedestrian stupid enough to be outside. Drivers ignoring pedestrians can be bad enough, but these guys were worse. They clearly knew that there were people out there walking, but they were determined on getting rid of us. I was the only person on foot around, so even though I quickly gave up on getting to the church alive and went back, my evening became as wet as it can possibly be in Russia for someone without a drinking habit.

At the hotel the culture shock continued. After a bit of tinkering with the TV (always bring a selection of tools when you go to Russia), I managed to get it to produce both picture and sound simultaneously. The channel I found showed a movie with an incredibly young George Clooney in the leading role.

Contrary to what I expected, the movie was neither subtitled nor dubbed in Russian. Instead it seemed that some guy at the TV station was translating the dialogue on the fly, as if he was covering a live event. Someone in the movie would say something, and a couple of seconds later the guy pitched in and drowned out the original soundtrack with his best effort at repeating in Russian what had been said. The same man did the lines of *all* the characters, which was rather impressive, really. He would even put his voice in a higher pitch when he repeated something a woman said, except when he ignored the women completely, which actually was quite often.

When I left my room in the morning I again had to show the *dezhurnaya* both my passport and that I had not stolen anything from the room. Only after having succeeded in this would she give me a check-out document. This I was to put in my pocket, and then take out again and give to her, so that she could stamp it and give back to me one more time. "Show reception this!", she demanded, before we parted with her wishing me good luck again.

The uniformed officer on duty downstairs woke up with a feminine scream, when as gently as possible I slid the *dezhurnaya's* note into her hands. In return I got an entertaining questionnaire about the hotel. Now, it's not at all unusual to be asked to rate the quality of the stay when you check out from a hotel, but the scale used at this hotel was special. My opinion about the various facilities and aspects of the hotel was to be given as either "Good" or "Worse than expected". Strangely, this actually made it easier than usual to fill in the form.

My plane to Russia had arrived at the Sheremetyevo-2 international airport, while my plane to Vladivostok was to leave from the Sheremetyevo-1 domestic airport. My travel agent had sincerely advised me to take a taxi to the other airport, as otherwise I would probably end up in a random remote corner of the country. That was pretty much where I was going anyway, so I decided to give public transportation a try. I was strengthened in my choice by all the taxi drivers I passed, who quoted prices in the neighbourhood of half a Russian weekly salary paid in used and unmarked US dollars for the ride.

It turned out to be a good choice. The other airport was actually the same airport, except the terminal building was across the runway. I could see it just a kilometre or so away. Being Russia, there was of course no other way to get there than by going all the way *around* the runway. I couldn't find a bus stop, but since I had plenty of time I figured I could just walk. Then I remembered the mud splash mafia, and I decided that with my big backpack on, I would be too easy a target for them.

To my rescue came a "marshrutka", which is exactly what it sounds like if you stop and think about it. Marshrutkas are minibuses that travel along fixed "marching routes" from point A to point B. If you can read the Cyrillic alphabet, a sign in the front tells you the exact route the marshrutka follows. The sign also reveals that the ride costs just a few roubles, no matter where you get on and off.

You find marshrutkas everywhere in Russia. It's how most people get around, since relatively few can afford to buy a car. Even rich foreigners are welcome to use the marshrutkas. So I got in and shared the cramped space with more Russians than there were seats, and soon I was at my

destination. Judging from the smell inside the minibus, my hotel was probably not the only place where the hot water had been switched off lately. Still, if exposure to body odour isn't your thing, I guarantee you that for the dollars you save compared to taking a taxi, you can buy a *lot* of air fresheners and bring them in the marshrutka.

My schedule for the day collapsed completely because of the marshrutka. What could have been hours of walking was replaced by a twenty minute drive. I arrived at the terminal with seven hours to spare before take-off. This gave me some time to mentally prepare for the flight. I was to fly Aeroflot for the first time in my life.

Many people love travelling by plane, while others definitely don't. Some are downright afraid of flying. I'm not. If I stand on a cliff or on top of a roof, I often find myself thinking about jumping into the open air. Not because I'm tired of my life, but because somewhere deep inside I imagine that if I jump, I will be able to glide unhurried towards the horizon and to new adventures. Maybe it's just one of man's ancient dreams, to be able to fly and be as free as the bird. Or maybe it's the vague remnants of an even more ancient nightmare, something to do with falling down from the trees. I don't know, but I *am* glad the aeroplane was invented.

It is truly fantastic to be able to cover long distances just by walking into a metal box somewhere in the world and sit down and eat peanuts and watch a movie or two. When you walk out of the box a few hours later, amazingly you've been transported to a place far, far away. I find this so marvellous that I can easily forgive the fact that in some unfortunate cases the planes have also brought closer together this world and the next.

Even though planes have made the world smaller, you can still not avoid hitting it if the plane stops working. In principle I have nothing against dying. Actually I look forward to my death. I certainly don't want to die too soon, but on the other hand I hope it won't happen too late either. When death strikes, I want to be there to experience it to the fullest, both mentally and physically. It must be an extraordinary feeling to know that life is running out of you, to know that this is the big good-

bye, and perhaps to be able to render some memorable last words. Not "Yes, I promise to call the doctor in the morning", "Whoa! Gotta run, that's my bus!" or "I see you have a big gun, but if you want my money, you'll have to kill me first!" No, I'd rather be remembered for something like Theodore Dreiser's "Shakespeare, here I come!", or "Not at all", as the author Henrik Ibsen said when his nurse one day commented that he seemed to be in better shape that day.

To die in a plane accident would not do at all. Especially not in a plane where no one understood what I said and could appreciate my last words. Even though Aeroflot had a somewhat bad reputation, especially their domestic flights, I knew that statistically I had a very good chance of surviving the flight to Vladivostok. Not wanting to think more about that, I decided to spend the hours before take-off wisely and comfortably.

Outside the airport terminal a dangerously intense summer sun was shining. I hid from it in the shadow of an old propeller plane. It carried the Aeroflot logo, but judging from the faded Soviet flag on its tail, this was probably a retiree, and not the plane I was going on later. It had been parked in the middle of a large, open square, presumably a long time ago.

At first it was a nice and quiet place to relax and do some reading, but as lunch-time approached, I was joined by many Russians, some of them possibly taking a technical break. I don't know whether the others were passengers like me or if they worked at the airport or in the Aeroflot headquarters nearby. I chose to believe that they were passengers, as most of them more drank than ate their lunch, and the beverage in question was beer out of large bottles.

"Ah, but it is only natural to calm your nerves with a bit of alcohol before flying", you may say. That is true, but I soon learned that Russians unfortunately don't need an excuse like that to enjoy a litre of beer or two in the middle of the day. From early morning on, throughout the week, I saw men and women drinking beer in the streets, in the parks and in special beer tents found everywhere. To many Russians, beer is just a thirst quencher. "It's the vodka that is dangerous", they will say. Both are sold in cheap bottles with caps that cannot be put back on once they're opened. If you open a bottle, you'll just have to finish it as well.

The result is inevitable. One of Russia's largest problems, and she has many, is a rapidly declining population. Covering one-eighth of the planet's land area, a mere 142 million people try to fill the space. Every year there are three quarters of a million fewer Russians. It may not sound like much if you are Chinese, but that rate would drain Norway of all its citizens in about six years. The reasons for this are many and complicated, but there's no doubt that abuse of alcohol plays a major part. Every year forty thousand Russians die of alcohol poisoning. That's more than the number of people who die from murders or car accidents combined, which are two other causes of death that often are closely related to heavy drinking. A genuine estimate is that every seventh Russian is an alcoholic.

The Russian attitude towards alcohol has a long history, stretching at least back to when my ancestors, the Vikings, went there. In their heyday they sailed from Scandinavia and up the large rivers of Eastern Europe to trade. They toiled and fought their way to become the dominant traders around the Baltic Sea and the rivers flowing into it, including what today is Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The Vikings conquered many important cities, and they founded several more. Slavic tribes had established a number of independent city states, but it was the Vikings who first formed larger unions of major trading centres.

Towards the end of the tenth century, the world known to the Europeans of that time had come to the point where every nation and people had to choose between the two major religions on the menu, Christianity and Islam.

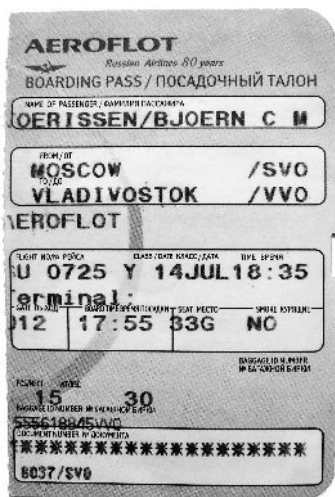
The leaders of both religions pushed hard to gain access to the population of what today is Russia. In the end, picking sides became the responsibility of a descendant of the Vikings, the leader Vladimir of Kiev. He was a powerful man who is now considered to be the father of the Russian nation. Receiving representatives from both the Caliph and the Pope, he asked them about their take on issues important to him. It didn't take him long to come to a conclusion. "Drinking is the joy of the Russian. We cannot live without it!", he declared, and with that Islam was out of the competition.

Vladimir's family tree sprang out of Danish roots. In Danish, the word for "inebriation" is "rus". Yet the name of the country, Russia, is not likely to stem from that word. "Rus" was probably just the name of the dominating Viking clan in the Kiev area when the city Novgorod was founded in 862, an event considered to be the first step on the way to a Russian national state.

In the time that has passed since Vladimir's decision, several factors have contributed to developing Russia's modern day drinking problem. A high rate of unemployment, cheap vodka and a certain alcoholic, white-haired president have not helped much. The Russians have a problem, and they know it. They just seem unable to figure out how to cope with it. A good start would be to make it less acceptable to drink large quantities of beer during work hours. But of all the people that enjoyed their lunch under the propeller plane that day, I seemed to be the only one who thought so.

At least none of the beer lunchers wore pilot uniforms. Encouraged by that I eagerly got on my plane late in the afternoon.

The passengers didn't seem to realize that we were flying through a night. The whole cabin reminded me of a dinner party. People chatted, mingled, ate and drank the whole way. Perhaps they didn't want to think about where we were going. Maybe they preferred Moscow, and if they couldn't be in Moscow, at least they would be on Moscow time. I slept through almost the whole flight, as comfortably as you can in tourist class on an Aeroflot flight. After eight hours I woke up close to the Sea of Japan. I was ten thousand kilometres away from Moscow, even further away from home, and I had just four weeks to get back to where I entered Russia. Right then that was all I knew about the next month of my life.





Two rugged men wearing big hats and taut uniforms checked the papers of every passenger before we were allowed to leave the plane. The conditions at the airport were so basic that there was simply nowhere else this could be done. To my great satisfaction, the two officers thoroughly looked at all the pages in my passport. They discussed at length where the different stamps came from, before finally they let me disembark.

I had to walk several hundred metres on the runway to get to the building where the luggage hopefully would show up. Retrieving the luggage took an unusually, but not surprisingly long time. I started to suspect that the luggage had not travelled on the plane at all, but was slowly on its way there on the same conveyor belt I had seen it disappear on at Sheremetyevo-1.

The reason we had to wait was that the airport had fewer than two functional luggage belts, and it brought luggage from only one plane at a time. While the luggage from a plane was on the belt, only passengers from that plane were allowed inside the building. I couldn't get my luggage until all passengers from all the planes that had landed before us had retrieved their suitcases, pumpkins, colour TVs, ironing boards and all the other more or less conventional things Russians tend to bring when they travel.

Vladivostok doesn't have a busy airport, but the wait was still long. Now it was night in Moscow, and fatigue had finally hit my fellow travellers. Some lay down for a bit of sleep while we waited. I became somewhat impatient, but if this was how Russians minimized the risk of somebody stealing my luggage, I was all for it and happy to wait.

The next problem appeared as soon as I finally received my precious backpack. The airport was fifty kilometres away from Vladivostok itself, and the only obvious way to get to the city was to seek out the assistance of a pack of men with golden teeth, proud owners of scrapped Japanese cars. That is to say, the cars had been scrapped by their previous owners in Japan, and soon thereafter they had become part of the car fleet of the Russian Far East, which is what the Russians call the vast regions east of Siberia.

The taxi drivers at the airport in Moscow may have been a cunning bunch of opportunists, but they could have learned many a trick from their colleagues in Vladivostok. I dismissed their intense sales pitch and sat down to wait for the bus that never came. After an hour or so I gave up the crazy idea that there might be some sort of public transportation between the airport and the city centre. I joined forces with another guy who had better things to spend his money on than financing more golden teeth for the taxi drivers. We split the bill for a ride into town with the most desperate of the chauffeurs. He gave us a ninety percent discount on his initial asking price, but we had to promise not to tell anyone. Promise hereby broken.

Because we paid so little, the driver had to drive dangerously fast. My big eyes and visible nervousness made him tell me to relax. "It's not dangerous!", he said, "You see, I have radar detector". Before we reached the city limit I had seen it work at least twice.

I had no idea where I was going, so with my best effort I tried to ask the driver whether he knew of a decent hotel in Vladivostok. He must have understood at least two words of my question. I was dropped off outside a grey colossus of a building with a sign on the roof that said "Hotel Vladivostok". It wasn't exactly cheap, but when the room clerk actually spoke a little bit of English, offered me a "zooper room" and mentioned that the hotel had room service massages around the clock, hot water in the shower *and* a casino with a dubious clientèle in the basement, I just knew I had to stay there.

My room was close enough to heaven at the eleventh floor. When I looked out of the window from my bed, all I saw was the sky and the ocean, and it was impossible to tell them apart. Sailing boats played in the wind out there, and I could have sworn that several of them floated in the air. If I walked closer to the window, I could dimly see the other side of a large bay, where Chinese



*No neighbours across the street*

and North Korean mountains ended Russia. Until then I had not given much thought to the fact that I wasn't in Europe any more, but instead somewhere east of most of the Far East.

Suddenly to be in Vladivostok made me feel like I had cheated. Normally you only get there by spending a week imprisoned in a train. Throughout that week you're exposed to increasingly denser air, an atmosphere full of your own and other passengers' sweat and tears. There's no proper shower available, so every day the microclimate on the train becomes a little bit more miserable. Yet you may not even notice the bodily scents around you, as they have to fight for your attention with various smells from a number of possible and impossible meals cooked up on the train by the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian passengers.

Outside the train you watch an infinite forest pass by, only interrupted by short glimpses of churches, mosques, lakes, marshes, villages that nobody's heard of and bridges and tunnels with armed guards to look after them. You're supposed to spend hours wondering about what makes someone decide to build such a long railway line through nothing. After all this you will be happy to leave the train at the fairy palace railway station in Vladivostok, satisfied with finally having completed the journey.

But now I was there. The end was the beginning, and everything in-between was still waiting for me. Until then I had not so much as *seen* a train.

There were several reasons for why I chose to start in Vladivostok. Someone had told me that few people do that, so instead of a trip surrounded by travellers on a crusade to tick off the Trans-Siberian Holy Rail from their "Been there, done that" list, I would get to see how Russians travel. This turned out to be exactly what happened, and I got to see more of how Russians travel than I would ever wish upon my worst enemy. The other reason for starting my trip at the eastern end of the line was that I had no schedule or plan for the trip, but my main goal was to get a good look at Siberia. By starting there, if I ran out of time, that would steal quality time from somewhere else than Siberia. Now the time had come to execute my non-plan.

I spent some days in Vladivostok to get used to being somewhere that at first glance looked like a normal city, but which upon further investigation was full of the unexpected. The oddities spanned from the small ones, such as that ice cream in cones was sold by the kilogram instead of by the ball (which made my stomach hurt on several occasions), to the larger and more sinister peculiarities, such as the city suffering from a water shortage so bad that after a rainfall I saw old women gathering fresh water from puddles in the streets.

Vladivostok was an important Soviet navy base during the Cold War. The city had been a no-go area for foreigners between 1948 and 1992. It seemed as if it had been closed for Russians as well during that period, or at least for carpenters, painters and other maintenance workers. Most of the buildings had been built at least fifty years ago, and judging from their façades, they had not been exposed to much maintenance since then. Only one detail on all the buildings was fairly new. The windows on the ground floor, and sometimes on the first floor as well, were protected by robust metal bars. Even though many of them were elaborate pieces of decorative art, the aesthetics they brought were hardly the reason they had been installed.

I particularly noticed all the dilapidated buildings when I was in Vladivostok. I gave them some thought and attention in the next couple of cities I visited. Later I simply didn't see them, even though there's decay in the photographs I took everywhere on my way west towards Moscow. But you can get used to anything, which explains how Russian cities can look the way they do.

If I squinted a little and ignored that trees were growing out of roofs and balconies, there was no doubt that this was a European city, despite its location well east of Iran, India and China. The faces in the streets were also mainly European. Of course, there were many Chinese, Koreans and Japanese as well. Much of the trade from the Far East to both Russia and the West comes in through the port of Vladivostok, where it's loaded onto trains on the railway line that begins in the city. Still, European Russians dominated the streets.

I used the opportunity to try and figure out what Russians look like. Particular traits of the face or other details in the head region can often be traced to a certain nationality. American women have big hair. British people have unusually angled ears and arrange their teeth in imaginative ways. French men look like French men, and that's the way it is. But what a Russian looked like, I didn't know.

Intense research performed by me while eating ice cream in the pedestrian shopping street made me none the wiser. All I developed were two preliminary hypotheses for what you can say about Russian women. Or, to be honest, the first thing was something you *can't* say about them.

You can *not* say that the nose of a woman from Vladivostok is straight or bent. Instead you must say that at the top it is fairly straight, then comes a rather crooked part, which continues until it dramatically ends in something quite resemblant of a ski jump. If her nose isn't like that, she probably doesn't have a nose, but a potato-like growth in the middle of her face. Almost every female nose I observed in Vladivostok could be described as either of those two variants. The only problem with my theory was that I also observed a few noses that could have belonged to supermodels, which leads me to my second hypothesis.

The reason I can say with a degree of certainty that some of the women in Vladivostok could be supermodels, is that they all dressed as if that was what they were. There really were fewer bearded female shot putters around than I had expected.

My main observation was that Russian women dress in unpredictable ways. When they get up in the morning, I don't think they look out of the window to see what the weather is like, or consider what they will be doing that day and dress accordingly. It was impossible to judge from the clothes and the make-up of a Vladivostok woman whether she was on her way to a bakery to buy bread or if she was going to a night club to disco, or possibly even to prowl the bar for morally questionable work. In the city streets a lot of glitter, frills and finery walked about on high heels. My eyes gravitated towards deep cleavages and transparent blouses wherever I turned.

Dressing up like that was probably just what I like to call the Reykjavik Syndrome in action, named after the capital of Iceland. The further away from what they consider to be the centre of the world and civilization people live, the harder they will try to imitate life in that centre. That's why the youth in Reykjavik act, and possibly *are*, cooler and wear more high fashion clothes than people in London or Paris. That's why gangsta rap is played instead of Norwegian folk music at after-ski parties in Norway. And that's why housewives in Vladivostok dress like they're going out with the nouveau riche in Moscow. The principle is universal.

My research made me hungry. The fast food outlet BURGER was the most inviting alternative around. On the first days of a long trip I try to be careful with what I eat, to get a good start on my journey with as little time as possible spent around toilets. An ordinary hamburger with fries and Coke is almost always a safe option, and usually it's also possible to find. Especially in a restaurant called BURGER, one would think.

Hungry and full of hope I got in line. I had not even had time to look up how to pronounce "bacon" in Russian before it was my turn to order. The clerk behind the counter helped me out by saying "Bacon-burr-yarey s-kartoff-el free?" It sounded about right, so I just nodded. That just had to be a bacon burger with fried potatoes. Unfortunately the description of what constitutes a hamburger had not yet reached the Russian Far East. What I got was what you get if you take a hamburger, remove the meat and insert a razor-thin slice of boiled bacon in its place. But hey! It was cheap!

On my first morning in Vladivostok I was thrown out of sleep by a merciless noise from outside. The sound had climbed all the way up to the eleventh floor, which until then had been an oasis of silence in a boisterous city. A marching band stood on a paved square next to the hotel and played one military march after the other. Their uniforms were so plastered with decorations that they all must have been high-ranking officers. Like a siege, their concert was long-lasting and monotonous.

Even though the marching band's uproar was impressive, they met competition from a construction site on the neighbouring lot. A new high-rise building was on its way, pushed upwards by heavy machinery and

loud cursing. I couldn't decide whether I preferred to listen to the construction workers or the musical majors, but it was certainly a good thing that they were all practising. Especially those who worked on the building.

The Soviet Union, whipped onward by Stalin, went from being basically a large farming community to being a superpower in the course of incredibly few years. It's easy to understand how a fast transition like that meant that not everything could be done with the greatest attention to detail. I think that was especially true regarding the often monumental buildings that suddenly had to be built. Because of all the guesswork and hurried carelessness, Russia's cities today are full of relatively new buildings that still are literally falling down on people's heads.



*A dilapidated pier in Vladivostok*

Along the oceanfront below the hotel I found a bad good example of this. Twenty-five years earlier a large facility for all sorts of sports had been built there. There had been a sea water pool with diving boards, running tracks, tennis courts and much more. All that remained of it were masses of rusty metal skeletons, piles of gravel and some buildings where the windows had fallen out, leaving openings that people apparently mistook for rubbish bins. It was sad to see what must have been a magnificent sports centre now being reduced to a rubbish dump.

While someone in my country may say "Don't use those stairs, they could collapse and kill you!", a Russian's take on the same stairway is more likely to be "Oh, those stairs have been there for a long time and they have carried many a person. I'm sure they will support you too." With the decay having reached the proportion it has in Russia, you can't blame them for having developed that attitude. Looking at things that way at least ensures that they don't spend too much money on superficial maintenance. There's no doubt that they have others and even more critical problems that need to be solved first.

Past the scrap heap of a sports facility, a lovely area with a promenade along the sea awaited me. There was a lovely beach where a walkway came down from the city centre. Pale Russian bodies were strewn all over the place, and the water was crowded with laughing, playful children. Some young men had swum out to the middle of the small bay to fondle a metal mermaid on an artificial island. Their friends back at the beach drank beer from magnum bottles and applauded the caressing. I wasn't impressed by their journey out to the mermaid, but there was no doubt that the sculpture offenders were brave men. I would *never* dare to show myself in public in the minimal, tanga-like swim briefs they wore.

Despite the debatable beach fashion, it was delightful for the first time to watch Russians really enjoy themselves. The atmosphere was friendly. Cheap snacks were sold everywhere. The air was filled by music from a street organ, children's laughter and loud, hilarious beach karaoke performances. It was a beautiful, sunny and hot day in a city where people know just all too well what it means to be cold. Even there at the coast, at approximately the same latitude as the French Riviera, midwinter winds from the north can bring the temperature down to minus thirty degrees Celsius. Combine that with the fact that many of the buildings lack central heating and that power failures are part of everyday life there, and you will understand why people go out and enjoy the sun whenever they can.

Close to the beach promenade I found Vladivostok's old fortress. There wasn't much to it, but a military museum inside offered a close look at old missiles, piles of rusty weapons from the war against Japan and a military pit privy. In a city that until recently had been off limits to tourists for



fifty years, you can't really expect too much from its attractions. But this was just about as good as it got in Vladivostok, so most tourists in the city went there, since after all it was better than nothing. Busloads of Asian tourists came there to listen to a Russian guide tell them, in Japanese and Chinese, how their ancestors not that long ago gradually had chased the Russian military forces further and further up the coast, all the way to the cold and unkind land near Vladivostok.

No one seemed to appreciate the irony in that a fortress built to keep the Japanese out of the city now daily attracted large groups of precisely Japanese people. The world moves forward. Or maybe it's just going in circles.

I spent my days walking from morning till late afternoon, amused and confused by all the strange things I saw. In the evenings I relaxed at the hotel, lacking the energy to go out and learn whether or not Russian women changed into something less comfortable after sunset. I had prepared for long evenings in hotels and long days on trains by bringing an archaic edition of Cervantes' "Don Quixote". Often cited as the best literary work ever, sleep was never far away when I opened it. Yet I was treated to enough waiting during my journey through Russia that I actually finished both volumes of the story.

A more inspiring source of entertainment and pastime occurred almost every night, usually around ten o'clock. I would typically lie dead tired in bed without not actually having gone to bed yet, when the phone would ring vigorously. I let it burn off some steam while I polished my spoken Russian and prepared myself mentally for the coming conversation.

When I was ready, I picked up the phone and said "Dohbree vee-etcher" into it, hoping that it would sound at least remotely like a "Good evening" in Russian. A similar greeting would echo from the other end, before the caller set out on a long rant in a language I don't speak very well. We would spend the next few, or not so few, minutes establishing that I didn't speak much Russian, and agree that maybe we should try in English instead. Inevitably the discourse would move towards something like the following, each time increasing a little bit in detail, length and entertainment value for me as I got better at it:

- *You want zex lady?*
- *Who? Me? No thanks, I'm driving.*
- *Woo-at?*
- *But thank you for asking!*
- *Why you not want zex lady? I have many bootifool girlz.*
- *Oh, well, in that case, do you have any non-smokers?*
- *Why no zmokerz? I have many bootifool girlz.*
- *Ok, but do you have one with a big nose?*
- *Why big noze? Yez, I have. Why big noze?*
- *Well, you know, I've heard so much about it, now I want to try!*
- *Woo-at?*
- *Nasal sex!*
- *Woo-at?*
- *You see, where I come from, the girls have very small noses.*
- *Ok, zo you want big noze girl with no zmoke?*
- *No, thank you very much. Good night!*

And then I hung up on them. It may have been tactless of me to joke around with the mafia like that. All they wanted was to sell me a prostitute, bless them. I really enjoyed falling asleep laughing after a conversation like that. Their thoroughness was impressive. They called me once and only once almost every night.

I was getting ready to leave Vladivostok. The city had been an interesting experience, charmingly ugly and beautiful at the same time. I was tired of the old and attractive, but run-down apartment buildings in the centre. I didn't need to see more of the endless rows of modern, grey concrete blocks of flats in the city's outskirts. Now I wanted to do something else, to travel, and I started out gently with a short stage on the Trans-Siberian; the night train to Khabarovsk, seven hundred kilometres to the north.

But first I had to get a train ticket. Humble I entered the ticket line at a Russian railway station for the first time in my life. After a long wait for my turn, the ticket clerk immediately turned me away when she discovered that I neither spoke nor understood Russian. "TSERVISS TSENTR!", she barked at me, pointing up a staircase at the other end of the waiting hall.

Of course I obeyed, and at the top of the stairs there really was a service centre for my kind. The only person in Vladivostok speaking decent English worked there. She was of great help and comfort to me. Ten minutes later I was back in line at the ticket counter, now equipped with a piece of paper with Cyrillic letters on it that described exactly what I wanted to buy. I felt like a small boy sent out by my mother to buy milk and bread. Proudly I showed the note to the ticket clerk, and soon I had a ticket in my pocket.

ПОЕЗД		ОТПРАВЛЕНИЕ				ВАГОН		ЦЕНА руб.		КОЛ. ВЕРСЛОВЕК	ВИД ДОКУМЕНТА
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ХАБАРОВС 1-ИРКУТ ПАСС (2034001-2054001) ФИРМ МЕСТА УКАЗЫВАЕТ ПРОВОДНИК 25 МСК АХ 674292 44У 41 0041010 150703 0053 3303321/Н 330199104/ТЕРРИСЕН=БК Н-3920 . 4 РУБ В Т.Ч.СТР.22 . 3+НСН 186.6/5.0/25 РУБ 433 ПРИВЫТИЕ 21.07.00.16											

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*A ticket from Khabarovsk to Irkutsk on train 1, the westbound Trans-Siberian Express*

For later ticket purchases I made the shopping list myself. Not every station along the Trans-Siberian Railway had a service centre, so I simply had to. Fortunately it was easy. All I had to do was to write the name of the place I was going, the number of the train I would like to go on, as well as what class I would prefer to travel in. If I also remembered to put on my best smile, most of the time I didn't even have to pay too much.

I can no longer remember exactly what I had expected, but I was slightly disappointed when I discovered that *The Trans-Siberian Railway* was just an ordinary train. No committee or brass band showed up to see us off.

An hour before the scheduled departure the set of coaches was ready on the platform. People walked onto the train and installed themselves comfortably in their home for the coming days. Many were going all the way to Moscow, others were lucky enough to be heading for destinations not so far away.



*The homey train corridor*

A brusque train host who had done this a million times before welcomed me, checked my ticket and showed me to the right compartment. The corridor outside the compartments was like on most trains, except there was a simple rug on the floor and the windows had proper living room curtains. At the end of the coach there was a large, old samovar, where we always could get boiling hot water for free to prepare tea, noodles or whatever we craved. I travelled in second class. My compartment had four beds, two on each side of a small table. During the day the lower beds converted into seats.

I shared a compartment with Sergey from Khabarovsk. His face was grey and expressionless. His only distinction was his Christian Dior glasses with thick lenses, broken, but mended with duct tape. If we had been in 1967, they would have been the latest thing in fashion. He spoke no English, German or anything else but Russian, yet he still kept asking me questions. After a while he gave up and was quiet for the rest of the journey. Except during the night, when *he* slept. And snored.



*The Trans-Siberian Express, the “Rossiya”, is painted in Russia’s colours*

There were no obvious tourists at the station, and I had only seen Asian tourists in the fortress in Vladivostok. So I felt like an outsider as we rolled out of the central station, passing the first kilometre marker. It told me that Moscow was 9,289 kilometres of railway tracks away. It already dawned on me that the journey through Russia could turn into a lonelier and mentally more demanding exercise than I had anticipated. I went to the restaurant carriage, hoping to find someone to talk more than primitive babble with.

The restaurant was empty except for a surly-looking woman behind the counter. I bought a sandwich from her and sat down at a table. The sandwich tasted of mould and cardboard, but I battled it down. As soon as I had finished it, the serving lady took my plate away. I got out my pen and paper and made a few notes regarding food and service on Russian trains. Two minutes later she was back. “Thiiz iiz reztaurant wagon, you muzt eat!”, she said. “If this is the restaurant wagon, you should serve something edible here!”, I retorted. Luckily, that was too many English words in a row for her to understand.

Back with Sergey I was puzzled when the train made a long stop after only an hour, in the middle of an industrial area. Vladivostok was still the nearest station. The provodnik, the male train host and ruler of my coach, came by to sell tchai, tea, for a few roubles per cup. "Nozzink iz wronk", he said. They often made stops like this. The long distance trains had schedules that weren't at all difficult to follow. Station managers as well as train conductors got part of their salary as a bonus calculated from how well the trains arrived at and left from the stations in accordance with the timetable. They should not run late and neither should they arrive too early. If they did, it would disturb the finely tuned logistics of the busy railway tracks. And that's why the trains I took in Russia sometimes just stopped for a while in the middle of nowhere, apparently for no reason at all.

It may seem stupid to deliberately "lose time" like that, but the good thing about it was that I could trust the train timetables in Russia. On the whole trip I never experienced more than a two minute deviation from the schedule. For a timetable seven days long that is pretty darn impressive! Especially considering that usually it's the exact same train set that is used on the whole journey between Vladivostok and Moscow. Although the country may be falling apart in every other way, at least the trains run as planned. Go figure!

The train chugged through the night. Most of the passenger trains between Vladivostok and Khabarovsk are night trains. Several places the tracks pass close to the Russian line of defence along the Chinese border. The Russians don't want to make it too easy for the Chinese to find out what they're up against, in case the time comes when China thinks she needs more space. Most Russians take it for granted that this *will* happen eventually.

Recently the tension had largely gone out of the border disputes between Russia and China. The no man's land between the countries was disappearing. This was unfortunate, as the area was the last remaining refuge for the almost extinct Siberian tiger. Even unscrupulous poachers had chosen to stay away while the two mighty communist states balanced on the edge of full-scale war there.

The Siberian tiger is the largest feline on the planet, and there are only a few hundreds left of them in the wild. Their length of about three metres and weight of more than three hundred kilograms was enough to prevent me from even considering camping in the forest. A typical meal for a giant Siberian kitty consists of about 45 kilograms of meat, which made me feel way too much like a perfect-sized snack for them. Still, it was great to sit safely inside the train and look out and know that somewhere in the forest there be tygers, animals of a kind I had always thought only lived in tropical regions. Not only do these tigers live in forests that look quite similar to the ones in Norway, they even live there throughout the year, during both the hot summers and the harsh and snowy Siberian winters.

Seeing a Siberian tiger in the wild is extremely rare. A more usual sight is the one of a half-eaten bear carcass. If you find one of those, you just know there's another large animal around. The tigers would no doubt have ruled the Earth if humans with guns had not been around.

I had trouble finding a place to stay in Khabarovsk. Several hotels and guesthouses declined to have me as their guest. Okay, so it took four or five years for the Russian revolution to reach all the way from Moscow to the Pacific coast, but surely the news about perestroika and glasnost should have reached the Russian Far East by now? But no, foreigners were not allowed to stay there, the room clerks claimed. Or maybe they just thought there would be too much paperwork involved. Or that since I was a Westerner, as soon as I saw the presumably non-luxurious room I would just leave anyway.

On my fourth attempt I finally got a room, at Hotel Turist. A single room cost 656 roubles and 48 kopeks per night, and the cashier was of the thorough type. He refused to round off the amount at all, so when I paid, I was actually given change that included two kopek coins, each worth just under 0.003 US dollars.



*Really small change*

The room was tiny, and those who had furnished and decorated it must have been very fond of roses and lace. I'm only guessing, but they were probably colour-blind as well. It was my second authentic room from 1974 out of three possible. On the wall there was a good old, Soviet-era turquoise plastic radio.

Russian radios from the communist years distinguish themselves by being extremely easy to operate. They only have one button, the on/off one. The radios came pre-tuned to the only radio channel people could legally listen to. So there was no reason to confuse people with buttons or dials to change frequencies with. All broadcasts to the people began with the concise message "Moscow speaks!", a source of a joke that still lives on in Russia; "Moscow speaks, the rest of us work!" I turned the radio on, but no one spoke. Instead the room was filled by something I recognized as the nostalgic singing from the airport hotel lobby in Moscow.

Also like in Moscow, it seemed that the hotel was working on reducing an infection. The taps offered no hot water. Luckily there was pleasant water in the river that runs through the city, although I had to share it with hundreds of Khabarovites.

The Amur is the sixth longest river in the world. It floats past Khabarovsk three kilometres wide, and the water was the perfect temperature for swimming on that warm day in July. The beach was full of rubbish and the water was turbid, but the atmosphere was pleasant, exactly like on the Vladivostok city beach. The number of people there holding a bottle of beer was roughly equivalent to how many people that on average will hold a mobile phone on the beaches back home. I'm not sure what kills you the quickest, too much beer or stress caused by mobile phones, but between the mouthfuls in Khabarovsk they at least seemed to be in a good mood as they approached death.

The predominant beach fashion was highly amusing. Tangas and string briefs were by far the preferred garments, but anything went. You just had to make sure you pulled as much of the fabric as possible into your butt crack, so as to maximize the buttock area exposed to the sun and the general public. On the upper body the men should wear a string vest as large-meshed as possible, while women were fine letting it all



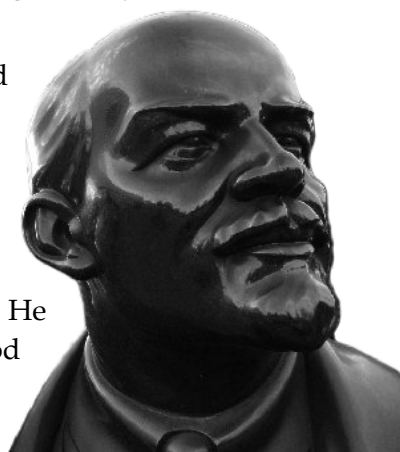
hang loose, as long as the nipples were decently covered with pieces of coloured tape. I had never thought this possible from the grey, serious Russians, but this was how they lay on the beach in Khabarovsk, cross my heart.

Running wide eastwards from Central Asia to the Sea of Okhotsk, an extension of the Pacific Ocean, the Amur forms the border between Russia and China for much of its length of more than four thousand kilometres. At Khabarovsk it turns to the north, while the border goes south. If you have your visas arranged, the Chinese city of Fuyuan is easy to visit. China's proximity was evident. The streets were full of Asian faces. They all seemed to be there for business and most definitely not for pleasure.

At the city market I found more proof of Amur being important to life in Khabarovsk. Like at any market, you could buy carrots, potatoes, cabbages and other edibles, but the largest choice of items was available to those who wanted to buy a fishing rod. There were hundreds of stalls selling just fishing rods and *all* kinds of accessories to them. I had never seen anything like it, but if it meant that the river was full of fish, nothing could be better.

I spent the evening in Ploshchad Lenina, a large, open square between venerable, old buildings. A bashful Lenin statue stood hidden in the outskirts of the square, giving it its name. He was seriously outnumbered by rows of large water fountains. They filled the square, stealing all the attention from good old Lenin by shooting water jets backlit in a wide range of colours.

Before I arrived in Russia I had imagined that when the Communist Party lost control of the country, all the Lenin, Stalin, Brezhnev and similar statues were torn down from their plinths nationwide. Not so. Although there was hardly a Stalin left, the Lenins were ubiquitous. He was still considered to have been a good man, fortunate enough to have died before the worst injustices to the Russian



people were committed. It was difficult to blame him for all the bad things that happened after his death, so countless squares, streets and monuments still honoured him.

The summer evening was warm and pleasant. It was a Friday night and people gathered in the Lenin Square after the restaurants, cinemas and theatres closed. Thousands of joyful people walked around, talked, drank and sang. Many had brought guitars, and it didn't matter that they couldn't really play them very well. Everyone seemed to know the lyrics, and the singing drowned out the sound of the guitars. Most people came walking, just a few arrived in cars. I guess that was partially because petrol costs money, but mainly because few people there were able to conduct anything but a slurring conversation. It was great to just sit and watch life unfold around me, but when the first drunken brawls broke out, I discretely retreated to my hotel.

My days in Russia whooshed by. There were still 8,523 kilometres between me and Moscow, so I had to skip many of the smaller settlements along the railway. Aiming for the heart of Siberia; Lake Baikal and the historic city of Irkutsk, I was in for a sixty hour imprisonment on the train. Never before had I travelled for that long continuously, so I really hoped for some interesting travelling companions. If not, my company would be Miguel Cervantes' writings in a yawn-inducing English version.

So, during the next three days I read several hundred pages about the adventures of Don Quixote. The only other tourists on the train were three elderly Japanese men who talked a lot, but only in Japanese. I shared a compartment with two young brothers on their way to Moscow to try their luck as carpenters, and an old, drunken sailor who didn't even know where he was going. None of them spoke anything but Russian. The brothers had brought lots of raw fish, which they gutted as hunger came and went. And hunger often came. To help the fish go down they had brought a large crate of vodka.

I couldn't complain. I had chosen to go on this trip, and besides, my co-passengers were friendly and generous people who were eager to share what they had with me. The fish I handled artfully. I sat in my upper

bunk, and as I was served pieces of fish, I put them away in a plastic bag I kept hidden. When we made stops I emptied the bag at the station. Not that it helped a bit against the smell in the compartment.

The vodka was a more serious threat. For some reason none of my dictionaries were able to suggest a Russian word for "teetotaller" or "total abstainer". And I happen to be one. I tried to explain the concept to my new friends, but they were unable to get even close to understanding that some people actually renounce their human right to enjoy a daily vodka or ten. My rescue was to come up with two simple words that fended off any further pushing of vodka: "Ya alkogolic!" You guessed it. "I'm an alcoholic!" It worked extremely well. Suddenly I got some respect from the men, and from that point on I was allowed to drink just water and soft drinks for the rest of the trip.

Like in the hotel, the radio in the compartment had only one control, the on/off switch. Not surprisingly, what came out of the radio was again mostly that deep, male voice with the nostalgic songs, occasionally interrupted by the Lolita-lesbian pop duo, T.A.T.U., the main cultural export of Russia that year. The DJ responsible for the broadcast was the provodnitsa.

Every coach on the Trans-Siberian has two gods. They are the two train hosts or hostesses, ruling half the time each. Usually they are women, provodnitsas, but there is also a male version, the provodnik. If they feel like it, they can grant you anything you may wish for, unless possibly if your desire is a non-smoking woman with a large nose. Although I seriously suspect they could get you one of those as well.

The provodnitsa knows the timetable by heart. She always has more toilet paper and from her you can borrow a short garden hose that fits the faucet in the restrooms on the train, so that you can have a basic, but nice shower in there. She makes tea, she cooks and she serves everyone under her protection a simple breakfast in the morning and a hot dish for lunch. She vacuums the train at least once a day, she keeps the windows clean and she brings new sheets for your bed when she reckons it's time to change them. Towards the end of stops she runs all over the station and gets absent-minded passengers back on the train before it leaves. She can

easily control a full battalion of soldiers about to get too drunk or too noisy. Provodnitsa is your friend, and when she sleeps, the other provodnitsa will be there to protect both you and the train. Nowhere else have I seen either train or passengers so well looked after.

Even though my provodnitsa knew the timetable well enough, her answers regarding the stops we made needed some adjustment. She, the train and the whole Russian railway system operates on Moscow time, and *not* on the official time where the train actually is located.

When you think about it, it's actually not that stupid. Dealing correctly with the eight time zones as the train passes through them on its way from Vladivostok to Moscow would be even more confusing. So that's the way it's done, and the price you pay is that as the train approaches the Pacific Ocean, the restaurant on board will not serve dinner until around breakfast time the following day. Unless your head thinks it's in Moscow, that is.

We made several stops before Irkutsk. They were seldom less than an hour apart, and in the most sparsely populated areas there were four or five hours between the stations. Many villages in Siberia exist just because they were set up as supply centres during the construction of the railway. When the construction was completed, the settlements no longer had any reason to exist. Yet some people stayed and continue to live there to this day, although there is little to keep them busy. They survive off what they can find in the forest, by eating it and by selling it to train passengers.

Between the stations more birch forest passed by outside than I could possibly appreciate. There was no end to it. Twenty percent of all trees on this planet grow in Siberia. And they will keep doing so in the foreseeable future. Millions of hectares of good quality wood, as well as other natural resources, are located so far away from civilization that it will take a long time before they profitably can be transported out of there.

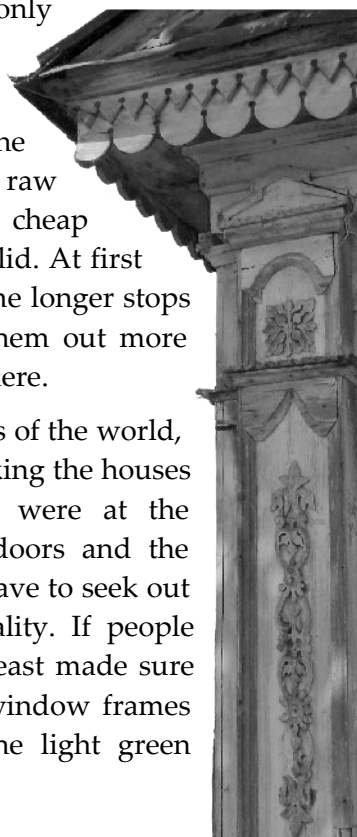
The landscape never surprised me. It just lay there, flat and silent like a painting. The lack of any steep terrain is the secret behind Siberia's many enormous, slow-flowing rivers. Which is fine, but it doesn't exactly make for interesting scenery.

Little by little I began to notice other things than the endless forest. Despite the low population density, I often saw power lines cutting through the forest, and the railway line was at least double-tracked absolutely everywhere. We met eastbound train sets all the time, far more often than we passed villages. The railway keeps the small communities in Siberia alive year-round, in the summer complemented by boats sailing on the large rivers.

A motor road with barely a gravel surface tried its best to keep up with the train. Often it would disappear straight into a bog, into a river that had found a new bed for the season or into a forest of grass that had grown tall in the absence of cars. Useful roads disappeared from Siberia when the Gulag camps were shut down and the de facto slaves in them were sent home. The traffic on the roads was mostly old motorcycles, often ridden by more than mature men wearing something that most of all looked like World War I pilot outfits. The only way to sensibly cross Siberia today is inside a train or a plane.

All the houses in the villages hidden in the forest were wooden. No surprise there, as the raw material was around in abundance and no cheap alternatives existed. The handicraft looked solid. At first the houses seemed very basic, but during some longer stops we made, I got off the train and checked them out more closely. I discovered beautiful details everywhere.

The local carpenters, just like in richer parts of the world, seemed to put much effort and pride into making the houses aesthetically pleasing. Meticulous carvings were at the corners, along the eaves and around the doors and the windows, so well done that in Norway you have to seek out museums to find woodwork of similar quality. If people couldn't afford to paint their walls, they at least made sure that as much as possible of the doors, the window frames and the shutters were covered in either the light green colour of hope or a melancholic shade of blue.



Near the villages, tiny fields and open meadows full of purple and yellow flowers appeared. There was no sign of industrial farming. Instead small groups of haymakers and scythemen worked the fields. Despite the scythes they were not particularly scary. In the summer heat they seemed to prefer to work in their comical, tight underwear. They built long hay-drying racks and giant haystacks. I couldn't even remember the last time I had seen a real-life haystack.



*It's casual Friday in the fields*

As the hours and the days went by, and as the other passengers drank more vodka and gutted more fish, I experienced a growing feeling of déjà-vu. The train started moving, travelled through the forest and stopped at a station that was impossible to tell apart from the previous one, over and over again. All I had to pass the time with was the book I had brought, written in obsolete English. There were no rewarding conversations to be had with anyone on the train. What kept me alive and sane was that I knew that this was the longest leg on my trip through Russia.

The flurry of activities that took place at the stations where we stopped for more than two minutes offered some variety. It was a market and a celebration every time. All the passengers rushed out and threw their money at small stalls strategically set up along the whole length of the train.

The stalls were manned, or rather womanned, by young and old ladies shouting out the offers of the day. Anything you could wish for could be bought from the women, as long as your wishes weren't too complicated.

They had bottles of beer, pure water without the taste of chlorine, fresh fish from the river, home-made ice cream, chocolate, dried meat, berries straight from the forest, fried pastries, sunflower seeds and lots of other items. The women had gathered and prepared everything themselves. The trade blossomed. People bargained, smiled and laughed, valuing the goods on offer highly and properly. Compared to the menu in the restaurant wagon, these were delicacies.

If you travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway nonstop, the kerfuffle that surrounds these halts is pretty much all you see of the real Russia. The rest of the time you just wait and you doze off. To me it seems senseless to spend a full week on a train, rushing past trees and accumulations of shacks, hovels and falling-down concrete buildings, the monotony only broken by the



*The Trans-Siberian view*

opportunity every three hours or so to run out and buy a couple of pancakes and some bottled water. The views on offer from the windows on the Trans-Siberian are eclipsed by shorter train journeys through almost any other country. If you're looking for interesting experiences when you travel on the Trans-Siberian, you will have to get off the train every now and then to find them.

A good place to leave the train to see something else is in Irkutsk, which happened to be the next place I did exactly that. By then I had spent almost seventy hours on trains since leaving Vladivostok, covering 4,104 kilometres of railway tracks. I still had 5,185 kilometres to go to reach Moscow, but it was time to stop for a while. I had reached Lake Baikal.

Since I was about to leave the train, my fellow passengers decided to let me in on a small secret of theirs. Earlier they had asked me if I was a spy, and they asked in a way that made it difficult to interpret it as just a joke. That a man at my advanced age of thirty years wasn't married *and* voluntarily spent my vacation in Siberia, a dismal and strange land thousands of kilometres away from the nearest good beach, it just didn't

make any sense to them. Most of them were on the train just because they had to go to Moscow for some reason, and they couldn't afford the plane ticket.

Okay, so maybe I wasn't a spy, they conceded, but since I so eagerly photographed almost everything we passed, even old, dirty factories and trains parked in oil puddles outside the stations, they had all agreed that I was at least one of them Greenpeace people. And in their opinion I would be more useful if I instead went to America and criticised the situation there rather than nosing around in Siberia. They knew they had a problem with pollution, they just couldn't afford to do anything about it yet.



*Fresh milk is always available at the train stations of Siberia*

Slightly taken by surprise, I was happy to learn that at least they knew about the concept of protecting the environment. Little of what I had seen in Russia indicated any awareness about it at all. Anyway, the mystery of the concerned looks I received from everyone whenever I lifted my camera had been solved.



Fortunately I had time to show them most of the photos I had taken. With their own eyes they saw that I had generally photographed nice things. I also tried to convince them that sometimes decay can be beautiful as well. We separated with smiles on our faces in Irkutsk. Well, at least I know that *I* was happy to leave the train.

It was easy to understand how the train passengers must have reasoned, and I could see what they were worried about. People can be content with what others may consider to be miserable conditions, as long as they feel that they have everything that they *really* need. But if a visitor from outside starts to ask questions about the lives they lead and compare their home to elsewhere, it's a reminder that things could have been different and better. *That* thought can be unpleasant.

It had begun to dawn on me that exactly this effect must have been the main reason why the Soviet leaders had not wanted visitors to roam freely through their vast social experiment of a country. From what I had seen in Russia that far, absolutely nothing reminded me of a superpower. Many of the sad sights had probably not looked much better during the Cold War. Whenever I stopped and looked around, I first noticed everything that was dirty, falling to pieces, poor, ugly and depressing to see. An underlying feeling of hopelessness and desperation prevailed. Even though the enormous country contained almost endless natural resources, it was also obvious that the country's leadership completely lacked the ability to convert the resources into cash, as well as a strong will to give the people a higher standard of living.

Irkutsk is one of the oldest cities in Siberia. Through its 350 years it has gone through both times of plenty and times of want. A *long* time ago, Alaska was administered from the city. Just in time for the Klondike gold rush, in 1867 the United States of America bought Alaska from Russia, paying a mere seven million dollars for more than one and a half million square kilometres of land. Needless to say, the investment soon paid off. Russia wasn't too bothered about it, as they had their own gold rush near Irkutsk at the same time. Gold was found in and around the river Lena, "only" a few hundred kilometres away, in the forests to the north of the city. The wealth soon flowed from there to Irkutsk.

It wasn't easy to see that the city had experienced good times. I'll be happy to give the local tourist bureau a new slogan for free: "Why go to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa, when you can go to Irkutsk and see a whole leaning city?" At least that was my impression after one day there.

Many wooden houses had clearly been built by artistic carpenters, and once upon a time I'm sure they must have been the pride of the town. Now they just lay there, grey of age and missing paint, so that no one could see how pretty they once had been. Some windows had moved from mid-wall almost down to the ground. I couldn't tell whether it was because the houses were sinking or because the ground was rising. Many homes lacked plumbing and water pipelines. Even in the city centre there were water pumps at the street corners. A steady stream of old women came to them with buckets, filled them up and struggled with carrying the water back home. Imagine that. In the twenty-first century Europe.

In a neighbourhood from where prosperity had long since moved out, a gorgeous, deep red brick church with cobalt blue bulbous domes was under construction. The houses and fences in nearby streets were all falling apart. The church was flanked by a closed down go-cart track and a couple of factories that seemed to produce only soot, dirt and trash. On a gravel road with plenty of holes in it, rain water had assembled to form puddles. The church was beautifully reflected in them, like a poor man's Taj Mahal.

Seeing the city took a long time. Not because Irkutsk is so large, but because it was difficult to see more than just a small part of it at a time. The Siberian forest was on fire. Thick, brownish smoke from millions of disappearing trees filled the air over an enormous area, including Irkutsk. A heat wave with its warm winds had dried the coniferous forests of the taiga. The summer heat brought thunderstorms. There was much thunder and lightning, but almost no rain. Now hundreds of small fires joined forces, and there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

When there's *one* small fire, the government can fight it by dropping massive water bombs from planes and helicopters. They even have a small army of sturdy lumberjacks with parachutes, who can be sent out to cut fire lines in the forest. But when there's a *large* fire and it rages in

remote, uninhabited areas, there's nothing to do but to sit back and wait and hope that the winds will not to blow the fire into a populated area. The snow will arrive in November and put out the fires. The people and the forests of Siberia then get a break until the spring, when new, rainless thunderstorms and Russian campers armed with matches return to the wilderness.

A sad message from home awaited me at an Internet café in Irkutsk. My grandmother had died. She had been ill for a long time and old for even longer, but it was still a bit of a shock to me. I didn't have to ponder much upon whether or not I should discontinue my trip and go home. She had died just as I had left Vladivostok several days ago, and now it was simply impossible for me to get home in time for the funeral.

I intensely felt that I was in the wrong place. Partially because I was thousands of kilometres away from where I wanted to be, but also because there was absolutely no one around that I could talk sensibly to about anything at all. My travel insurance could have taken me home, but because of the visa situation it couldn't have brought me back to continue the trip later.

This is a risk you run when you travel to far-away places for longer periods. Of course it feels terrible when it happens, but you cannot let the fear of it force you to always stay at home. I didn't panic, but right there and then I felt sad and mournful. I needed some peace before I could go



*The "Taj Irkutsk"*

on. Lake Baikal seemed like the right place to go. Looking at open water always helps me think, and now I had a lot of thoughts and memories to process.

Thirty sweaty minutes in a ticket line at the Irkutsk bus terminal didn't result in much. Apparently the morning bus to Listvyanka, the nearest village by the lake, was full. I could get a ticket to the afternoon bus, but I declined the offer. Instead I walked outside to the reportedly full bus. It was ready to go, but I asked the driver whether the bus really *was* full. My experience from other places where public transportation is ridiculously cheap, is that a bus can never be completely full. Especially not if you get your ticket directly from the driver.

My white arrow into the dark hit its target. Paying half price straight into the driver's wallet allowed me to sit on a box in the back of the bus. I lifted it to see what was under it and found a hole leading straight down to a tired, oily engine. I quickly put the box back in place.

Two Polish backpackers considered it a personal insult and another injustice done to Poles by the Russians, when they heard that I paid a little less than them for the bus ride. They calmed down a bit when in Listvyanka I paid ten times more for my accommodation than they did. I met them again down at the beach in the afternoon. I asked them what they were standing out in the ice-cold water for. It turned out that their cheap lodging offered neither toilets nor showers. That didn't worry them as long as they had an enormous, blue bathroom located right outside their dormitory.

For my roubles I got my own bathroom with hot water, a solid breakfast, a good bed and a window with a lake view. The house I stayed in was at the very end of the cluster of houses that formed the village. A cow patrolled the garden, now and then coming over to peek into my room to check whether I was hiding some good grass from her. When the cow stayed away, I sat in the large window frame and watched and listened to the waves crashing onto the beach. As soon as the last gangs of picnicking young people left, the sound of the waves was all I could hear.

I take that back. The youth on the beaches of Lake Baikal weren't gangs. It's too incriminating a word to describe how adorable they were.

My guess is that when I saw them, I witnessed an established, efficient, local mating ritual. When the boys from Irkutsk has saved enough money for petrol, they fill their cars with carefully chosen girls and bottles of beer and bring them all down to the lake. There the boys display their manliness by undressing to their underwear and throwing themselves into the water, almost without looking like they're freezing to death. A few seconds later they come out of the water, catch their chosen girls and pull them towards the lake. The girls squeal, but they don't put up much resistance. Soon they undress as well, but for some reason only from the waist up. Then they wade back and forth along the beach wearing just bras and trousers, while the boys sit comfortably on the beach with their beer and enjoy both the wonderful effects of alcohol and the nice view of the bathing girls, as if they were watching a Saturday night football match.

When all the bottles are empty, the boys throw themselves at the girls again and bring them back on land. Disappearing into blankets, they all do their best to keep each other warm. Eventually someone will almost freeze to death, and only then will the party hastily pack their stuff, except for the empty bottles and the trash. This they of course leave behind, as is the custom in Russia. In the end they drive back to Irkutsk to enjoy some raw, uninhibited sex. Or at least everything seemed to me to lead in that direction, so we will assume that to be the case. But apart from that last bit, the whole scene was acted out with incredible sweetness and innocence. It was exactly how I imagine young people back home used to behave back in the days when everything was in black and white and the dinosaurs ruled the Earth.

Ambling through Listvyanka was like visiting a fairly well-kept open-air museum of cultural history. Cosy, wooden houses stood scattered on a narrow shelf of land between the lake and some steep hills. Some of the buildings were new, most of them were old, but they all carried the same, elaborate wood carvings. Almost all the houses were in use, and outside them their inhabitants were at work, painting the outhouses, mowing the lawns and picking berries from the bushes in the gardens. It was rather idyllic.

Many homes had signs saying "Rooms for rent". The village made a living from its visitors. Or at least they *tried* to. According to a notice board on a square by the beach, Lake Baikal received only seventy thousand tourists a year, definitely not counting all those who pass by in trains and see just a tiny bit of the lake from behind a window.

On that day I could believe it. In the small square there were more people selling souvenirs and smoked fish than there were buyers. Still, seventy thousand sounds like a low number. When I later told Russians that I had visited Lake Baikal, their eyes glazed over. Every single one of them would tell me they dreamt about visiting the pearl of Siberia some day. Given that there are about a hundred and fifty million Russian dreamers around, you would imagine the square in the tourist town of Listvyanka to be more crowded.

That said, it's not easy to make Lake Baikal and the surrounding areas seem crowded. From outer space it looks like a delicious, blue banana at three quarters the size of Switzerland. It stretches almost six hundred kilometres from north to south, with a coastline of nearly two thousand kilometres to show for itself. The dark blue water of the lake in places reaches a depth of more than fifteen hundred metres. Scientists likely to die long before anyone can prove them wrong, claim that the eastern and western sides of the lake are moving away from each other, so that in a few million years Asia will be split into two new continents. The lake will then become an ocean.

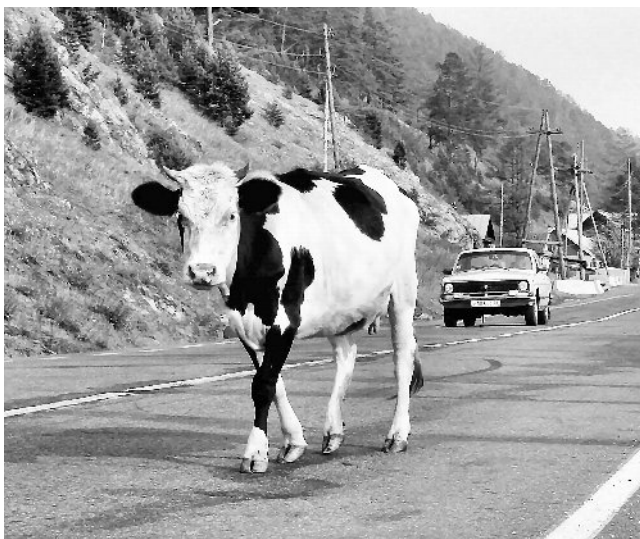
In this giant aquarium about a fifth of all non-frozen fresh water on the planet is gathered, housing hundreds or possibly thousands of species of animals and insects that do not exist anywhere else. Among them you can find the only fresh water seal in the world and the world's largest tapeworm. In addition to living side by side, the two creatures also have in common that they both eat fish.

Oh, and the fish of the Baikal aren't exactly normal either. The pink golomyanka, "the fat fish", doesn't have fish-scales, and unlike most other fish species, it doesn't go through the egg laying and hatching routine. Instead it gives birth to fully developed new fish. If you ever catch a golomyanka on a warm summer day, you'd better eat it right away. If not,

it will disappear, as it simply melts when exposed to sunlight. All that's left after a meltdown are a few bones and a tiny pool of fat.

Don't worry about the fat fish. When you visit Lake Baikal, you're more likely to get an omul fish in your hands than a golomyanka. All over Listvyanka fishermen's wives stood with half a barbecue-style oil barrel full of red-hot coal in front of them and a pile of fresh omuls behind them. They were preparing smoked omul. After walking up and down the main street, I stunk of both fish and open fire. The worst thing about the omul is not the smell it leaves in Listvyanka, but the fact that it screams when it's caught. As if fishing doesn't already make you feel bad enough when you have to put a worm on the hook before you can even begin.

In the village the fauna was less exotic. The streets were full of running chickens, cows and sheep, all tended by shepherds. The reason they ran wasn't that they were in a hurry, but because they spent much of their time on the main road to Irkutsk, ruled by cars and other lethal vehicles. The drivers didn't seem too



*Heavy traffic in Listvyanka*

worried about what a heavy cow could do to their tiny, fragile cars. They zigzagged at breakneck speed between the farm animals, the shepherds and me.

The maniacs in the cars inspired me to move on. I had come to see the lake and to find peace for a while. To achieve that I evidently had to put more distance between myself and civilization. From Listvyanka boats regularly left for other places around the lake. If you *really* wanted to leave the world as we know it, like my Polish friends planned on, a ten hour ride on a hydrofoil boat would take you Severobaikalsk, a city at the

northern end of the lake. The Poles overslept and missed the boat by half an hour. When they learned that the next boat wouldn't leave until the following week, they just grunted and got on the train to Mongolia instead.

My plans were more moderate. I wanted to get on a ferry for the thirty minute crossing to Port Baikal. From there I could walk along old railway tracks towards Slyudyanka. A long time ago, Port Baikal had been a train station on the first railway line between Irkutsk and Slyudyanka. That lasted until the Angara River (the only one flowing *out* of Lake Baikal, more than three hundred rivers and streams flow into it) was dammed. This put large sections of the railway tracks to Port Baikal under water. Tracks were laid straight from Irkutsk to Slyudyanka, away from the lake and the river, making the Port Baikal line an unnecessary branch off the new Trans-Siberian service.

The forest along the lake was full of ticks, carriers of the potentially paralysing and lethal Lyme disease. To avoid them, I walked on the railway tracks. Although only a few trains per week passed by there, it was enough to fight back the grass from which ticks like to hang when they hunt for blood.

Listvyanka and Port Baikal are separated by a sound just a few kilometres wide, but the thick smoke from the forest fires and the local preparation of fish made my destination impossible to see from where we started out. Slowly Port Baikal glided out of the smoke, revealing a run-down, but still pleasant and richly coloured ferry landing from the 1950s.

In the general store at the wharf, the till lady used an abacus to calculate what my change should be. Apparently I paid for my Coca-Cola with an unusually large note, and it took quite a while before she was satisfied with her calculations. Next to the wharf a half-sunken ship lay in the water, remains of the vessels that used to bring train sets safely over the water before tracks were laid along the lake. At the train station there were large piles of coal, put there to seduce old locomotives into coming there from Slyudyanka every now and again. Port Baikal was dying.

After ten minutes of walking I was already in what felt like wilderness. I was pretty much all alone. Every few kilometres I saw tents pitched by





*The abacus is still in use at the general store in Port Baikal*

the lake, usually inhabited by a family or a young couple on a cheap vacation. The summer scene was complete. Warm air, green grass and lush bush surrounded the path. Flowers were in full bloom, and the bumblebees buzzed happily from one bowl of nectar to the other. I soon forgot that I was walking next to a natural wonder of a lake. The scenery was familiar to me, an almost exact replica of what you typically see on a walk in Norwegian coastal forests.

The greatest thing about Baikal is no doubt all that you cannot really see; the enormous size of the lake, and the unique forms of life that hide beneath the surface, both on land and in the water. Further north the scenery may be more exciting, but coming from Norway, the southern parts of Lake Baikal did at first sight not seem that special at all. It was more difficult not to be impressed by all the visible works of engineering.

The laying down of railway tracks was a relatively easy task through most of Siberia. Long stretches of tracks could be laid straight down on flat ground, and the work progressed quickly. It was of course difficult enough to work in a wilderness that no one really knew. Some places rivers had to be crossed, and every now and then there was a hill in the way. The hardest challenge was to avoid putting the tracks too close to rivers that were prone to flooding. It was also necessary to stay away from permafrost areas, which at times easily could transform steady ground to unstable marsh and damage the tracks.

When they reached Lake Baikal the situation worsened. A lot. To lay the tracks north of the lake would be a long detour and included a high risk of encountering permafrost. In the south the tracks would come close to Mongolia and China. Russia didn't trust these two neighbours at all, so they didn't want to put the tracks closer to them than absolutely necessary. The terrain along the lake was steep and rocky, and difficult to do any construction work in. At first they tried to solve the problem by having boats carry the train coaches across the lake. During the summer that was fine, but in the winter the ice lay too thick for the boats to propel their way through it. The engineers claimed that building a railway line along the lake would be hopelessly expensive, and at first they dismissed the idea completely.

During the winter of 1904 the Russians became desperate. They were at war with Japan in and around the Sea of Japan, and they just *had* to get supplies through to their military forces. The only way to do this fast enough was by train through Siberia. The emergency plan was to lay railway tracks across the ice on Lake Baikal. Laying down the tracks went fine, but when the first train set out on the journey across the ice, it soon became evident that this was *not* a good idea. The coaches are still deep down at the bottom of the lake.

So that was it. They had no choice; the railway *had* to be built along the southern shore of Lake Baikal. It was completed with thirty-something tunnels, more than a hundred bridges and an unknown number of workers dead and buried next to the tracks. Ironically, today this most impressive and costly section of the whole Trans-Siberian Railway is practically not in use. On the other hand, it has turned into the perfect place to go for a comfortable walk through wilderness and history on a sunny day.

Rambling along the railway tracks was a strenuous, yet relaxing experience, and it cannot be denied that I was a changed man when I returned to civilization. I had changed so much that not even the most vigorous of deodorants could have disguised it. When I returned to my hotel in Irkutsk, the room clerk surprised me by not only immediately noticing and recognizing me, she even gave me a key straight away and

told me to come back and check in later, after I had changed my clothes and taken a long, hot shower. I must have stunk beyond belief.

I stayed in a different room than the one I had left a few days earlier. I discovered this when I quickly undressed to get in the shower. While I still had my head inside my t-shirt, suddenly a large globe belonging to a ceiling lamp was in the way of my roaming arms. It went down. The last time Irkutsk had witnessed a crash of similar proportions must have been when Boris Yeltsin fell over during a visit to a chandelier shop in the city. (I'm just assuming this must have happened.)

The whole floor was now full of tiny, razor-sharp fragments of glass. The large globe on the lamp appeared to have been manufactured with the finest glass available. "Oops!", I thought out loud, and I stiffened as I anticipated the arrival of the local riot squad. No one came. So I walked out to the corridor to welcome the hunch-backed dezurnaya who I thought had to be on her toilsome way towards my room by then. But she wasn't. I went back inside my room, brushed up the broken glass and took a shower, all bloody and perplexed.

Guilt-ridden from so recklessly having broken such a treasure, I began to ponder upon how I could resolve this matter. Locals are often used to foreigners doing strange things, sometimes they even expect it, but according to my guidebook the last vandal to visit the town was Genghis Khan. That was some time ago. How would I explain this?

Thinking myself unable to elaborate on my crime in Russian, my solution became to create a photo story. Thanks to the self-timer on my camera, the broken globe and a remaining whole one, I was able to put together a credible reconstruction of what had happened. With my camera in hand and my tail between my legs I walked down to the check-in desk.

It went better than I had feared. First the room clerk thought I was just trying to impress her with my digital camera. She put up a discouraging face, telling me that if I was looking for a woman, I'd better get on the phone with the mafia instead. Then she recognized the hotel room on the small screen on the back of the camera. Suddenly she was very interested in my presentation. She paid close attention to the story, and when she

understood where it all was heading, she simply pulled out a price list from a drawer and said "Slamat lampu, 80 rouble!". What a marvellous thing to have a list like that handy, just in case a partying rock band on drugs or a silly Norwegian backpacker comes by. Relieved, I paid my indulgence, and then everything was okay.

Russians are pragmatic in matters like that. Done is done and forgotten is forgotten. I guess that's the way it has to be in a country where in the near past so many things went so horribly wrong.

My last night in Irkutsk I did some more walking beyond the old town. I left the city centre and crossed over a bridge to an islet in the Angara, The Island of the Youth. Every town and city I visited in Siberia had a hotspot for evening entertainment, frequented mainly by young adults. The largest cities had parks and organized fairgrounds, while in smaller towns the sensation seekers had seemingly just picked one of their streets at random as the fun place to go. People would come there every night, regardless of the weather, even though in some cases the only thing to do there was to get drunk on beer while you watched others do the same.

In my country, most people can meet up in their own homes, whether they are two people or ten. Russians, however, usually live in cramped apartments until they marry, often sharing the space with parents as well as grandparents. As soon as they get married, children start popping out and drastically dampen any desire to host social gatherings at home. Also, while my friends and I can meet in relatively inexpensive cafés and restaurants, Russian towns offer few such facilities. When Russians go out for a meal, they do it properly, with dinner, wine and vodka. Many Russians cannot afford to do this very often, especially not the young ones. Having an informal meeting place outdoors is therefore an important social factor for them.

The Island of the Youth was such a place, and a well equipped one at that. Near the entrance I found a karaoke scene, an open-air disco, candy floss machines and a small funfair. It offered only basic rides, but everyone enjoyed them with great enthusiasm nevertheless. On the other side of the island there were horses to ride, a street organ, popcorn and a beach full of patches of tall grass, so that blushing couples could

disappear from the public eye when they wanted to. And they wanted to a lot. Those who wanted to, but who couldn't because they had no one to disappear with, worked hard on changing the status quo. Girls walked around in couples, arm-in-arm and all spruced up. They were circled by herds of young men. Bawling drunkenly and waving bottles they did all they could to impress the females. It was quite amusing to watch.

Less pleasant, but definitely more thought-provoking was the late night news broadcast on a local TV station. I'm not claiming that I understood everything that was said, but I did get that it had been a quiet day in the city, except for something that was either a suicide or a murder. While the nature of the death was unclear, the coverage of it was remarkably straightforward. First we were shown an interview with an eyewitness. He had seen someone fall down from a high-rise building, and with big eyes he described exactly what had happened. I understood mainly the part where he said "Ooo-whEEEEEEEE, bampsh!" The open-mouthed reporter barely managed to throw a question or two into the dramatic story.

This was followed by pictures showing a river of blood running down a street. The cameraman travelled upstream with great dramaturgy, all the way to the source, a pool of blood surrounding something bulky hidden beneath a blanket. A quick cut later someone had adjusted the blanket ever so slightly, so that we all could see what a smashed face looks like after having been accelerated by gravity from the ninth floor all the way to the hard ground. A policeman came running into the picture, yelled at the cameraman and put the blanket back in place, thus concluding the report. Back in the studio it was time for the weather forecast. More smoke and some light showers.

That night I dreamt splatter dreams.

—

The smell of fish was intense on the train out of Irkutsk. Only a couple of hours earlier the train had stopped in Slyudyanka, where the platform had been full of sellers of fresh fish from Lake Baikal. I closed my nose as much as I could and smiled to the omul gluttons with whom I shared a compartment. The train was still surrounded by an boring, drowsy and

greyish green forest. One night and eleven hundred kilometres closer to Moscow I could take it no more. I left the train in Krasnoyarsk.

If I had been more fish smell tolerant, I would probably have jumped straight onto the next passing train. Krasnoyarsk didn't seem particularly enticing. I knew it was a city with much industry. Up until the 1900s it had been a relatively calm outpost of the Russian empire. Its first inhabitants had been trappers and hunters. Later, during the gold rush, it turned into some sort of a general trading centre. The city changed dramatically when Stalin during World War II decided to move heavy industry there from the European part of Russia, to protect it from Hitler's advancing troops. After the war the factories remained in place, since most of the raw materials they depended on came from Siberia anyway. The growth of the city continued, and by the time I arrived, Krasnoyarsk had become one of the ugliest cities in the world. It was all grey and dull, with more than a million slightly less grey and dull inhabitants.

A poor donkey was the only thing in the city that had received a coating of paint since the fall of communism. Russia has many city parks, and in most of them you can pay to sit on an animal and have your photograph taken while you're being transported a hundred metres or so. Usually the animal is a horse. In the north it can sometimes be a reindeer, while in the south, if you're lucky, there's a camel available. Krasnoyarsk was the only place I visited where the animal on offer was a freshly painted zebra!

To avoid having to see too much of the absolutely ugliest façade in the city, I rented a room inside the building it belonged to. Hotel Krasnoyarsk was in the centre of the city, next to a square surrounded by an opera house, the river bank by the Yenisey and various other banks with façades that were almost, but not entirely as ugly as my hotel's. In the square there were fountains of the kind that the Russians seemed to be awfully fond of, at least ten beer and kebab tents which the Russians obviously were even more fond of, and, which pleased me the most, a huge, inflatable bouncy castle. Everything was grey, except for the brewery logos on the beer tents. I immediately started planning my departure from the city.

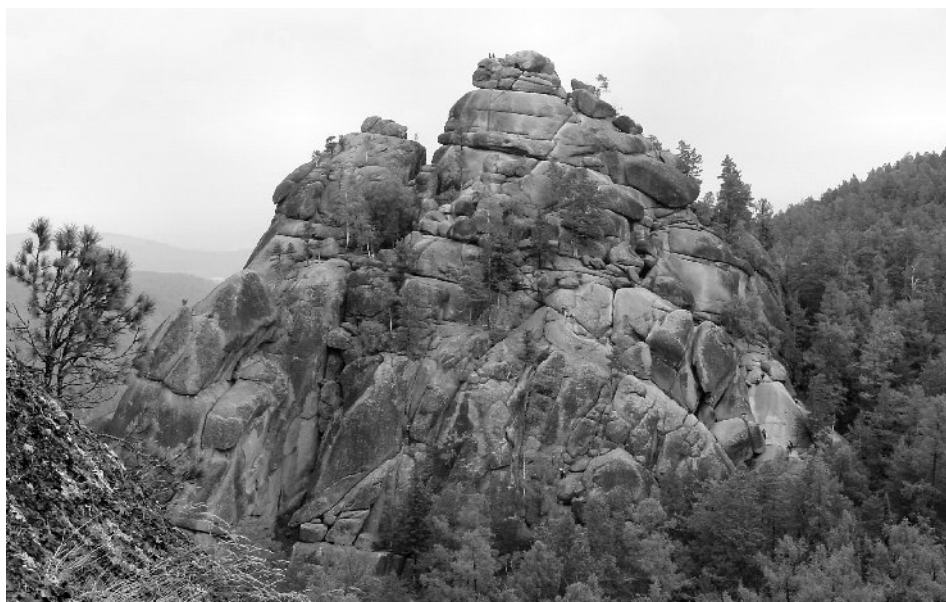
It turned out that Krasnoyarsk *did* have something to offer its visitors. I just had to travel a bit out of the city to find it; the Stolby Park. The park got its name from its main feature, the stolbys. In the middle of the enormous, green carpet of forest just outside Krasnoyarsk, some fascinating, strange peaks break the green monotony.

If you ever built a stack out of rounded stones like the ones you can find at the bottom of a river, you have seen a tiny stolby. From a distance they looked like cairns built to show the way through the wilderness. But these cairns stood several hundred metres tall. The stolbys could easily have been abstract sculptures created by giants in a world populated by elves and hobbits. They looked like contemplating, peaceful, literally petrified trolls, with trees growing on their noses and ears.

Nowhere in the world can a forest enthusiast have a better view than from the top of a stolby. All you can see is trees, trees and more trees all the way to the horizon in every direction. Although I had seen trees outside the train the whole way from Vladivostok, I still wanted to climb a stolby. I took a marshrutka and got off at the park entrance. It was early morn, and I tip-toed past a sleeping forester on duty. An hour and a half later I stood at the base of my first stolby.

Even though the stolby looked like a theatre prop made from papier mâché, upon closer inspection it was rock solid. The climb was extremely steep, but there were many places to put my hands and feet, so it was hard, but not *too* hard to make my way up. Forty-five minutes of climbing, leaping and struggling brought me to the top. It was a cold morning, but I was steaming with sweat.

At first I was alone, but soon I heard shouting from below. One after another, more sweaty bodies joined me on the summit. Boys, girls, women, men, old women and greybeards, it seemed that all sorts of people were conquering "my" stolby that Sunday morning. Soon the atmosphere up there was party-like. An obviously disturbed man had brought a guitar. Unfortunately for us, but good for him, he was a much better at climbing than at playing the guitar. Many rewarded themselves with a bottle of beer or a swig of vodka. Outdoor life in Russia is as varied as life in general.



*An entry-level stolby (and seventeen climbers, for those of you with eagle eyes)*

I hardly fooled anyone in Siberia into believing that I was Russian, possibly except for a few times when I *really* tried to join the large, grey, marching mass in the streets. Suspicious glances met me wherever I went. If I wore my running shoes, people stared at them. Wearing my tired hiking boots bought me less attention. Walking with my backpack on was a dead giveaway. If I wanted to reduce my alien factor, I could carry my stuff in a grey plastic bag instead. In general, though, I unmistakably looked like a foreigner. On rare occasions people who spoke a little English or German approached me to practice their language skills. Usually just to show their friends how clever they were, and not to hear my replies to their questions.

Up on the stolby I was wearing both a backpack and my running shoes. That, and the fact that I wasn't visibly suffering from a hangover on a Sunday morning, clearly made me a foreigner. A man who had studied English for several years came over and introduced himself. I asked him whether it was normal for people of all ages and levels of fitness to go on neck-breaking climbs like this one. He didn't understand what I meant. This stolby was the easiest to climb in the whole park, of course anyone could get up there.



Other stolbys were much steeper. Climbers sought the absolutely most difficult routes up them. No one seemed to take any safety precautions or use ropes. Some people could have climbed them blindfolded, and there were actually those who sort of did. A special kind of climbing came as a result of World War II. Wounded and blinded men returned from the war. They couldn't work, but they remembered how they had climbed the stolbys before they joined the army. Mastering the climbing gave them a way to prove that they were still not completely useless.

At the base of one of the stolbys there was a chapel. It had been built in memory of the many war heroes and a number of foolhardy teenagers who suddenly one day impressed no one any more. Sad stories are always hiding just around the corner in Russia, even in those places where people actually seem happy.

On my way back I encountered another sad story. Hunchbacked old women with walking sticks were out looking for their pension; flowers and berries to sell for small change in the city later in the day.

Near the stolby park I came upon a zoo. I hesitated before entering, and as soon as I had gone inside I regretted it. In a country where even many people aren't well cared for, it is not to be expected that four-legged and feather-clad creatures are treated with much respect. Krasnoyarsk Zoo was a prime example of this. Most of the animals were psychotic. Except for some visiting sparrows, the animals and the birds wandered restlessly along the walls in their too small cages. They reminded me more of badly designed robots than of animals.

This is what you get when you give animals too little space to live in and you surround them with an audience consisting of mainly unruly children ("Look mum, when I throw stones at the bear, it gets angry!"), and grown-up men who walk around with large bottles of beer in their hands. ("Look bear, when I throw empty bottles at Boris, he gets angry!")

I took no pleasure at all in watching the animals, but the Russians appeared to enjoy it so much that the zoo made a little bit of extra money from renting out cameras by the hour. This I had never seen before. Perhaps most of the visitors to the zoo weren't exactly well off, unable to afford buying their own cameras. Maybe being in a place where at least

*some* creatures were below them in the pecking order made them feel good. Could it be that they wanted to take photographs there, so that later they could look at them at home and think “Ha-ha, look at that stupid tiger, desperate for my popcorn”? I quickly left the park, or else I would have started throwing rocks at people, just to make a point.

With more time in Russia I would have left Krasnoyarsk by boat instead of by train. The river Yenisey, just a few bends away from being one of the ten longest rivers in the world, flows by the city on its way to the Arctic Kara Sea, far north of the polar circle. During the barely six months when the river is free of ice, people use the Yenisey to get to and from small settlements between Krasnoyarsk and the coast, two thousand kilometres to the north.

Transportation on the river was carried out by ageing vessels. Most of their passengers were also advanced in years, and of the kind that will bring two thousand cabbages, a large pile of long-playing records, cheap TVs and lots of batteries when they travel. Now they were heading into the wilderness, to places with magical names like Norilsk and Dudinka. There they would sell their treasures to the locals.

By the way, Dudinka is possibly Earth's coldest place with permanent residents, Antarctic research stations excluded. The average temperature *throughout the year* is about ten degrees Celsius *below* freezing. I'm pretty sure that people there pay for their cabbages and batteries with wolf and polar bear skins. This I may never find out for sure, as the trip up the river and back takes at least two weeks. Even though I wanted to go, I just didn't have the time.

Instead I went to the train station to buy a ticket to Yekaterinburg. It wasn't as easy as you would think. The woman who sold tickets refused to sell me one, claiming that no such place existed. My Russian skills were not up to discussing the matter, so I gave up when not even showing her the city on a map was enough to make her change her opinion. Trying my luck at a second counter was just as fruitless. Not having much else to do, I tried another one, and this time I succeeded. The woman behind the counter offered me a ticket not to Yekaterinburg, but to Sverdlovsk. It was just as good, she said.

And it was. As recently as in 1991 Sverdlovsk changed its name back to what it had been before the revolution, Yekaterinburg. Twelve years later the ticketing system and most of the employees at the railway station in Krasnoyarsk had still not received the memo.

My next provodnitsa was a stereotypical grandmother; rounded and amiable, with her hair neatly arranged in a top. Smiling, she showed me to my compartment. I was to share it with three grandmothers like her, presumably as some sort of special service to them.

The grandmothers kept staring at me and commenting on my every move. I amused them without not really knowing how. All it took was to be a stupid foreigner, I think. My new friends invited grandmothers from the whole train to come in and look at me. I tried my best to make conversation with them all, but whatever I said they just laughed at me, in much the same way I had seen people laugh at the animals in the zoo. I longed to be back on the train where everyone had thought I was a spy. On this train I was just a clown.

There was only one way to stop their mockery. I hardly ever do this when I'm around poor people, but I was desperate. I told them that I was 30 years old and unmarried, and I told them how much money I made in Norway. The laughs disappeared, and they all went silent. Then the swing door hit back with double force. I was busy for the rest of the day. Before night fell I had been introduced to, given the address of and/or been shown a photograph of *all* unmarried, female descendants of the whole herd of grandmothers on the train. The situation had improved.

I don't know much about what grandmothers spend their days doing, but after that train journey I knew all too well what they do at night. They snore. With an unfathomable force and a complete lack of rhythm. As long as the train was moving it wasn't a problem. Then I could just put an ear against the wall and all other sounds would be drowned out by the relatively pleasant sounds from the train. But whenever the train stopped at a station, the sound picture was pretty much this:

\*thumpthump\* \*thump-thump\* \*thump – thump\* \*whiiine\* \*silence\*

**\*SNOOOOOORE!\***

The sudden monster of a sound startled me at every stop that night. It may be far between the train stations in Siberia, but every little heart attack counts towards the end of your life.

I consider myself a defender of all basic human rights. I don't support the use of capital punishment under normal circumstances, but there is one exception. There is *no* mercy to be had for those who choose to sleep in hostel dormitories despite knowing that they are world-class snoring champions. Serious snorers *must* be kept away from innocent and silent sleepers at night. Even when confined to single rooms, they should stick to a sleeping position that minimizes the noise. If it's bad enough, a snore can easily penetrate a wall. Offenders could for instance try sleeping with their heads in water, face-down.

Lacking laws to protect us, luckily there are other ways to handle the problem. Here are some techniques you can use:

1. Always, but *always*, carry ear plugs in a pocket or container you have easy access to. While some snoring can penetrate ear plugs and thus only worsen the situation, ear plugs can in many cases dampen the noise enough to let you sleep. Practice sleeping while wearing ear plugs at home, as you need to get used to sweaty auditory canals and the sound of your own heartbeat.
2. Go to bed before the snoring person and fall asleep as quickly as you can. It helps if you spend the day getting really tired, as it will make your sleep deeper. Sooner or later you *will* wake up from the snoring, but in theory you are then close to rested anyway, so you can consider the nasal blares to be your nasty wake-up call.
3. Keep an arsenal of small objects in or near your bed. The objects must be suitable for being thrown at the offender without injuring him permanently. (Although offenders can be of any gender, men are generally the worst.)

Suitable items are rolled-up socks, loaves of soft bread, rolls of toilet paper, empty plastic bottles, newspapers and large beetles, preferably dead ones. In the middle of the night it is too much of an effort to get out of bed and walk over to the offender to

physically stop the snoring. Throwing objects at him can often work just as well and may give you some much needed satisfaction at the same time.

4. If you lack hand missiles, you *can* go to the offender's bed, wake him up and ask the offender to sleep on his stomach. This is likely to stop the snoring. If you're sleeping in a bunk bed, though, and the snoring person is above you, you have another option. When the snoring commences, you simply kick upwards into the bottom of the offender's mattress.

Adjust the force of your kick to the size of the receiver. I once failed to do so, and sent a modest-sized, snoring Singaporean flying onto a concrete floor from an altitude of two metres. Luckily he never understood what had happened. It was not a pleasant situation. For him, I mean. Ideally you should kick just hard enough to make the offender change his position. Keep on kicking until the noise is reduced to an acceptable level.

5. For various reasons you may wish to avoid physical contact with the offender. If so, you can direct a fine sprinkle of flour or sugar into his open mouth. This will invariably lead to the offender licking his lips without waking him up. Maybe he will even close his mouth. Either way, the shape of his respiratory passage will be altered. Continue until the snoring ceases. (And stop before breathing ceases.)
6. I can only recommend this last option when you *know* in advance that someone will snore in the night. Characteristics to look out for are obesity, breathing with an open mouth even when awake and bruises on the forehead from thrown plastic bottles or similar.

What you do is to put itching powder in the bed or inside the sleeping bag of the suspect. When he goes to bed, he will not fall asleep. Instead he will spend the night itching and scratching himself. Who does not sleep, does not sin by snoring. But *you* will sleep well. (Unless he spends the night swearing loudly. Consider the possibility before you act.)

Not even all these excellent pieces of advice can guarantee you a good night's sleep. I had brought ear plugs, but unfortunately they were out of order. They kept falling out. An unfortunate incident earlier that day, involving the ear plugs and a boiling hot cup of tea, had led to my ear plugs losing most of their ability to adjust to my ears. The tea had not benefited from the event either, as it acquired a slightly waxy taste.

I was unable to make myself kick or throw stuff at the grandmothers, so I just gave up sleeping and instead spent the night reading my book and having a look outside whenever we stopped. I was sad to see the cities of Omsk and Tomsk slip out of my hands. Their names would have looked good on my travel CV. All I know about the two cities is that they seemed very dark at night.

We crossed the border between Siberia and Ural before dawn. There may be an official and visible border somewhere, I don't know. But I do know that the landscape outside changed sometime during the night. Instead of the desolate, infinite forests of the previous evening, the view outside the train windows was now dominated by farmland, large fields and small, rural settlements.

People in Siberia sometimes talk about the European part of Russia as "the mainland", as if Siberia were an isolated island. If it is, I was now approaching the other side of the "ocean".

I had always imagined the Ural Mountains to be a massive wall, put up by the powers that be to make sure that Asia and Europe keeps a proper distance to each other. Now I was in the middle of the Urals, but the terrain was as uneventful as ever. All I could see was open fields and friendly, rounded hills. Fair enough, the Trans-Siberian Railway crosses the Ural Mountains at their lowest, but they are merely modest mountains all over. The whole mountain range stays below two thousand metres. Not that it matters. The most important thing about these mountains isn't their appearance, but the vast quantities of minerals that are hidden inside them.

Yekaterinburg's existence is a result of the wealth inside the mountains. The city was named after two Katarinas. One was the wife of Tsar Peter the Great, and the other is the patron saint of Russian miners.

For hundreds of years the Russians have brought gemstones, metals and minerals out of the mountains and into the factories. Among the products this has resulted in are heavy machinery, petrol, steel, diamonds, jewellery and many other things, depending on what the country has needed the most at different times. The wealth of the mountains has benefited the city in many ways. The best and most recent example is the metro in Yekaterinburg. It is literally a gold mine, although nobody knew it before the digging of metro tunnels suddenly revealed the fact.

My view from the hotel told me that I was certainly not in the old Soviet Union. I looked straight into an enormous factory chimney that just stood there, bored and with nothing to do. In the distance the "Church on the Blood" dominated the view, a cathedral recently erected on the spot where the now canonized tsar family was murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1918. Bathing in the evening sun, the bulbous domes of the church beamed rays of golden light in every direction. It made the old and decaying concrete buildings surrounding it seem even uglier than they could have done on their own.

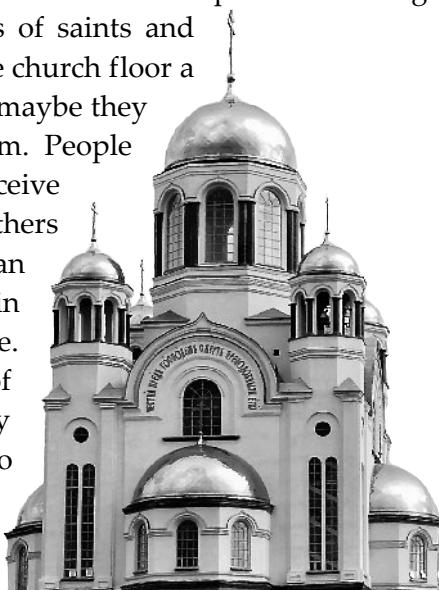
Closer to my hotel, a coffee manufacturer did its best to seduce me into having a cup, by covering the whole side of a fifteen floor apartment building with a giant advertising banner. What the view had been from that same hotel room fifteen years earlier I do not know, but it certainly must have been different.

The golden domes on the cathedral lured me inside. It was my first visit to a Russian church. A seemingly everlasting service was taking place. At least I think it was a service, although it certainly was quite different from the sleepy performance that is offered to Norwegian churchgoers on Sunday mornings.

There were no chairs or benches inside, so everyone had to stand. While that may have been a bit exhausting for some members of the congregation, the priests were the worst off. They ran in and out of doors between the church, the vestry and the sanctum, retrieving and replacing a wide range of items that were used in the service. Fortunately, there was a large team of priests to share the tasks between them. The atmosphere was more chaotic than solemn. About two hundred people

were present. Almost all of them were women, ranging from old ones dressed in black from head to toe, to young girls wearing miniskirts and fashionable pastel shawls.

There was never a dull moment, several things went on at the same time. As the high priest read the text of the day out loud, junior assistants danced in and out of swing doors on the inner wall. People made the sign of the cross and walked up to images of saints and kissed them. Somewhere high above the church floor a choir chanted gloria and hallelujah. Or maybe they were angels, I didn't actually see them. People went to an altar in a corner to receive Communion. New people arrived as others left. Some just popped by to leave an offering and to light a candle bought in the kiosk operating near the entrance. There was no hushing or raising of eyebrows. The old hags who in Norway would have dedicated themselves to this, instead stood in a circle in the middle of the church and loudly exchanged the latest gossip.



I found the whole scene slightly confusing, but there was no doubt that this way to run a church attracted people. Those who were present seemed significantly more sincere about their faith than the church sleepers you typically find on the pews in my country.

When the tsar family had been executed and the city had received its new name, Sverdlovsk, the city became a quiet place until World War II. Like in Krasnoyarsk, the city's population was doubled many times over when important factories for manufacturing military equipment were moved there from areas too close to the war in Europe. Sverdlovsk received the great Lenin medal for its contribution to victory in the war. It can still be seen on a bridge in the city.

Then followed another quiet period, or at least that appeared to be the case. Because the city was full of top secret military installations, news



reports from there rarely slipped out to the world. In 1979 more than two hundred civilians died when by accident anthrax was released into the air from a military laboratory working on chemical weapons. This wasn't officially confirmed until an investigation was conducted in the 1990s.

After the fall of communism, Sverdlovsk again became Yekaterinburg. A certain animated Boris Yeltsin was head of the region for a number of years, acting not much saner than he later would as president of the nation. After he moved on to Moscow, there were still plenty of dubious men left in the city.

With the collapse of the strict communist regime, the mafia quickly rose to power, taking control of many more or less legal businesses in Russia. In Yekaterinburg a violent and extensive battle raged for a long time between different criminal factions. Since then the situation had improved, but the gang wars had left its footprints in the city. The first thing I noticed was that even the green man in the traffic lights appeared to be on his way to robbing a bank. You needed only an inkling of imagination to see that he was holding a gun. The next thing I noticed was that to change money in Yekaterinburg wasn't quite like changing money elsewhere.



I had 250 US dollars I wanted to convert to roubles, so I made my way to a bank. Outside the large building a number of Mercedeses were parked. Most of them had a man sitting inside. As I approached the bank entrance they all followed me with their eyes. When I stopped at the door, they started shouting something about dollars. I chose to ignore them. The door was locked, but next to it there was a button and a surveillance camera. A quick push on the button made the door swing open.

Inside was a corridor full of more men of questionable breed. They asked me whether I was there to change dollars. "Da, da", I answered honestly. Golden teeth twinkled from joyless faked smiles. Two men kept offering to change the money for me at increasingly better rates. "Nyet, nyet", I said, still very honestly. Instead I found a bank employee sitting behind a bullet-proof window. He willingly traded my passport for an admission card to the actual bank.

With the card in hand I could continue through another door that suddenly opened in the wall. In the next room my backpack and pockets were thoroughly searched by security guards. Satisfied by my innocence they escorted me to a waiting room. I felt alone there, although I wasn't.

Sitting in large leather sofas, some other men were probably there to change money just like me, but they *could* just as well have been waiting to get in to audition for a part in a mafia movie. They wore ugly suits, had expressionless faces, large bellies, broken noses and copious amounts of gel in their hair. One of them was so cross-eyed that his eyeballs appeared to be flirting with each other. In their hands the men held suitcases and plastic bags full of roubles, presumably soon to be converted into a more useful currency for international trade of certain goods. Or bads. Again I received offers to change money at exceptionally good rates. Once more I politely declined the offers. Their money hardly came from harmless activities, such as selling handpicked violets and berries from the thick of the forest. I didn't want to play a part in their game.

The money exchange went fine, although it was an elaborate process with the filling-in of many forms. When I left, the men outside were no longer interested in me. I let out a sigh of relief. I found a quiet street where I distributed my roubles to various concealed locations on my body and in my backpack. Then I had an ice cream in celebration of my moneychanging skills.

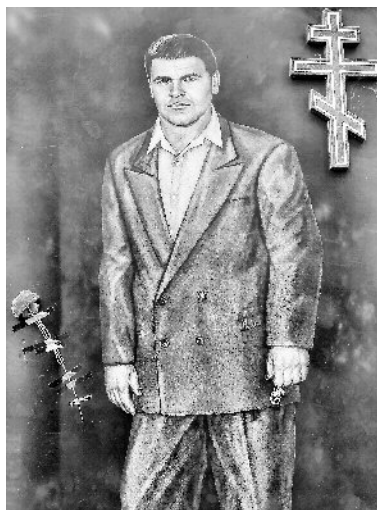
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Inspired and fascinated by the open villainy in the bank, I decided to visit a place where I could safely have a closer look at the mafia. I went to the Shirokorechinskaya cemetery. For more than an hour I walked along the main road out of the city, risking my life with every step. It was quite the challenge, but I took comfort in the fact that whether I managed to avoid the swerving cars or not, one way or another I *would* end up at the cemetery.

Instead of the tidy park kind of graveyard I expected, the place was partially hidden inside a pine forest. There was a massive number of graves, but I soon found the ones I had come to see. The gangsters had not been afraid to spend money on services and items from the funeral

parlour. Lost ones were memorialized the way they had lived, hard as rock and surrounded by status symbols.

Right by the entrance to the cemetery the previously most influential mafia members had taken up residence. They had no normal tombstones or simple goodbye messages like "Rest In Peace". A guy who must have been an important player in the war of the villains had been put to rest in a large sarcophagus surrounded by elegant marble jars, still filled with fresh roses and violets almost ten years after the funeral. Behind the monument there was a large granite tombstone. A life-sized portrait of the man himself had been engraved with laser on the polished rock. So now anyone could come and see how stylish he had been, wearing his mafia suit and a lethal look. To dot the i, the artist had put a key ring with a Mercedes logo in one of the dead man's hands.



*Not your average tombstone*

Further up the gravel path more heroes from the underworld emerged; godfathers, godsons and errand boys. A pretty mistress was also remembered. She was perpetuated in white marble, wearing her favourite outfit, a slitted evening dress with a deep cleavage that must have been *at least* life-sized.

One man appeared to have been a part-time boxing champion with an interest in powerful engines. His tombstone was decorated with engravings of a killing knockout and a ride in a snowmobile across wide expanses. Others had picked more typical macho representations of themselves. The toughest guy may have been the one wearing a leather jacket and holding a lit cigarette. He held his head at a downward angle, daring any passers-bys to look him in the eyes, like a James Dean or something. I found the cemetery slightly ... bizarre. Thousands of men between twenty and forty years of age had recently, in the course of just a few years, died fighting for an influence that shouldn't even exist. But there lay the undeniable proof that it existed nevertheless.

Deep inside the forest the paths through the cemetery were more or less overgrown. The graves there seldom saw visitors, and they certainly didn't receive fresh flowers any more. These were graves from the communist years. Socialist party bosses had been granted fairly impressive memorials, with a marble bust here and a golden hammer and sickle there, but nothing came close to the sumptuous monuments of the mafia.

Hundreds of graves were nearly identical. According to the principles of communism everyone should be given the same, in death as in life. On a foundation of cement stood something that looked like a miniature drilling rig, bright green and almost a metre high. At the very top of the small tower a red star shone. It was as if the old Soviet Union even after the death of its citizens had tried to pump the last bits of soul out of them.

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Back in the city centre I discovered that the same madness took place in Yekaterinburg as in other large cities along the Trans-Siberian Railway. For some reason, construction workers were replacing the concrete pavement with patterns of red and white paving stones. It would have made sense, except for the fact that the pavement was possibly the only thing in the city that *wasn't* badly in need of repair. Surely there were better ways to improve the city.

I'm just guessing here, but what might have happened was that mayors from cities all over Siberia had met for a "seminary" somewhere, most likely on a lovely beach by the Black Sea. The weather had been nice, so the mayors had worked more on their tans than on anything else. On the last day of the gathering they quickly had to come up with something they could all agree on and present back home. Dazed by the sun, they decided that if they just modernized their pavements, all other problems would solve themselves. This desperate notion now caused every pavement in Russia east of Moscow to be beleaguered by men working at a very slow pace, forcing innocent pedestrians out onto the roads. I'm pretty sure some people were run over by cars because of this.

If I were a news reporter in need of a scoop, I'd look for connections between the Russian president and the cobblestone manufacturers.

Yekaterinburg is the largest university city in eastern Russia. Wherever I walked, I discovered faculty buildings, institutes, conservatories and museums. Feeling like widening my horizon I visited all the museums I found. The Museum of Photography was interesting enough, as I could make sense of most of the photographs. The Museum of Geology was also sort of interesting. A nice and shiny rock is exactly that wherever it comes from. But in the rest of the museums I really should have brought an interpreter to tell me what I saw.

The Museum of the Youth sounded promising, but the only thing youthful about it was the girl who sold tickets. There was a lot of radical art, with various photos, installations and abstract sculptures which, I think, were supposed to put war in all its forms in a bad light. I guess they succeeded fairly well, but it was nothing compared to the bad lighting in the large Museum of War History. After having bought my ticket I fumbled my way through the blacked-out museum for about half an hour until I literally stumbled across a sleeping employee of the museum. He was very old and hard to understand, as he had more arms than he had teeth. I think he tried to tell me that there was light upstairs. One of his colleagues was summoned. Armed with a flashlight he helped me find my way to the stairway.

During the rest of my visit I was closely followed by two museum guardians. When their opinion was that I had spent long enough in a room, they would simply turn off the lights and force me on. I was their only visitor, and they were visibly uneasy about having a foreigner walking among their treasures. Maybe the receptionist from the hotel in Irkutsk had called ahead and warned them about me.

Their finest exhibit was some metal nuts and bolts inside a dusty display case. If my interpretation of the Cyrillic text can be trusted, they were the remains of an American U2 spy plane, shot down near Yekaterinburg in 1960. The plane had been on its way to Norway, so I knew the story. According to my memory, the plane had not actually been shot down, but the pilot had been forced to make an emergency landing with a damaged plane. This was good for the Soviets, as they could dismantle the aircraft and examine it. The exhibit was presumably parts they had finished examining, and not really all that was left of the

plane. But my two personal museum guides insisted that yes, this was all you would be left with if you shot down a poorly designed Western aircraft. I just nodded and accepted their explanation.

With that I had seen enough old things for a while. For a taste of modern Russia I decided to go to Kazan, the historical centre for the trade between Russia and Central Asia. This meant I had to follow a more southern route towards Moscow than the official Trans-Siberian Railway does. There were only night trains going that way. I decided to pay for another night at the hotel, even though I would have to leave my room before midnight in order to catch my train. The difference between the price of the hotel room and the cost of using the left-luggage office at the railway station was surprisingly small. Having nothing better to do, I spent the evening exploring the sensationally inexpensive hotel.

My conclusion was that a cheap hotel in Russia probably *can* be a good place to stay, but that there's also a risk that hidden behind the low price, there may be some unpleasant surprises. Let's have the juicy details!

First, the corridor. I got lots of corridor for my money. From the hotel entrance to my room I measured the distance, including the six stairs, to be several hundred metres of dark and gloomy hallways. If you say "Ah, but that's no problem, I have a suitcase with wheels on it so I won't have to carry it!", I say "So what?" The floor was a strange material that once upon a time possibly did a good job at imitating a parquet floor, but now it just looked like water-damaged strange material. Lots of holes and bumps in it made for an uneven, hilly experience. Good luck with dragging your suitcase across it.

Even though it was a long and demanding walk, I walked it swiftly. The scary sounds escaping from under the doors almost had me running. Many of the cheap single rooms seemed to house more than one person, to put it that way. A couple of times I asked the *dezhurnaya* to bring her flashlight and take me to my room.

At first sight the room itself was decent enough. One of the three lamps worked, and if the refrigerator wasn't exactly cool inside, it had a powerful noise generator that functioned perfectly. It also had the

charming and entertaining feature that at times it would jump across the floor to the window and take a well-deserved smoking break.

A mosquito flew in from the bathroom. It seemed surprised to see me and quickly buzzed back. I followed it to inspect the facilities. I immediately saw that the mosquito came from a large family. Not only was the bathroom home to hordes of mosquitos, it also functioned as a habitat for multitudes of mould, dry rot and other exciting life forms. Instead of toilet paper on a roll, the hotel offered a pile of torn newspapers, presumably to give their usual guests a feeling of homeliness. I felt extremely environment-friendly when I used it, but the ink made my bottom blacker than I would have preferred.

So, part of the explanation for the cheap room was easy to find. The hotel probably saved substantial amounts of money by not wasting roubles on cleaning and maintenance. I decided to do the potentially scary bed test to confirm my hypothesis. I wasn't going to sleep in that bed again anyway.

Performing the bed test is something you learn out of necessity when you travel on a low budget, particularly when in Asia or Africa. Eager to keep their prices at a competitive level, many hotel proprietors in certain countries and areas do their best to not expose bed sheets and mattresses to unnecessary wear and tear. A common technique is to clean and air the sheets as seldom as possible. Maybe never. So if you find a room that looks surprisingly good considering the asking price, it may be a good idea to take a closer look at the bed.

When you lift the mattress in a cheap room, you stand a chance of witnessing The Bug Race. Many insects have discovered that even on a hot day it is possible to find a nice place to just hang around and digest last night's feast. That place is in your bed, between the bed bottom and the underside of the mattress. Certain bugs happily spend their days there, waiting for a fresh batch of human flesh to arrive in the evening. If the mattress suddenly flies up into the air and the little rascals are exposed to an all too bright daylight, the shock they experience is considerable. Their immediate reaction is to start running around

frantically. That's The Bug Race. The only way to win is by quickly finding somewhere dark to hide again. It's a race for life or death.

With some experience you can learn to differentiate between insects who are there just for the atmosphere, and those who, given the opportunity, *will* help themselves to some human blood. If you don't see bloodstains anywhere, your health will probably not be influenced by sharing the bed with the bugs.

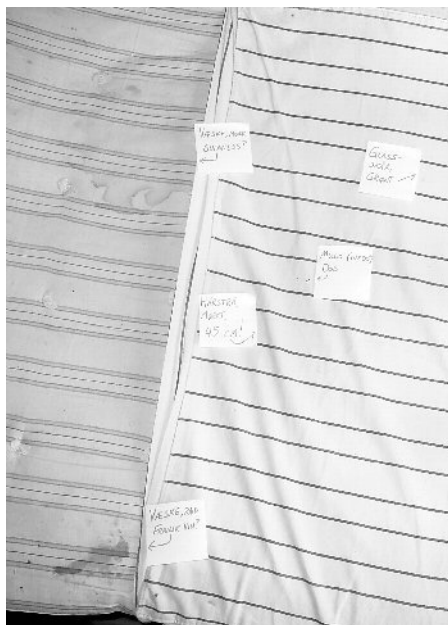
If you wake up in the morning with visible small, red dots neatly arranged, as if made with a needle and a ruler, then the insects must have been of the bad, bloodthirsty bedbug type after all. In that case it will be good of you to hunt down a couple of the well-fed culprits and crush them against the wall above the bed. By doing so you warn the next seasoned traveller to come by about the situation, so that he can move on and find a better room. This way of "signposting" works remarkably well. If you come to a place where bedbugs have been allowed to establish settlements, there's a good chance that the walls aren't cleaned too often either.

In Yekaterinburg I didn't expect to find much visible life in the bed, but I was still in suspense when I pulled the sheets off the mattress. You just never know what you will see. I searched and I found:

- One fragment of glass, green, about 1x0.5cm. Probably beer bottle.
- Three mosquitos, dead, but well preserved. Unusual location possibly due to difficulties with navigating, for instance caused by heavy smoke in the room.
- Strands of hair, assorted selection. Some dark hairs with a length of about forty-five centimetres. Also a number of blond hairs, roughly twenty centimetres long. Various short, dark hairs, suspiciously curly.
- Stains from reddish liquid. Wine, possibly French, or possibly not wine at all.
- Stains from *a lot* of a seriously dark liquid. Could be Guinness beer, or quite conceivably blood.



- Stains from yellow liquid, located in the central region of the mattress. Hopefully just orange juice.
- Burn marks. Very strange. A sign in the room clearly indicated that smoking in bed was strictly forbidden, and that smoke detectors in the ceiling would trigger the sprinkler system. On the other hand, *if* those smoke detectors actually worked, they would be just about the only electrical appliances in the hotel to do so.



*Some of my hotel bed discoveries*

All in all the findings in my bed were comprehensive. It was a pleasure to vacate the room and move on.

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By the morning the landscape outside the train had changed again. The grey weather in the hillocks of Ural had disappeared. Instead the sky was a perfect royal blue, the way it only can be above yellow fields like those on the plains surrounding the mighty Volga river. An army of threshing machines slowly glided side by side towards the curved horizon, efficiently harvesting grain for the daily vodka, and maybe some bread too. Although I was still in Russia, I had arrived in a new nation; Tatarstan, a semi-independent republic the size of Ireland.

In Siberia only the window frames had been granted a taste of paint. Here, further west, the whole house got to participate in the colouring, immediately making the buildings more attractive. At first I thought that the rich farming in the area was the source of the region's relative wealth. I soon discovered an even better explanation.

As we approached Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, I noticed that the landscape contained small hollows full of a black, uninviting substance. Sulking cows stood unhappily in them. It wasn't exactly beautifying mud baths they were surrounded by. They were up to their udders in oil. The ground there was so full of it, that many places oil had just oozed up to the surface and formed pools. Closer to the city large and small oil wells appeared, and in Kazan itself there was no doubt that the Tatars knew how to utilize their gift from Mother Nature.

Just over half the population of Tatarstan are ethnic Tatars, the descendants of a nomadic, Muslim, Turkic people who harried the Russians both there and further north a thousand years ago. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of Genghis Khan's conquest of Tatarstan (and *much* more), the city became the capital of the Kazan Khanate, consisting of Tatarstan itself and her neighbouring regions.

The Mongol warriors probably enjoyed themselves there, although they may have been seriously annoyed by how the horrible, black soil stuck to their horses. The idyll was broken in the 1500s. Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible arrived with his army and convinced the people, in the only way Terrible Ivans can, that they were now to be good Russians and would pay their tribute to Moscow instead of to Mongolia.

During the next centuries the Tatars kept muttering something about the Russians being just as bad rulers as the Mongols. Talk about independence from Russia turned into loud shouting as the value of the nation's oil became known. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Tatarstan took the opportunity to declare itself an independent republic. It didn't last long. Through five hundred years of influence from Moscow, large numbers of ethnic Russians had moved and *been* moved to the area. So in a referendum in the year 2000, a majority of the population voted to fairly voluntarily return to the Russian Federation.

The streets in the city were clean. People dressed elegantly, neither grey nor gaudy. To me it also seemed that people actually were better-looking in Kazan than elsewhere in Russia. Maybe they were. Wealth always attracts beautiful people from far and near. Another explanation could be that after weeks of seeing nothing but Russians, I was adapting

to them. My experience is that the more time you spend away from home, the more you get used to the faces where you are, and mysteriously this also makes the people there prettier and more sympathetic. I haven't read about or performed any scientific research on the phenomenon, but I am convinced it is just yet another way the human brain copes with change.

Anyway, I may be wrong about the aesthetic excellence of the locals, but the houses in Kazan definitely looked nicer than their colleagues in Siberia. Not only were they painted, they even stood straight up, and seemed able to continue to do so for a long time to come.

My most unexpected moment in Kazan still came when I saw a tall, black man wearing a Nike cap backwards. He just walked down a pedestrian shopping street as if it was the most natural thing in the world. What surprised me was chiefly that after several weeks in Russia this was the first dark-skinned person I had seen, and secondly that the city had a pedestrian street with no cars in it! This was not the Russia I thought I knew.

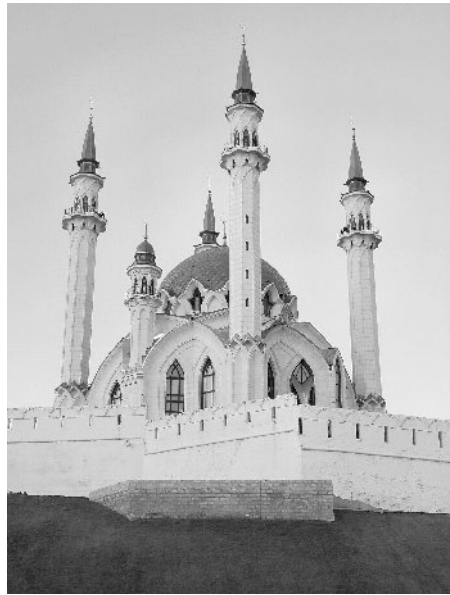
The oil wealth of the republic had not been put aside for later. The riches were visible everywhere, for instance in a large number of churches and mosques that either were in good shape, under restoration or being built for the first time. Still, the decidedly most grandiose building in the city was the gigantic new basketball stadium. Which probably explained why they had a black man walking around in their city.

Even though the Tatars a few years earlier had decided to remain in the Russian extended family of republics, oblasts, krais and districts, a bit further south in the federation other regions were less enthusiastic about the large union. For that reason the streets of Kazan were under strict surveillance by the police, who made sure that visitors to the city would do nothing drastically stupid. The Central Asian parts of Russia had seen a lot of trouble lately. All men wearing Arab-style clothes and ditto beards were without any drama or protest routinely stopped, searched and questioned about their doings. I was left alone. Thank gods for the electric shaver.

I left the peaceful waterfront by the Volga to climb up the hill to the Kremlin, the city's medieval fortress. As a result of its location and its

history, the walls of the Kremlin encircled both a magnificent mosque and an elegant cathedral. The mosque was newly erected, a replacement for the one that had been destroyed by Ivan the Terrible when he visited.

As the mosque was still burning, so to speak, Ivan had a church built right next to it. It was a commissioned work, done by the same architect who later gave Ivan and the world the famous fairy palace church on Moscow's Red Square, the Saint Basil's Cathedral. Now the church and the mosque rest together in Kazan. Side by side they are centres



*The mosque in the Kazan Kremlin*

for one religion each, separate yet closely intertwined by history. I hope they both will remain there in peace for all eternity (well, until the Sun explodes, at least), even though Russia still contains much unrest. To see them be there together on the hill was a beautiful and encouraging sight.

Speaking of being together; the lovely summer evening brought a dark red sky. The whole city had a warm glow, and in the pleasant light I explored the narrow cobbled streets inside the whitewashed walls. All I could hear were the echoes of my own steps, an intense cooing of pigeons and ... some strange sounds that could only come from human throats.

It turned out that in the twilight on a warm Friday night like that, the small, green lawns and the quiet, out-of-the-way corners of the Kremlin turned into a haven for Kazan's amorous, young couples. Loving duos with no better option for privacy could take their chances there, and oh boy, did they!

Taken by *much* surprise, I walked straight into several intense scenes involving no textiles at all. In other parts of the world you must join secret clubs and pay good money to enjoy such sights. Couple after couple were at it, performing activities I had never before seen taking place in any of

the other locations that UNESCO has declared to be of significance to the human heritage. The medieval fortress definitely helped preserve both genetic and cultural heritage.

I was surprised that the evening use of the Kremlin had not lead to piles of contraceptives lying around. Actually, I saw no used condoms at all. The reason was hardly that the lovers in Kazan were more considerate or willing to clean up after themselves than others. More likely the explanation was simply that no one used condoms. In Russia the ordinary way to avoid unwanted babies had always been abortion. The last decade the situation had improved slightly. Condoms had become available at an affordable price, but the habit of using them was not yet established.

It has been estimated that Russian hospitals assist in about two abortions for every childbirth. In the 1990s the average Russian woman was statistically likely to have three abortions during her lifetime. Having an abortion has "always" been legal *and* free in Russia. Any woman who wants it can on short notice have an abortion performed by a qualified doctor. As it is a frequent procedure, the doctors and nurses are well-trained for it. Still, there's always the risk of a botched abortion and accidental sterilizations. Inevitably, this way millions of Russian women of reproductive age have lost their ability to have children. So there you have another piece in the large puzzle of explanations for why the population in Russia is declining.

I chose to withdraw from the Kazan Kama Sutra show, rather than risk disturbing the couples, although I could perhaps have improved the country's abortion statistics ever so slightly if I had kept walking around.

If Friday night in the streets and alleys of Kazan had been surprisingly wild and liberated, Saturday morning was correspondingly relaxed. I bought some pastries and sat down on a bench to watch life. There was precious little of it to see. The explanation could be that Kazan is a business city, and business people don't work on weekends. Instead they go to their dachas, tiny cabins in the countryside with small patches of garden to cultivate. There people can drink their vodka and grow their cabbage and potato in peace and quiet, in the meantime leaving the city even quieter.

Neither was much happening back in Norway. I knew this because I had been to the post office and used the Internet to read my e-mail and talk to my friends. In Russia like in any other country where large parts of the population cannot afford to have a telephone and a computer at home, you can find cheap, reliable Internet access at the post office. Unlike most other countries, in Russia, using the Internet is the *only* cheap and reliable service you'll find at the post office.

The main post office in Kazan was a beautiful building with an impressive, venerable interior. My footsteps on the marble floor resounded through the entire premises, for the acoustics were good and there was almost nothing else there that made any noise. Especially striking was the complete absence of the sound of people working. I wasn't sure how the woman at counter number fourteen felt about having me as a customer, but after I had let her register my passport in a thick ledger, she escorted me to counter number two and a computer that was connected to the Internet. She installed herself two counters to my left and started playing Wolfenstein 3D, a violent, gory and noisy computer game from 1992. Now, *that* changed the atmosphere in the hitherto quiet building!

I don't know if it was the sounds of chainsaw massacres and the firing-squads of Castle Wolfenstein that kept the customers away. During the full morning hour I sat there, only a handful of people came by the post office. Most likely that's just the way it is, they don't have many customers these days. Letters in Russia rarely reach their addressees, so few people bother with trying to send each other anything. Most people don't even have a functional letter box at home. Almost all the letter boxes I saw outside houses and in stairways in blocks of flats looked like they regularly were opened with dynamite and axes. Foreign companies and embassies of course have to be able to receive mail. This they do by having their mail sent to Finland, from where it's taken to its destination by special couriers.

For some reason, the few people who actually came by chose to seek out me instead of the gamer to my left. When they asked me whatever they asked me, I looked up from my computer, smiled politely and gave the customer an answer to whatever I figured or guessed he or she was

asking me. The poor customers were of course duly confused by my replies, but they were saved when the Wolfenstein woman discovered what was going on and told them not to listen to me. It was rather entertaining. Fortunately no members of the mafia came by.

Having caught up with the world via the Internet, I spent some time walking the streets of Kazan. The sun was shining and it felt good again to be able to walk past well-kept houses in streets that weren't full of rubbish. Blissful I just walked where my feet led me, with no particular goal. I wasn't done until I realized that I had walked four times past the only statue in Russia showing a clean-shaven Lenin. It stood outside the city's university. Lenin had been a student there, and the statue depicted him with books in his arms, eagerly on his way to attend a lecture.

The plaque on the plinth of the statue didn't mention with a word that Lenin had been expelled from that very university, a punishment for being considered an agitator and for having a bad influence on the other students.

After the random amble I dedicated myself to more practical purposes. I did my laundry in the sink in my hotel room, and afterwards I brought the wet clothes to the beach for some intense drying in the sun.

The beach was nice, with lovely sand and a pleasant temperature both in the air and in the water. When it reaches Kazan, the Volga is nine hundred kilometres old and has spent its entire life efficiently collecting waste from a number of towns and cities. The floating trash didn't keep people from cooling off in the water, wearing just their narrowest of tangas and their broadest of smiles. There were many people there, but every small group of them seemed to live in their own world. Somehow they were able to shut out the existence of everyone else. Some couples were intimate enough that I started to experience a *déjà vu* from the previous evening in the Kremlin. No one seemed to sense anything of what the others were doing. Not until a certain line apparently was crossed, that is.

Three glue-sniffing street kids staggered onto the beach and had just pulled off their trousers to cool down in the river. That was when people suddenly reacted. Several men and women from different groups ran

over to the unfortunate children. They took the glue bags away from them, and in return gave them a scolding of epic proportions. I did of course not understand much of what was said, but they must *at least* have told the kids to leave the beach at once and instead go home, do their homework and wash behind their ears. The children seemed to protest feebly that they had no home to go to, but that bought them no mercy at all.

I couldn't make up my mind about whether it was good that people at least didn't ignore the boys, or if it was just sad that the poor children weren't allowed to enjoy a swim in the river. Anyway, the boys wandered off without their glue, seemingly ashamed of themselves.

When the sun set my, clothes were dry. Many a Russian throat, however, was quickly becoming anything but dry. As is usual on a Saturday night, the city was full of wedding festivities. A cacophony of music from numerous parties echoed through the streets. Easy listening music and ballads from American and European song divas dominated the playlists. When I followed the music to its source, I was treated to the view of Russians dancing like nobody was watching. Russians are unrivalled in this skill. It must be the same gene they use when they caress each other intimately on crowded, public beaches. No matter how they do it, they were most entertaining to watch. It was all joy and laughter, kept going until the early hours thanks to lots of Russian champagne and vodka.

Again my hotel room was of the inexpensive kind. I only needed a place to sleep. Well, that, and to brush my teeth and to do what one usually does in a lavatory, of course. After some busy days in Yekaterinburg with little eating, my stomach had become stubborn, refusing for a full three days to let go again of what I gave it. But now, after some Turkish cuisine, I sensed that my digestion was about to catch up with me. This I looked forward to. The only problem was that my cheap room only came with a shared bathroom. And what was worse, the people I shared it with was a full floor of idiots who instead of being allowed to use the shared bathrooms should each have been given a patch of land to manure. I don't know why, but there is an astonishing number of people in the world who simply are unable to use a toilet properly.



I am all for introducing a world-wide toilet certificate for travellers, requiring passing both theoretical and practical tests. If you don't have your certificate you'll of course still be allowed to dump your waste products, you'll just have to do it in an already messed up bathroom. To do your business in a hygienic facility with proper conditions, though, you will first have to show your certificate.

The certificate must be renewed every ten years. You see, based on my observations I suspect that ageing and obese men are the main culprits, and they just continue to get worse as the years and the kilograms add to themselves. It makes perfect sense. When you no longer can see neither what you're aiming at nor what you're aiming with, it should come as no surprise that the target will often be missed. So how it can happen is understandable, but it still shouldn't lead to problems or discomfort for innocent people.

I spent more time in Kazan preparing the toilet for safe, hygienic use than I did on actually using it. Nevertheless, afterwards I was a happy man.

Kazan was charming and enjoyable, but not quite what I had hoped for, a Samarkand light, a magical and mystical link between east and west. Soon I wanted to move on. Large ships sailed past on the Volga, westwards to Moscow and southwards to the Caspian Sea. To calmly float off on the tiny waves of the river seemed infinitely more tempting than to return to cramped train compartments reeking of fish and sweat.

At the city's river station there was a large notice board with timetables for the various vessels going up and down the river. Through a serious effort I managed to decipher that a passenger boat would arrive that evening from the south and continue in the direction of Moscow. Perfect!

I joined the line at the ticket office. Three people were already patiently waiting for the woman inside to finish staring into the empty air. It took a while, but eventually her staring actually resulted in her being ready to sell us some tickets. The guy in front wanted a ticket to the same boat as me. To me it seemed obvious, since it was the next boat out of Kazan. To the woman selling tickets, however, this was shocking news. She was so astonished, she almost fell off her chair.

The ticket lady looked at her customer with wide-open eyes. She asked him some questions to verify that he really wanted a ticket for the only boat to leave Kazan that day. When she finally was convinced, she gave a deep and reproachful sigh. Then she picked up the phone and started dialling random numbers, hoping that sooner or later she would reach someone who knew anything at all about boats or about selling tickets.

By an incredible coincidence, after only a dozen or so attempts she actually got through to a booking office. Someone read her a list of available cabins on the boat. She repeated what the other person said and meticulously wrote down the cabin numbers and the rates as they were read to her. In the queue we vaguely caught that there was little space left in the third and fourth class. This triggered some alarm among the people behind me. Two old ladies broke into something I can only describe as intense glossolalia, of which I only understood that everything had certainly been much better when Brezhnev was president.

Number one in line got his ticket and walked triumphantly away. Number two was suddenly a party of twelve who were all travelling together. After a long series of talks, discussions and collecting of travel documents, they finally managed to secure a four berth cabin to share between them. I guess they planned on sleeping in eight hour shifts.

The old woman in front of me wailed and lamented about there being tickets left only in the first and second class, which she couldn't afford. In the end, I think, she threatened to go outside, fill her pockets with stones and jump into the river unless they let her buy a fourth class ticket. I felt bad for her, but since I didn't know how to give her a couple of hundred roubles without hurting anyone's pride or committing other cultural blunders, she just walked away. Then it was my turn!

I had prepared a piece of paper describing exactly the ticket I wanted. It seemed to work well until the woman suddenly insisted that I gave her some more information. At first I didn't understand what more she could possibly want. I tried to just pay her more to get it over with. It didn't work. After some intense listening I picked up the words "parents" and "address". Aha! She wanted to know how they could get in touch with my next of kin, in the hopefully unlikely event of an accident on the boat.

Not feeling up to explaining the concept of Norwegian characters to her, and having had only good experiences with Russian boats on previous trips, I sort of faked a short address for, well, not exactly a relative of mine in Norway. I'm just guessing, but I do believe that it would have caused some confusion if "King Harald, The Castle, 0101 OSLO, NORVEGIA" had ever received the message that his unknown son had died on a river in Russia. But the boat stayed afloat, so this we will never know for sure. I paid less for a first class cabin on the two nights cruise to Nizhny Novgorod, the next large city along the river, than I had paid for my first night in Russia at the horrible airport hotel.

The atmosphere on the boat was peculiar. It was an old boat, much like the ones I had seen leave for the Arctic from Krasnoyarsk. The furniture was decidedly old-fashioned, with dark wood panels and carpets and walls that both looked and smelt like they had been exposed to more than their fair share of cigarette smoke. All the pieces of art on the walls were communist classics, romanticised pictures of white, yellow and black people working and thriving together in bountiful fields. Over their heads conventionalized peace doves hovered, twittering happily. The rather spartan environments didn't keep the excited Russians on vacation from pretending they were on a luxury cruise in the Caribbean.

Chambermaids wearing cute uniforms stood in the corridors. They were all smoking cigarettes and, well, slightly bearded. I didn't mind. It all just reinforced my belief in the cruise brochure, which said that the experienced staff would do *anything* to please their guests. Evergreen muzak streamed softly from the intercom, and I waltzed onto the vessel just as people were changing into a more formal attire to attend dinner. Very classy, except many of them actually changed their clothes in the corridor. Even considering this, when it came to comfort and style, this was vastly superior to the Trans-Siberian experience.

A few details *did* drag down the overall impression of classiness. My cabin had metal walls covered in a psychedelic, bright green, and my sofa was upholstered with sacking so rough it was like sitting on sandpaper. I spent little time in it for fear of burns. Neither did it feel particularly luxurious that all showers had to be taken on the lower deck, next door to the engine room. The shower consisted of an extremely quick scalding in

the cooling water for the engines. But the Russians seemed to have the time of their lives, so I decided to pretend I did, too.

At midnight the common areas were locked up, the muzak faded out and the lights in the corridors were turned off. First I thought I had joined a cruise for retired people who liked to go to bed



*Travelling in style on the Volga*

early. But then I went for a walk on the upper deck and found the youth department sitting in the dark at the very back of the boat. They had not at all gone to bed. Instead they just sat quietly together, drinking beer and looking at the stars. The boldest of them danced and kissed slowly to some barely audible music from an old, portable cassette player. You'll search for a long time to find a more well-behaved and less rebellious youth than the ones who go on a Volga cruise with their families.

I could see in their eyes, even in the dark, that they were through and through happy and grateful for being allowed to leave home for a while to go on this adventure. It was unthinkable for them to do anything that could break the spell and disturb the dream world they were in. Seeing this made me feel all warm and mushy inside. It was a reminder that I must not forget how privileged I am to be able to go on trips like that pretty much whenever I feel like it. I smiled at them. It was the only way I could even begin to tell them what I was thinking. Then I went back to my metallic pistachio cell to sleep and dream peacefully.

Bliss is to be lulled into sleep by the smooth, sweet murmur of ship engines, after recently having spent too many nights listening to double thumps from trains and drunken drivel and noise from next door. When a short, mysterious message in Russian came over the intercom, in my head I was instantly brought back to the crossing to Antarctica. My last, muddled thought before I fell asleep was that on my next journey to

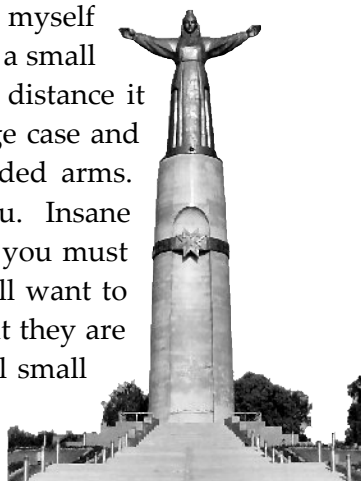
Antarctica, I would travel on a peaceful river boat rather than on an earthquake of an icebreaker.

My awakening the next morning was just as gentle. Precisely at seven o'clock the little gnome inside the loudspeaker in my room began playing classical violin music. Five minutes later an agreeable female voice wished me a good morning and told me that we had docked in Cheboxary, where shortly a guided walk through the city was on offer.

We were to stay in Cheboxary until lunch, so I set out on an expedition on my own. I found a beer tent by the river, where I had breakfast served by a woman with huge, tattooed upper arms. I ordered everything on the menu, which was two fried pastries and one shish kebab. My stomach wasn't convinced this qualified as a wholesome breakfast, but a good night's sleep and the fresh air on the river had given me the appetite to finish it all.

Nutritionally satisfied, I walked along the river towards the city centre. An abundance of churches lined the road, and a surprisingly large number of people went inside them on their way to work, school or the beer tents. Ungodly miniskirts were welcome there, whereas my tourist shorts were deemed unsuitable for the congregation's eyes, according to a sign outside. They might have let me in if I had done like the practically naked young girls, namely to wrap my head in a handkerchief, but I wasn't really interested enough to give it a try.

Instead I walked on and soon found myself embraced by Mother Russia. On a summit by a small lake, a giant bronze statue towered. From a distance it looked like a hybrid between a huge cartridge case and a woman with enormous breasts and extended arms. Now, *there's* a Russian speciality for you. Insane monuments. Many of them are so large that you must see them to believe it, and even then you will want to go up to them and touch them to confirm that they are not just gargantuan optical illusions. You feel small and insignificant next to them, a fact that is likely to be intentional. It's rarely a good



feeling. Sometimes it is difficult to understand the logic behind the scale the Russians pick for their monuments. On the other hand, the dimensions of the tragedies they commemorate are also often difficult to grasp.

Slightly less tragic was the beach in Cheboxary. At eight in the morning it was already full of people. Their outfits were extremely summery, even though the rays from the morning sun were fairly weak. A minimalist swimsuit fashion is just one of many sun tanning optimization tricks the Russians have up their, well, unworn sleeves. Other important techniques are 1) never to use any suntan lotion, and 2) working on a tan is not necessarily something you have to lie down to do. If a Russian calculates that the impact of the sun is stronger if he stands rather than lies down, then make no mistake, he *will* stand.



*An early morning on Cheboxary beach*

In the morning you will naturally catch more rays from the sun in a vertical than in a horizontal position. So when I arrived, most people stood around on the beach, holding books and bottles of beer, rotating at a turtle's pace to get an even tan all over their bodies, much like pigs on a spit. Some were even standing with their arms straight out or up into the air, to direct the tan to exactly where they wanted it. It looked strange to me. Standing upright like statues was weird enough, but when they combined that with the Russian habit of accommodating as much of the

swimsuit as possible into the butt crack, it really made me silently question the sanity of the people surrounding me.

Two girls asked whether I possessed the means to light their cigarettes. They were slightly confused by my response, namely that it was a quarter past ten. I had of course not understood a word of their request, but statistically they should have asked me the time. Apart from that I managed just fine in Cheboxary.

The mood on the boat was delightfully relaxed when we resumed our journey up the river. From the boat there was little to see or think about, just the wide river and its featureless banks. The Volga is 3,690 kilometres long, which is particularly impressive when you consider that it starts out from a mere 225 metres above sea level somewhere between Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Surrounding the river was a countryside as flat as the Volga herself, but the view was pleasant nevertheless. There were green and rich forests, fields and meadows, a river station here, a church and a monastery there.

Every now and then we encountered long chains of rafts, large barges transporting goods up and down the river. The flat, floating storage space was pushed forward by a powerful engine on a vessel in the back. Every raft in the chain seemed to be a one man enterprise, or in some cases a one man-and-his-woman enterprise. In a corner of each raft there was a cottage where that raft's janitor or owner or whatever appeared to live. Some of the small houses even had a picket fence and a tiny garden outside. They were the ugliest house boats I have ever seen, but I was still fascinated by them. The people on them smiled and waved at us as we passed them. In the summer sun on a silent river it looked like the perfect place to live and work.

The gentle flow of the river had a calming effect on the already relaxed passengers. Many just sat around in the sun, turning red faster than lobsters in boiling water. What saves the Russians from dying of skin cancer is chiefly the fact that they manage to die of malnutrition, cirrhosis of the liver or AIDS first.

An old man was on a slow, perpetual walk around the top deck. He was wearing a baseball cap with the words "Nirvana – Kurt Coabin" on it.

I couldn't decide what was coolest; that he had a Nirvana cap, or that it obviously was a fake. The children watched old Disney cartoons in the cinema, an almost defect TV in a library without books. On the shadow side of the boat, old men played chess in silence. Their intellectual wives sat next to them reading Pushkin and Chekhov, while the others sat in the back of the boat and chatted.

One of the topics up for discussion was me. For almost a full day I was a mystery to them, as I silently walked between the different groups on the boat and observed them, often stopping to take notes. I caught more than a few inquisitive looks. Finally they sent a delegation of three determined matrons to settle the matter. They asked me "You're not Russian, are you?", in Russian.

I immediately confessed and gave them my name and nationality. Suddenly I was the most interesting person on the boat. A little girl, no more than seven years old, said to me "Bjørn Dæhlie!", the name of a Norwegian skier who had quit competing several years earlier, before she ran away giggling. The man with the Nirvana headwear surprised me by reciting, in a Russian translation, a number of lines from a Norwegian poem and book, "Peer Gynt" by Henrik Ibsen. Of course he may have been just babbling, but at least it seemed to me that all the rhymes were there, so it probably was the real deal. In short, they did everything they could to make me feel at home with them.

Many of the passengers were from Moscow, and the younger ones spoke some English. Most of them were doing the full cruise, having travelled with the boat all the way from Astrakhan by the Caspian Sea. All the passengers who were able to do so in English, told me the story about the foreigner who had travelled with them before I came on board. He was an Englishman, on his way around the world on his bicycle. His Russian vocabulary consisted of only forty words. My new friends could quote them all, for it was they who had taught them to him. I gathered that it wasn't the nicest list of words. He called them in despair the day after he had left the boat. On land he had not found a single person that could speak any English, and his forty Russian words had brought him into more than just a *little* bit of trouble. It was a funny story, especially the first couple of times I heard it.



After having shared this splendid story, the Russians felt they really knew me. Now the time had come to spend hours asking me about how much money I made in Norway, why I wasn't married and why I had no children. They couldn't understand why I voluntarily and all alone had come to Russia. They *did*, however, understand why I was travelling alone. Their theory was that of course none of my friends would want to travel to Russia. I tried as hard as I could to praise the fascinating and charming qualities of Russia and its people, but I couldn't come up with much, really. Fortunately I was literally saved by the bell, as the captain right then loudly signalled that we were making a stop in Comeasyouaresk, or something like to that.

The passengers met the challenge. As they were, they ran on shore, threw off their clothes and established a temporary holiday camp right next to the river station. I had seen enough Russian buttocks to last me decades, so instead of joining them I went for a walk on the narrow gravel roads between the old, wooden houses in the village.

For the last time in Russia I was taken fifty or maybe even a hundred years back in time. Manual water pumps adorned the street corners, well-worn, but still in use. Wood carvings were beautifully detailed on old and new houses alike. A horse pulled a cart with its owner and a bale of straw on top of it towards a barn.

Inside the general shop the customers were on one side of the counter and the shopkeeper and his merchandise on the other. I bought a cornet full of brown sugar, carefully measured out on a manual scale. Exactly how my grandmother had told me things had been done “in the good, old days”. This was a good new day, and particularly good it was to see with my own eyes that this way to live certainly had something to it.

After two colourful days on the Volga, it wasn't a great experience to literally jump ship in the sad and grey Nizhny Novgorod. The morning air felt nice, but looked bad. It was non-transparent in a sickly brownish way. Any sense of colour in the city was dampened by the air. Not that there *was* much colour in the first place. Especially not in the harbour where the boat had docked.

The Volga meets up with another river there, the Oka. A bridge seven hundred metres long spanned the river, and on the other side I found my new home, the mother of all dull buildings, Hotel Tsentralny.

Nizhny Novgorod has been nicknamed "Russia's wallet", while Moscow is considered to be the heart of the country and Saint Petersburg its brain. There are sand banks in the river, but the only banks of significance in the city are the ones in the business district. I could tell at the hotel. The reception hall was full of men in suits carrying executive briefcases. At first they all looked at me and my backpack with disapproval as I got in line for the check-in. Still, I got my room. Anyone with a pocketful of dollars to show for himself is welcome in Nizhny.



*Lenin proudly presents Hotel Tsentralny*

My room wasn't grey. It was white and sterile, had a refrigerator that worked, clean sheets and the TV even had CNN. A neon sign opposite the hotel showed the temperature to be thirty-nine degrees Celsius. So I was happy to discover that the room also had multi-step air-conditioning. My happiness faded away when I turned it on and the large box on the window wall wasn't air-conditioning after all, but a huge radio with four

channels. An ice cube dispenser in the corridor would have to help me stay cool.

Being a tourist in Nizhny Novgorod wasn't too easy. After having given it a try, my recipe for having a good time in Nizhny is to get the newest edition of Russian Playboy and stay in your hotel room with it until a train can get you out of there. Of course, I didn't know that yet, so instead I went out to discover the city.

My impression of Nizhny may be coloured by the relentless heat there on the day I visited. Moving around on foot was hard work, and nowhere did I see anything to like. The railway station was a colossus. A massive, ugly brass chandelier in the departure hall lit up the faded communist propaganda murals on the walls.

It was not a place for joyful sinning. Smoking was forbidden, carrying a 30 rouble fine. Enjoying alcohol was out of the question, unless you wanted to pay a 50 rouble fine. Playing cards was *strictly* forbidden, as indicated by the 100 rouble fine. If those rules had been practised at train stations in Siberia, that part of Russia would have been completely abandoned, not just almost.

On the bright side, having your hair cut at the train station *was* allowed. While waiting for the morning rush and the long lines at the ticket counters to disappear, I went to see a hairdresser.

I got a good and cheap haircut, but towards the end of my session in the chair, a short and rather embarrassing moment occurred in a very Monty Pythonesque kind of way. When the woman who cut my hair seemed just about done she asked me, "Iz all, or you want blowjob?" She appeared to be looking much forward to my response. I raised an eyebrow and replied with a curt "Hmm?" She repeated her offer. Fortunately she then stopped speaking English, and instead imitated a hair dryer with her hand, pointed it at my head and said "Whooooosh!", which, I think, is Russian, for "Do you want to have your hair dried through the process of having hot air blown through it?" Alas, her offer had been a perfectly innocent and legitimate one. I politely declined, maybe slightly disappointed, paid for the haircut and bid her goodbye with a smile.

Nizhny Novgorod also had a Kremlin, but it was nowhere near as charming or full of naked people having sex as the one in Kazan. And I really have my doubts about the signs claiming that the Kremlin was hundreds of years old. It looked suspiciously new, built with boring, red bricks. So the walls weren't much to look at, but inside them there was supposed to be an excellent museum, full of treasures of art. Maybe there was, maybe there wasn't. I certainly wasn't allowed to see it. A guard stopped me at the entrance, saying it was closed "for various reasons".

That phrase and "for reasons from above" were explanations I often met in Russia. I had learned that when someone said this, there was no use asking for any further explanation. It just meant that the place was *really* closed, and that nobody knew when it would open again. Often the real reason was painfully obvious. For instance, the building behind the sign saying "Closed for reasons from above" could be burnt down to the ground. The actual reason for the closed museum in Nizhny Novgorod was not clear to me, but I let culture be culture and headed over to an exhibition of military items instead.

After World War II the city became an important centre for military research and development. The first Russian atom bomb was put together nearby, and advanced MiG fighter planes were still made there. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that this city, almost a thousand kilometres away from the nearest ocean and even further away from a harbour that isn't frozen for several months every year, was chosen as the country's centre for research and production of submarines. This says a lot about how paranoid the Russians were about espionage during the Cold War.

Different models of aeroplanes, combat vehicles, machine guns, submarines and more were on display, all built in Nizhny Novgorod during the last fifty years or so. They didn't really satisfy me. Most of all I wanted to go back to the railway station and have another haircut. That had been the indisputable highlight of the day.

Instead I crawled back to the hotel and took a long shower without using any hot water. Afterwards I went to bed to devour ice cubes and wait for a train to take me away. I fumbled some more with the radio, hoping that it somehow could regulate the room temperature after all.

Exhausted I gave up after having listened to Russian music for half an hour.

I probably wasn't the first depressed guest to stay at the hotel. In the central stairway there had once been an open space leading from the twelfth floor all the way down. Not any more. Safety nets had been installed on every floor. I'm convinced they were there because someone successfully had demonstrated the need for them.

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My adventures on the Russian trains had so far taken place in second class compartments. A compromise, it let me travel fairly cheaply while at the same time it offered a certain comfort. If I had travelled in first class I would simply have paid twice as much for twice the space. Apart from having only two beds in each compartment instead of four, the only difference between first and second class was that in first class there was a TV in the compartment, on which you could pay the *provodnitsa* to screen movies. Oh, and you only had to share the bathroom with half as many people. Paying twice as much just for that didn't seem like a sensible investment to me. True, there probably would have been less gutting of fish around me, but still, thank you, no.

From the second to the third class, on the other hand, the jump could be quite challenging for a delicate foreigner. Where in second class there were lockable compartments with a corridor outside, in third class they had torn down all the walls except the exterior ones and inserted more bunk beds, turning the whole coach into one large dormitory. Suddenly the two small bathrooms were shared by fifty-four people, plus a number of accompanying children sleeping for free in the beds of their parents. You may think that it's safer to have many people around you than to risk sharing a small room with three drunken Russians. To this I say that you have to consider the risk of ending up sharing a coach with fifty-three not quite sober soldiers.

Since I was getting close to Moscow, I decided it was time to try the third class.

Third class is also called "platskartny". I think it means "refugee camp" in Russian. I was prepared for more people and fewer walls, but I quickly learnt that third class also means more string vests, larger families, chubbier grandmothers, louder snoring, children constantly running around, and last but not least, an abundance of silent and expressionless faces willing to stare at foreign tourists for hours nonstop. I concluded that platskartny can be an interesting experience in the daytime, but at night it's a foretaste of hell.

Like in second class, people in third class didn't do much. The composite fragrance from all the different meals prepared and consumed in the couch had possibly more ingredients. People ate, ate and ate. When they weren't eating or yelling at their children, they slept. A few read books, even fewer solved crosswords. Every now and then someone would change clothes, apparently without giving much thought to the fact that other people were present. I felt like a voyeur, it was like being a spy in fifty bedrooms at once. The Russians, on the other hand, acted as if they lived in each their own room, and paid no heed to anyone outside their own party of travellers.

Nowhere in Russia did I feel more like a stranger than in third class on the train. Guess what? There's a fourth class as well.

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North-east of Moscow there's a cluster of the oldest towns in the country. The Russians proudly call them "The Golden Ring", because these places are full of old monasteries, churches, castles and other magnificent buildings of an era when Russian tsars hired the best foreign architects and craftsmen they could find. I now entered that ring. The descriptions my guidebook gave of the different towns made them impossible to tell apart, so I just picked the first one I came to, Vladimir, as my base.

The hotel received me with a hospitality that must have been on par with the one that Genghis Khan's grandchildren got, when eight hundred years ago they had come there to burn down the town. I almost did the

same. When I turned on the black-and-white TV, a strong smell of something on fire immediately filled the room. Fortunately a fuse somewhere blew and cut off the electricity for the whole floor before a fully-fledged fire developed.

I had a thorough look at the many churches and other touted attractions of both Vladimir and the neighbouring village Suzdal. There was no doubt that the area had been visited by many great architects a long time ago. When the Russians fought back the Mongols, the rulers in the Moscow region were in for their heyday. Some of the constructions they ordered built to show off are still there. Fair enough, from many of them trees and bushes grew out of the roofs and windows, and many tall spires had been converted into cell phone antennas. It was still obvious that in past times the area had experienced a golden age.

The only problem was that without detailed knowledge about the history of Moscow and Russia, it simply wasn't that interesting to see the Golden Ring in all its splendour. Okay, there were many churches. Suzdal alone, with only some twelve thousand inhabitants, had thirty great, old churches. If you think that's impressive, try counting the souvenir shops in the same village! Being within striking distance for day trips from central Moscow, the streets were crowded with foreign tourists fumbling with expensive cameras and whining to their guides about wanting to have lunch immediately. Suzdal would have felt more exotic without them.



*That's a pony, by the way*

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't belong to the group of hard-core travellers who complain about places being too "touristy". Neither am I

among those who say "You should have been here ten years ago, before everything changed. It's a tragedy what has happened to the place lately!"

A place doesn't change because it is visited. Places change because time goes by, because people everywhere watch TV, read newspapers and visit other places, picking up new impulses all the time. New inventions quickly travel around the whole world, even when they have to do it one village at a time. People, wherever they may live, in the poorest or the richest of countries, do everything they can to improve their lives. General stores close down, so that a mall in a nearby city can thrive. Houses that nobody wants to live in and care for fall down. New houses are built with hot tubs, satellite dishes and swimming pools outside. Young people stop wearing the sweaters their grandmothers knit. Instead they buy something neat and cheap from a chain store.

That's the way it is, and it's happening everywhere, all the time. Maybe it happens faster now than it used to, but still, this is the way of progressive human beings.

Nevertheless, after having experienced what I felt was more "real" in Eastern Russia, seeing Vladimir and the Golden Ring was an anticlimax. It was all too easy to see that the whole village was designed to be in accordance with a certain international standard. You know, the one that aims to give as many tourists as possible an experience that is sufficiently good to make them willing to part with as much money as possible in the shortest possible amount of time. And the formula works.

I don't know whether people's dislike of "touristy places" is caused by a desire to keep to ourselves the things we like the most, or if it has something to do with liking to discover things for ourselves rather than having them served on a plate. Never mind, it's not important. What matters is that everyone should be allowed to go out and find their own adventures and favourite places, adapted to their own preferences and abilities. So in all fairness, Suzdal and the Golden Ring *are* nice places to visit. It was probably just that I had become blasé and tired of travelling, a few days before I was returning home. This can easily happen on journeys of some duration.



My feeling of being fed up with everything Russian was stronger in Suzdal than anywhere else on my trip. It made me think about what I really was doing there. I still didn't know, and soon I was going home. In my head I had started out with a very vague idea about what Siberia would be like, and after having been there, that had not changed much. Simple questions had become more difficult questions, but I still had few answers.

Maybe a trip to Russia is best if you have a specific reason to go there. My only goal had been to see the country before it changed and became all too similar to my own country. Before I went I sort of had a feeling that this change was "dangerously" close to taking place all over Russia. After having seen it ... Well, Russia is certainly changing, though not nearly fast enough if you ask me. I wish the best for the Russian people, rather than for the spoilt tourists who have to travel increasingly farther in order to see something different from home.

I surprised myself by being extremely enthusiastic about getting on the train in Vladimir for the short ride to Moscow. My excitement probably had a number of causes.

Travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway can be quite an ordeal, especially if you don't make any stops to relax and get away from the boredom on the train. However, in theory there is reason to believe that in a biological sense, travelling nonstop may be just the perfect thing to do.

"Everyone" knows (even though it's not useful to anyone) that more than ninety percent of all researchers and scientists who ever lived, are actually alive and among us today. It sounds crazy, but just look at all the strange research that's going in and you will believe it.

One curiosity uncovered recently by researchers is that the human body doesn't seem to prefer twenty-four hour days. Ideally, the researchers claim, we should live on a planet where we only had to get up once every twenty-five hours! This theory was at first of course brushed aside as a bad excuse from a lazy scientist who always turned up at work one hour late. But then some scientists of a higher standing came to the same conclusion, and now we're pretty sure there's something to this. But why? Nobody knows.

People who spend their vacations going to Roswell and the rest of the year looking hopefully towards the sky, like to point to the fact that a day on the planet Mars lasts for just about twenty-five hours. A coincidence? They think not. Still, it's unlikely that the Earthlings used to be Martians. We're not green, and besides, well, we don't think so. A more probable theory is that our twenty-five hour diurnal rhythm is some sort of genetic adjustment some remote ancestor of ours made in its formative megayears. Maybe the Moon once upon a time moved at a different pace relative to Earth, or maybe Earth's rotation has changed a lot through the years due to meteors crashing into it, jumping Chinese or whatever.

Anyway, if we accept that twenty-five hours is the perfect length of a day for us to feel fresh in the morning, travelling from east to west on the Trans-Siberian Railway is perfect. Vladivostok is seven hours ahead of Moscow, and the journey lasts for seven days. So when travelling nonstop with the train, you gain an hour every day. Exactly what your body needs! In theory you should therefore feel better as a traveller on that train than you would if you stayed put in the same spot anywhere else in the world.

My claim is that there's not much indicating that this theory works in real life. Still, when my train entered Kursk railway station in Moscow, I was close to ecstatic about finally having completed the journey. All that was left for me to do before I could go home was to stay alive in Moscow for a few days.

I was mentally exhausted. Travelling for so long without having a single meaningful conversation with anyone was tough. The strain from exploring cities and forests on foot more or less from morning till evening every day was nothing in comparison. Maybe I suffered from a deficiency of vitamins as well. When vegetables can only be bought in the streets from elderly people who sell their three carrots and two radishes as if they were parting with precious heirlooms, it's a lot easier to just buy a bar of chocolate from a kiosk.

Outside the train, the last of about ten thousand kilometre markers appeared, and then suddenly I was in Moscow. First I couldn't tell it apart from other Russian cities. Noise and Russians were everywhere, and I

was used to that. Then I noticed. Everything was bigger. Much bigger. The railway station's departure hall was at least twice the size of what I had seen elsewhere. The lines at the ticket counters were exceptionally long. Booths and stalls selling bad copies of branded goods lined the pavement for as far as I could see. The streets had so many lanes that for anyone but an athletic cheetah it would be futile to attempt crossing them. If I wanted to see more of Moscow than the block I had arrived in, I would have to seek out the underworld.

I left the surface of the Earth and joined the swarm of people navigating the subterranean walkways. Holding tightly on to my backpack I found an M sign, showing the way not to fast food, but to the Metro, Moscow's enormous underground railway system. The sign led me to a ballroom adorned with beautiful paintings and mosaic works. Under my feet the floor was marble, and above me, from the stuccoed ceiling hung long rows of crystal chandeliers. Along each of the two side walls trains came and left. The Russians like to surround themselves with beauty when they travel through their capital.

Metros are basically the same all over the world. With practice from other large cities the Moscow Metro was easy to navigate. Soon I had found my way to Vladykino station far on the other side of the city. My guidebook told me that a street full of cheap hotels was to be found there, and it certainly was.

I had just been offered a single room at 726 roubles per night when the reception clerk realized that I was a foreigner. All of a sudden she spoke English, which made the room cost 1,008 roubles. It is strange how not only words have to be translated between languages, sometimes you have to translate amounts of money as well. I couldn't be bothered to discuss the phenomenon with the woman. With just three nights left in the country I had more cash left than I really needed anyway.

A walk through a countryside also known as the botanical gardens of Moscow took me to the All-Russia Exhibition Centre. It was not as grand as the USSR Economic Achievements Exhibition may have been, although strictly speaking it was the same place. It received its new and less resplendent name in the 1990s, when there no longer was a Soviet

economy to keep it running. Originally it had been constructed as some sort of temporary "socialistic world expo" in 1939. After World War II they built another one, this time with so much success that the Soviet leaders decided to make the attraction permanent.

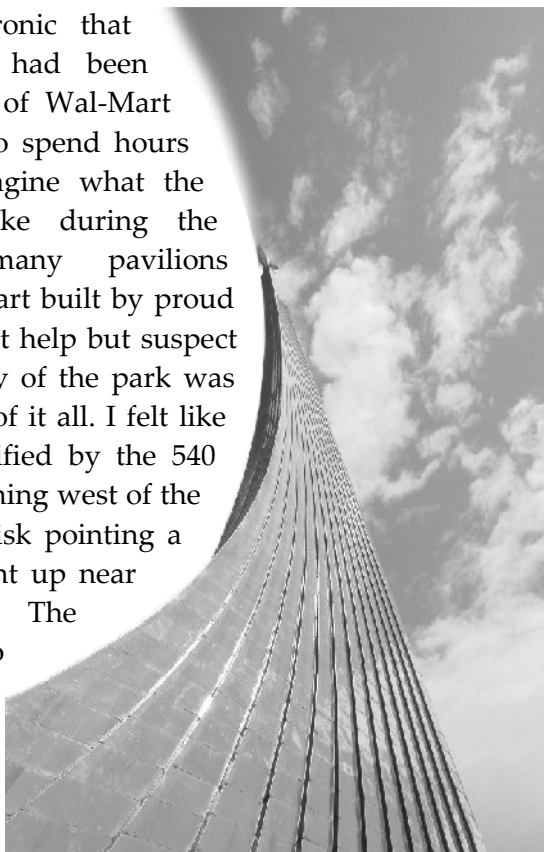
As the Soviet Union grew and developed, new exhibitions were added to encourage a feeling of togetherness among the many different cultures and nations within the union. The purpose was to show visitors what an amazing and wonderful society the Soviets lived in.

Much time had passed since its glory days, but the park was still there. It received me well as I came out of the woods and walked straight onto a monumental, wide avenue with huge fountains, colonnades and flowerbeds. The avenue was two kilometres long, and for its whole length it was surrounded by exhibition pavilions.

Once upon a time hundreds of pavilions had been open to the public, with colourful names tempting people to come inside, admire the show and learn something new. In The Pavilion for Nuclear Power you could enjoy the view of a working nuclear reactor that glowed in the dark. The Meat Pavilion contained a number of good-natured, particularly fleshy farm animals. The Pavilion for Space Exploration was possibly the most prestigious of them all, for a long time displaying the latest news from a field in which the Soviet Union actually were leaders. Maybe the Soviets had been world leading in whatever they showed off in The Pavilion for Mechanical Fattening of Pigs as well. Unfortunately, the whole exhibition had long since been closed and disassembled, so I never found out what they had been doing there. It sounded awfully intriguing, though.

When I visited, some eighty pavilions were in place. Many of them were still standing mainly because they were too large to be removed, others because they had not quite collapsed yet, although they tried to. In recent years a number of pavilions had received some much needed maintenance. The restoration had been sponsored by car dealers, consumer electronics outlets, music shops and other boutiques containing largely foreign goods. In return the sponsors had been allowed to use the buildings to sell their merchandise.

I found it wonderfully ironic that Stalin's own bragging park had been transformed to a bizarre mix of Wal-Mart and Disneyland. It was easy to spend hours just walking around and imagine what the place must have looked like during the communist era. While many pavilions unquestionably were pieces of art built by proud and skilled craftsmen, I couldn't help but suspect that the most important quality of the park was the almost inconceivable scale of it all. I felt like an ant. The feeling was amplified by the 540 metre Ostankino TV tower looming west of the park, and by a titan steel obelisk pointing a hundred vertical metres straight up near the entrance to the park. The monument was supposed to look like a frozen space rocket launch. It succeeded in this extremely well when seen from ground level and up towards a grey sky.



No one seemed to worry about the recent radically changed significance of the park. People still crowded the place with big eyes and broad smiles. In addition to the shops in some of the pavilions, the park also offered a Ferris wheel, popcorn, candy floss and camels and reindeer for people to ride. I'm pretty sure that on Sundays they even had freshly painted zebra-donkeys there.

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The centre of Moscow is the sort of place you don't really experience. Instead you just go there and find everything you have already seen in countless movies and news broadcasts. I saw the Kremlin, the Red Square, Lenin's Mausoleum, the Saint Basil's Cathedral, the Bolshoi Theatre, soldier's marching with goose steps in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Stalin and Lenin impersonators willing to be

photographed for a few roubles, grumpy Russians, happy Russians, grey Russians, Russians wearing Gucci and Nike, wide streets, golden bulbous domes and matryoshka dolls inside dolls in up to twenty-three layers. Which was all well and good, but not much to write a book about. So I walked on, away from the centre.

You don't have to wander far in Moscow to find stranger sights than a red square that isn't the least bit red. On an island in the Moskva River about one kilometre south of the Kremlin, I came upon a monument that was really ugly, but so incredibly large that I almost found it attractive anyway. Okay, so when you design a statue in honour of Tsar Peter the Great, of course you can't make it a tiny statue, but here the artist, or rather architect, had overdone it. Peter was a sworn European. He considered Moscow to be a dirty dump in the outskirts of civilization. So instead of living there, he founded Saint Petersburg in a marsh by the Gulf of Finland and declared it to be the new capital. Considering this, maybe he doesn't really deserve a monument in Moscow at all.

Yet there he stands, in a sweet spot right in the middle of the lovely scents steaming out of the Red October chocolate factory next door. He looks to the west, towards his city and to Europe. This may well be the only fitting detail on the whole monument. Almost a hundred metres tall he poses on the deck of a sailing ship, itself piled upon a number of smaller sailing ships. The metal statue is painted black, making it hard to distinguish any details, but in his hands Peter is holding a golden scroll. What it symbolizes nobody knows. Maybe it is the decree he wrote that made Saint Petersburg the capital, or maybe it is the only law Peter is remembered for, the one that introduced a tax on beards. This was just one of Peter's



*Peter and the chocolate factory*

many attempts to encourage Russians to shave and behave like proper Europeans of the time.

Evil tongues claim that originally the monument wasn't even intended as a statue of Peter the Great. Instead it was meant to be erected in Havana, Cuba, in honour of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus' Spanish discovery of America. Fortunately for the Cubans they made a discovery themselves, namely how large, expensive and ugly the statue was going to be. So they cancelled the project. Somehow the Russian sculptor Zurab Tsereteli managed to convince Moscow's megalomaniac mayor, Yuriy Luzhkov, to buy the bronze monster.

Many Muscovites weren't too happy about the metal Peter. Some of them disliked it so much that they actually almost blasted the whole thing away. Charmingly, the dynamite enthusiasts cancelled the detonation in the last minute, reportedly because an infatuated couple, two anglers and a senseless drunkard were standing dangerously close to the statue when the explosion should have happened. Instead they called the police and told them how to find and disarm the seven explosive charges on the statue. The caller made sure to mention that, by the way, it would probably not be a good idea to remove Lenin from his mausoleum, which was a hot issue up for debate in Moscow at the time. Because, he told the police, if that happened, new explosive charges might well find their way to both the statue and several other locations.

So when I approached the monument to make sure that it was real and not just me having a bad dream, it was under the close surveillance of a grumpy, armed guard.

The lovely aroma of fresh chocolate lingered in the air. I really liked the place. I just had to close my eyes first to realize it.

Further south, across the river, I walked into a small park full of sculptures and statues of a more modest size. In every other way they were still superior to the Peter monument. I had found the Park Skulptur.

When the communists under some pressure in 1991 renounced their right to do whatever they liked, it didn't take the people of the Soviet Union long to start refurnishing their streets and squares. One of their

first actions was to tear down and destroy statues put there not principally for their aesthetic value, but to make sure that people didn't forget whose hands held all power. Some smart guys sold their statues to rich collectors in Europe and America, while other statues disappeared into barns and junkyards. Fortunately, some of the retired sculptures were saved from destruction and oblivion by being sent to the sculpture park in Moscow.



*"Stalin's victims" in Park Skulptur*

Much can be said about the Soviet era politicians, but the work that a large number of mostly unknown artists put into immortalizing them through statues was often of high quality. The propaganda busts of Brezhnev and Stalin could in their retirement enjoy the company of Gandhi, Einstein, football players and peasants. The range of statues there was impressive.

An old Russian joke, which for obvious reasons is still being told, goes like this: "What's the similarity between a politician and a sperm cell? They both have a one in a million chance to become a human being." That



testimonial could also be read from the faces of the stone presidents and KGB directors in the park. Many of them were wounded, lacking a nose or displaying other visible evidence that they had met the people's wrath towards the end of their dead lives in cities all over the Soviet Union. I sincerely hope that Park Skulptur will outlive the joke.

I spent an interesting evening wandering among the sculptures. The country may be turning less red every year, yet the sculptures blushed in the light of an increasingly redder evening sun, until suddenly darkness fell.

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On a city map I discovered a district in the south of Moscow named Sparrow Hills. Something so humble in a city of such ambitions and grandeur was enough to make me go there the next day. It was a nice walk along the river, past the Gorky Park pleasure grounds and the Luzhniki Stadium, centre stage for the widely boycotted 1980 Summer Olympics. Something caught my eye on the river bank vis-à-vis the stadium. A dozen wedding parties were waiting in line to be photographed on a small pier with the Olympic stadium in the background.

If you're a tourist in Russia on a Saturday, you cannot avoid running into a number of brides, bridegrooms and their wedding guests. An important part of modern Russian wedding celebrations is to spend half the day visiting war memorials and other attractions, and to thoroughly photograph the newlywed couple at every site.

The slightly bizarre custom began when the communist government decided that church weddings weren't good for the people. Every city and town got its wedding palace so that people didn't have to go to the churches any more. There people could get their papers to prove that they were officially married. As a special encouragement from the Soviet Union they also received some coupons that allowed them to buy various things newlyweds might need, from special wedding shops that were allowed to stock a selection of merchandise from the West.

It was difficult to build any decent celebration around this, so the Russians were at a loss regarding how to do their weddings. In the years following World War II a new tradition was introduced. Every family had lost at least a son, brother or father in the war. To include the fallen in the ceremony, newlyweds started going straight from the wedding palace to the local memorial for dead soldiers and pay their respect.

As time has passed, many have forgotten the original background for visiting war memorials after the wedding. At the same time, church weddings and all the décor surrounding them have become the fashion again, with beautiful wedding dresses and fairly expensive bridegroom suits, looking the way Russians for inexplicable reasons think they should look. Family and friends gather for the occasion, in many cases visiting from far away, being part wedding guests, part tourists. So today the whole wedding party travels all around the city after the church or wedding palace ceremony, and they visit not only war memorials, but other tourist attractions and viewpoints as well.



*Just married and just hanging there*

As if it wasn't strange enough to see all the wedding processions mingling with busloads of Japanese tourists walking in the shade of their parasols, the surrealism reached new heights at the foot of the Sparrow

Hills. In the slope up from the river there was a ski jump and a chair lift. After having completed the photo session by the river, the newlyweds took the lift up the hill and down again. I guess it's a way to show that now they are really in it together.

There's a Russian saying; "If you think about joining the army, consider it one more time. If you want to become a sailor, think twice about it. If you want to get married, think it over three times or more." Many of the couples in the chair lift seemed to be doing some heavy thinking.

At the top of the hill I found chaos. Newlyweds poured out of the chair lift and a long caravan of limousines. I'm not exaggerating when I say that for as long as I was present that Saturday afternoon, there were never fewer than ten wedding parties at the viewpoint on top of the Sparrow Hills. None of them stayed around for long, but new ones arrived all the time. The parking lot was one big party. Between the confetti-clad puddles of rain water, there were souvenir sellers, wedding singers, photographers, balloon sellers, decorated cars and small orchestras that could be hired to play for a few roubles per minute. Toasts of champagne were given, before the glasses were sent crashing onto the pavement. People waltzed and discoed, accordions were played, someone failed at singing like Elvis, couples kissed, mothers and fathers cried of joy and their children cried because they couldn't have a balloon. I just stood there, speechless.

To complete the picture, a 236 metre tall wedding cake had been built on the hill, with thirty-six floors, seven spires, four enormous side wings and a large, red star on top. Or at least that's what it looked like to me at first. When I looked again, I saw that it wasn't a cake after all, but the Moscow State University, one of the largest buildings in the city. She belongs to a family of constructions lovingly dubbed Stalin's Seven Sisters, and she was the tallest building in Europe until 1988.

Despite its nine million citizens, Moscow has never had a city centre that can be described as "where there are skyscrapers". Instead they have a whole city where every block is full of massive buildings of ten to fifteen floors. It makes you feel really small when you walk around in the city,

but when you look at it from a plane, the city looks rather flat, dull and not impressive at all. Stalin realized this in the 1930s after having seen photos of the capital of capitalism, New York City, and he compared it to his own city. Since Moscow was about to celebrate its 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Stalin decided time had come for building a number of monstrous high-rise buildings.

This resulted in seven huge, wedding-cake buildings throughout the city. Today two of them are apartment buildings, two are hotels, one is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, another the Ministry of Heavy Industry, and the last and most massive one is the Moscow State University. Fifty years after their construction they still dominate the cityscape of Moscow. The sisters are all separated, but they literally stand above the rest of the city, so from the top of any of them you can always see at least one of the others. Not only can few buildings in Moscow match the sisters when it comes to size, they are also by far the most awe-inspiring works of architecture in the city.

In addition to being both tall and wide, the shining white façades on the Stalin palaces are filled with communist symbolism. An enormous number of details appear if you look closely at the buildings. Sculptures fill every corner and every ledge. Mosaic works and marble engravings depict themes of idyllic rural life, industrial efficiency and heroic workers and soldiers. Red stars shine down on you, together with hammers and sickles and the letters CCCP in beautifully bright golden letters.

I suspect that Stalin in his old age began to worry about his posthumous reputation. Maybe he decided that he would try to do like the old pharaohs of Egypt, who today are remembered mainly for their large pyramids. If so, I'm seriously worried that eventually he will succeed with his plan.

Something that at least I will remember for a long time is the Moscow airport Sheremetyevo. The mood there was as sombre when I went there to go home as it had been when I arrived the first time. The taxi drivers still guarded the exit and threw themselves full force at all new arrivals. "I'll charge you only three average monthly salaries to take you to the city centre!", they offered, and some naive, big fish would swallow the

ridiculous bait. I had just come from the centre by using the Metro and a bus. It had cost me less than the price of a bottle of vodka. And the vodka is *dangerously* cheap in Russia.

The walls inside the terminal were still dark and the sandwiches in the cafeteria were still sweaty. The most popular service on offer was the booth where you could pay to have your suitcase "laminated", completely wrapped in thick plastic. That way it would be reasonably well protected against shocks and thefts on its perilous journey through the airport's luggage handling system. I gathered my travel documents, found the queue leading up to an emigration officer who looked vaguely friendly, took two deep breaths and put on my nicest smile.

It worked! I passed through the checkpoint like a breeze. In accordance with the prevailing visa regulations, I had painstakingly registered my passport in every city and every hotel where I had spent more than one night. It had cost me some roubles and some effort. The emigration officer pulled the pile of receipts out of my passport and ... threw them in the rubbish bin, without even looking at them! She then asked me whether I carried more than a thousand dollars, and if I perhaps had filled my luggage with some lovely, Russian delicacies. To which my answers, obviously, were "Nyet" on both accounts.

"Then you are free to go", she concluded, waving me past her. I wondered whether she had just watched too many American movies, or if she actually considered her country to be some sort of prison. In practice, to many Russians, it *is* a prison. The only difference between today and a couple of decades ago is that now the prisoners are allowed to have visitors.

The question is whether anyone wants to visit them, and how having guests will change the country. I don't know for sure, but my guess is that it will take a great many moons before tourism becomes a major industry in Russia outside the city limits of Moscow and Saint Petersburg. It will take more than nicer pavements and an increasing number of McDonald's restaurants before the tourists of the world will even begin to consider visiting the provincial Russian capitals and the surrounding countryside. Even if the Russians had constructed a Leninisneyland, sold Stalin-style

fake moustaches and learned to cook other dishes than pancakes and soup, I still doubt that blasé Western tourists would find it sufficiently tempting. A potentially huge tourist destination is Stalingrad/Volgograd, where the Russians through an enormous loss of lives turned World War II around. Few people go there, and as the number of breathing war veterans in Europe and in the USA decreases, so does the tourism potential of the place. No one seems willing to work hard to make Russia more attractive to visitors.

To those who prefer to travel independently, Russia can be a most satisfying place to visit. Just make sure you bring someone you can talk to, so you don't have to go half mad and start having conversations with the walls. In general, to enjoy a trip through Russia you need to be slightly more prepared than when you go to most other countries.

I was happy both for having gone to Russia, and for now being on my way home again.

When I returned to Oslo I was met by a quiet Sunday at the airport. I got on a city-bound, air-conditioned bus. Soft, classical music from the radio filled the air. The front page of a newspaper I bought was dedicated to whimpering Norwegians, upset about the price of meat having gone up eight percent during the last two months. In a country where people on average eat sixty-eight kilograms of meat per year each, a price hike like that is a big issue. No one suggested that we could eat "just" 63 kilograms of meat instead. Sure, it would mean smaller steaks, but that way we wouldn't have to spend more money than before. More than a kilogram of meat per week is probably enough anyway.

Many travellers before me have said that the main purpose of travelling is not to go to other countries, but to return to your own country as if it was a foreign land. If this is true, then my trip to Russia was a success.

I'm already looking forward to going back. In fifty years or so. By then at least parts of both Russia and myself will probably have changed a bit. Let's hope it will be for the better for at least one of us.



*Blueberry babushkas earning their "pension"*







## Dare, Traveller!

You have finished the book. Together we visited Patagonia, southern Africa and Siberia, and we made it back safely. Our journey didn't change the world, just like travelling to foreign parts doesn't have much of an effect on life back home.

Of course people miss you while you're gone. Friends change jobs and find new sweethearts. Progress is continuously made in many ways, yet people have no difficulties finding new things to complain about. Life at home goes on just fine without you, and when you return, pretty much everything is like it was before you left. That the world doesn't change because of a book or a trip is reassuring, but *you* may change, because of what you see and what you learn. If you do change, there's reason to be satisfied.

I hope this book inspires you to go travelling, on your own or with one or two of your friends. Throughout the book I have tried to give you some practical pieces of advice regarding independent travel. Now I'd like to tell you a few more things while you're still within my reach.

If you are among those who want to travel, but who for some reason think it is impossible for you to actually leave, *do* read on as well. Let me take a guess at what keeps you from going. Maybe I can show you a way around the obstacles. Maybe you'll discover some new possibilities. Most of what I'm going to tell you is independent of where you want to go.

Almost everyone will tell you that they love to travel. By that, surprisingly many really mean that what they like is just to leave home for a while and do nothing. To some, the best part of travelling is even to return home afterwards. Spending the days in a sun lounger and the nights in restaurants and pubs, that's what most working class heroes associate with travelling. I have no problem with people dreaming of taking a break like that from their routine jobs and lives at home. But to call it travelling, that's just wrong. Travelling is much more than that. If you want to experience something really unique, it often means you have to put some effort into it. Maybe you have to sacrifice something (usually comfort), and there may even be times when you must take a larger (yet not too large) risk of some kind than most people do when they travel.

The journeys in this book are to me examples of proper travelling. Little was planned in advance, many interesting things just appeared along the way, and we had to relate to much that differed from life at home. Not because we could choose to, but because we had to. This way of living and travelling may seem scary, especially the first time you try it. I know it did to me!

### **Across the doorstep**

My first *real* journey went along the usual route for first-time backpackers travelling literally around the world. I was going to be away for six months, and I would visit the Himalayas, South-East Asia, Australia and the USA.

Up until a few days before leaving home, I was looking forward to the trip more than I had ever done to anything else. Then a sceptic suddenly showed up in my head. He told me that if I stayed at home, I would know exactly what next week would be like, and wouldn't that be nice? If I

went travelling, on the other hand, absolutely nothing would be certain regarding my well-being by the end of the week. The only thing I knew was that in the country I was going to visit first, people spoke a language I didn't understand, and if I got in trouble, I would also be the only one who could get me out of it. And what about the food? Something I like to eat very much, cow, would be hard to come by on a plate, as they were considered *sacred* where I was going! How would I fare in such a place?

Relatives and friends didn't offer much comfort. They willingly told me all kinds of stories about horrible things that had happened to naive Norwegians abroad. I don't know why, but people seem to believe that everything is much more dangerous everywhere else than where they live themselves. When confronted with something we're not familiar with, we automatically perceive it as risky until the opposite has been proved. The burden of proof is unfortunately often placed on the news desks of our TV channels and newspapers. When *that* monster unwillingly lifts its head above what happens in its own backyard, it will usually only cover disturbing stories with significant elements of catastrophe, war, poverty and distress.

I'm not saying that it's safe to go everywhere. *Some* places you *should* stay away from, and common sense will go a long way in telling you which places those are. Norwegians think themselves tough and special for living in a cold country in the Arctic. In other countries other people similarly seem to pride themselves for their ability to survive in the surroundings they have been given. Most places are safe both to live in and to visit, as long as you know what you're doing.

If someone brags about how dangerous it is where they live, maybe you should go somewhere else. More likely, you will be fine going even to that city or that country. Just stay away from where the trouble is. Read up on it. Ask travellers and locals on the Internet what you should do. When you're ready, go out and explore!

Now, this is of course easy to say for someone who has travelled like this a few times. But during the last days and especially the nights before I left home alone for the first time, inside I was trembling with fear for my uncertain future on the road. I still told people that I looked forward to

my trip, although I almost didn't sleep at night. All I could think about was how on earth I could go ahead and do something I knew so little about.

What settled it in the end was exactly the thought that if I didn't go, I really *could* predict what next week would be like. Although my life at home was good, I felt ready to go out and discover things I never had seen before. To do that, I would simply have to seek out strange places. So I left, although I was really nervous.



*A view worth leaving home for*

As soon as my trip began, all my fear was replaced by curiosity. New experiences hit me in a seemingly never-ending row, allowing me neither time nor reason to be anxious about travelling.

Just a few days after leaving Norway, I had dinner on the roof of a Buddhist monastery outside Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. On the street below me a scarred troupe of travelling knife throwers performed, and on the horizon to the north I could see the snowy peak of Mount Everest glowing in the light from a setting sun. The food I ate was rice

and lentil soup served on fresh banana leaves. Everything was new to me, and I couldn't have cared less about what life would have been like if I had stayed at home. All I had to think about was to keep my eyes, ears and nostrils open, and to keep track of where I kept my money and my passport. If I did that well, the next six months would be a great experience. And it *was* a great experience, despite the food poisoning, cyclones, snake blood, insect bites and other small disasters that came as part of the package.

I cannot tell you what you should do. All I can say is that if you want to travel, do it while you still can take care of yourself and there is not too much else you have to care for. You can find opportunities to do this throughout most of your life, but that is *not* an excuse to delay the departure. The world is a big place with more to see than you can ever cover in your lifetime.

### **The Packing Problem**

Some people stay at home simply because they can't even begin to imagine how they would pack everything they think they need to travel. "How can you be gone for six months? Where do you keep the 180 socks?", they ask me. The answer is simple. Not as simple as that all you need is a towel and a credit card. Even though in most of the world you can buy what you need when you need it, not everyone have money to spend like that. A better answer is to stick to a frugal packing technique.

When you travel with a backpack for an extended period, you're not on vacation. You sort of live a normal life, except your home is your backpack. And when you have a home, you need to spend some of your time doing housework.

A t-shirt that must be changed after only one day's use at home, can somehow be worn several days in a row when you travel. Sooner or later your instincts, or sometimes the person next to you on the bus, will tell you that it's time to do some laundry. This doesn't mean you need a washing machine. There's always a stream, a wash tub, a sink or something else available in which laundry can be done manually.

At home you may need forty pairs of shoes to choose between, but when your closet is a small plastic bag in a backpack, you'll be fine with just one good pair of hiking shoes and one pair of trainers. Keep thinking like that and remember that twelve to fifteen kilograms is all you can carry casually. This way you *will* end up with a limited number of things you actually need. I promise!

## **Travelling alone**

Fate sometimes hands out a chance to carry out your travel dreams. Maybe you finish school and land a job set to begin a few months into the future. Or maybe you work in a company that struggles to survive, and suddenly one day you're offered financial compensation if you're willing to leave your job. Perhaps you inherit some money. No matter how it happens, suddenly you find yourself with an opportunity to leave home for a while, and you know that it's *now* or never.

Unfortunately, when opportunity knocks like that, it often does so only for you, and not for those of your friends who you might have preferred to share the experience with. So you have to choose. Are you going on your own, or will you stay at home and buy yourself a new couch instead?

There's an easy answer to that question, especially if you ask others what they think you should do. Your friends envy you because you can do something they can't. Besides, they like to have you around, they don't want you to leave and be gone for a long time. And your family don't want you to end your days inside an anaconda or beheaded in a ditch somewhere in foreign parts where dangerous stuff like that probably happens all the time. Suspecting that you may regret this some day, not next week, but in ten years or so, you end up going to IKEA instead of to Guinea. And you *will* regret it.

Of course, in many ways it *is* better to travel with someone, I won't even bother with listing the arguments supporting that view. But before you cancel your travel plans just because you don't have anyone to go with, you should know that starting on a journey alone doesn't mean that

you will stay alone while on the road. Backpackers are gregarious animals. They embark upon new friendships as soon as the opportunity presents itself. And it does. All the time.

Sleeping in dormitories automatically lead to conversations with those you share a room with. If you go on day trips organized by the hostel you stay at, before the day is over you will have as many new friends as there are seats in the minibus used for the trip. Or more.

Should you ever find yourself completely bewildered at a bus station in Syktyvkar, Pokhara, Cuzco, Cairns or Kampala, soon enough there will be two of you, and the most natural thing in the world for you both will be to start talking and help each other solve the mystery of the lost ticket office. It's more than likely that you're both heading in the same direction. If not, you will still meet again four weeks later with a hug on a street corner in Hanoi. This, in turn, will lead to annual Christmas cards and a free coach to stay on in London two years later. Maybe you marry the person. Nobody knows what putting a backpack on and travelling the world may lead to. As long as you stay on or near the backpacker highways, loneliness will simply not be an option.



*Feeling lonely? Get on a bus!*

If one of your reasons for travelling is to meet new people, you should definitely travel alone. Maybe you're not the most extrovert person at home, where you have your friends, family and daily tasks to rely on. That doesn't mean much. When you travel on your own in foreign countries, you'll be surprised by how easily you start talking to strangers. Really. Because that's what humans are designed to do. You may just have to get away from your sheltered home to discover it.

Another bonus is all the time you save when you travel without company. Expect a significant decrease in the number of hours spent waiting for someone to finish in the bathroom, buying fridge magnets or

new clothes. Those hours are instead yours to spend on doing exactly what you want to the most. Enjoy!

Your gender doesn't change any of this. Many countries and regions, actually most of them, are as safe to travel in as your home ground. You should take the same precautions everywhere, whether you're at home or travelling. Look after yourself and follow the advice you get from guidebooks and from everyone you meet on your way.

Sometimes, even when it's safe to travel alone, you may need someone to travel with to share the cost of hiring a car and a driver, or something like that. When this happens, just post a note on a hostel notice board. Write where and when you would like to go and include some information about who you are. Or you can simply get in touch with someone who already has put up a note.

If you want to be absolutely certain that you won't be travelling alone, there's a wide range of tour operators that are more than willing to help you. "Overland tours" and other expeditions by bus along popular backpacker routes can get you many places, and they will probably offer you more company than you really need. Still, too much is maybe better than nothing, so there you go.

These tour operators will let you spend weeks or months on tours with intriguing names like "The Great Andean Adventure", "Surf & Drink Australia" or "The Silk Road in a Pink Bus". You pay more than you would have if you travelled on your own, but in return you don't have to plan or arrange anything yourself. On the bus you meet lots of people. Some you will like, some you won't, and you will probably not have to be alone for a second throughout the whole trip.

If you're not quite brave enough to travel on your own, a trip like that can be an excellent way to get your life as a traveller started. You *will* see most of what the brochures promise, and there's no doubt that you will have some great experiences. What you don't get is the freedom to stay longer in the places you fall in love with. You will miss that freedom. Often. Still, if your alternatives are either to travel with a group like that or not to travel at all, go with the group!



## **Money, money, money**

Depending on how important money is to people, "I could never afford to travel as much as you do!", is either the first or the last objection they have when I tell someone they should travel more. Sure, it *can* be the biggest obstacle to many. Then again, people accustomed to "normal vacations" are often surprised by how little money a long-lasting trip can cost. Plane tickets *are* expensive and cost more or less the same for both long and short term travellers. Adding days or weeks to the trip doesn't have to cost much extra. If you want to travel on a low budget, you must be open and young at least in mind. You should be willing to share a bathroom with others, to sleep in tents and dormitories and to quickly get to know the people you meet. Often you can save money as well as experience more by quickly changing your plans and spontaneously jump on exciting opportunities that arise. If you're able to not worry about everything you don't know, then you will be just fine travelling on the cheap.

I will not deny that travelling has a cost, especially because time spent travelling is time not spent working and making money. Still, by picking the right countries, like for instance *not* Monaco, Japan, Switzerland, the Seychelles and pretty much all the Caribbean island nations, you can get good value for the money you have. Also, by avoiding any local high season you can find inexpensive tickets to almost anywhere in the world. All it takes is some planning.

If you really try, it is actually possible to *make* money from travelling, or at least to have your trips pay for themselves. Most essential travel experiences don't have to cost much. A city's atmosphere, stunning scenery and the view of animals in the wild can often be enjoyed for free. On top of the basically free experience you can add as much luxury as you want or can afford.

Tax-free shopping is not a way to save money any more. Globalization has made the things you *really* need cost more or less the same all over the world. Fortunately there are other ways to benefit financially from travelling. I'll list a few ideas. At least some of them will probably be new to you, and they can all contribute to reducing your travel expenses. Most

of the techniques involve no danger of leading to a (free!) stay in prison, while others are more difficult to defend from an ethical point of view. I'll leave it to you to decide which of these tips are applicable for your purposes. All the methods have been used successfully by, erm, someone. (Not necessarily me!)

- **The Study Tour**

For those lucky enough to live in Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand or Japan, there are many countries where you can travel for less money than you would need just to stay alive back home!

If you qualify for a student loan or a scholarship, there's a good chance you can combine travelling and studying. The requirements for receiving the money may be just that you pass certain exams. If you think you can pass just by studying on your own, why not study while you travel? In some cases it can even help you achieve better results. If you study history, geography, religions, international relations or social sciences, there's no better way to learn than to go where it all takes or took place.

As a young traveller there may be another good reason to register as a student. Travel insurance on long trips is usually substantially cheaper for students than for others. While "annual" travel insurance may seem like a good deal, the small writing on the insurance policy typically reveals that while the insurance may indeed be valid for a full year, it only covers trips that last less than 30 or 45 days each. That kind of insurance is not at all useful for typical backpacker expeditions.

Another good option, and not just for students, is the free travel insurance that comes with some credit cards. All you have to do is to use a credit card to pay at least half of your total transportation costs. For this to work you need to save all your receipts from when you use the credit card. Make sure you use your credit card "enough". You should be fine as long as you pay for plane tickets and car rentals with the card.

- **Free Wheels**

In many countries hitch-hiking is a perfectly useful way to get around. In some areas it may even be the *only* way to get around without having your own car. Hitching a ride for just yourself is easiest, but that is also less safe, relatively speaking. Hitch-hiking together with someone is safer, but since many drivers are reluctant to pick up more than one hitch-hiker, it probably means more time spent waiting. Safe hiking is best done in the daytime, and a man and a woman hitch-hiking together stand a good chance of quickly getting a ride. Make a sign that says to where or in which direction you're heading. The best places to hitch-hike are next to petrol stations or other places where people have to stop or lower their speed anyway.

A more comfortable way to go by car without paying for it, is to take on driving jobs for car rental agencies. They often need to have a car transported quickly from one of their offices to another, and they're happy to let otherwise potential customers help them with that. You must be over a certain age and also have been a legal driver of cars for a certain number of years. You need to show a credit card to guarantee that you're not planning on stealing the car, and you must seem like a fairly sane person. If you qualify, you will be given a free rental car with a full tank of petrol, and you get a limited number of days or hours to drive the car to a specified location. Your only expenses are for any additional petrol you need to get there, and you may have to pay for insurance. Now you know why it's so expensive to return a rental car to a different location than the one you pick it up from.

- **The Coin Trick**

Time and again opportunities arise for some creative currency dealing, in ways not exactly intended by the central banks around the world. All you have to do is to move coins from one country to another, and then use the coins as if they were other coins. The reason you can do this is that the two coins in question have exactly the same measurements, despite one of them being worth more than the other. You may have heard about this. Once or twice a year the newspapers

have stories about it, typically in the soft news section. This is of course not something you can make a living from, but in theory you can at least for a while enjoy cheap soft drinks and chocolate from vending machines. Here's a list showing the factor a coin's value can or could be increased, based on exchange rates from July 2007:

- Swaziland's 1 lilangeni, the same size as a British pound (14)
- Denmark's 25 øre, a perfect New York City subway token (42)
- Thailand's 1 baht, impossible to separate from the Euro coin (43)
- Iceland's 5 auran, easily passed as a quarter in the USA (309)

I'm not sure what will happen if you're caught at an international airport in Europe carrying five kilograms of Thai money. I suppose it will attract some attention. You may have to present a somewhat credible explanation to a man who will not be smiling while you tell him your story. But the fact of the matter is that while there usually is a limit for how much foreign currency you are allowed to bring into a country, that limit is decided by value, not by weight. So you have to carry a *lot* of coins before it becomes an issue.

### • Cheating Las Vegas

Casinos are exceptionally good at tricking money out of people's wallets. Sometimes they're so eager that they actually risk fooling themselves. An often used ploy is to offer special packages. For 500 dollars you get not just a couple of nights at a hotel, meals and plane tickets, you also get 500 dollars worth of play money, to get you started gambling "for free"! The catch is of course that the money can only be used to play in the casino offering the package. The idea is that after you have lost the play money, you'll be eager to win some back, and then you start wasting your own, real money.

The way you can take advantage of this is based on the fact that while the play money is useless for anything but gambling, whatever money you manage to *win* using the play money will be real money, or at least casino chips that can be exchanged for real money. The problem is just

that in the long run you *will* lose all your money when playing against a casino. So you have to find someone else to play against.

A way to do this requires that there are two of you, and that you both play the roulette. It's the simplest of all the games in the casino. One of you will bet on red, the other on black, and most of the time one of you will win almost as much as the other one loses. The one who wins must keep the convertible chips and continue to play using the funny money. When you're left with only "real" chips, you exchange them for cash. Then you can start enjoying yourselves, spending the money you've just earned.

There's a catch, of course. The casino may have a rowdy gang of men with baseball bats sitting in the cellar, ready to get rid of troublemakers like you. It may be a good idea to try to be a little bit covert about what you're doing, and at least part of the time stray away from the pattern of betting against each other.

- **Midday meals and other ways to cheap eating**

If you travel on a budget, you can often save money by buying food at supermarkets and cook for yourself. Most hostels offer good kitchen facilities to their guests. Still, keep your eyes open for restaurants and hotels that have bargain buffets with infinite food or lower prices in the middle of the day and on certain weekday nights. Sometimes it can turn out even cheaper than cooking your own food. Also, if you do an "Eat as much as you want"-style buffet the right way, you can get so full that you won't have to eat again for several days.

A buffet is usually arranged to make people help themselves to heaps of cheap and filling dishes, like rice, pasta and potatoes. That's fine, except it means less stomach space for more expensive and nutritional goodies. Make sure you take a good look at the whole range of dishes available before you load up. Leave some space on your plate and in your stomach for what you really want to eat.

When you have filled your plate, it's time to eat. At this stage it's easy to forget the most important thing. To fill up thoroughly and to avoid

spending too much time later lying down with pains in your stomach, you *must* chew your food thoroughly. Failing to do so will result in your digestive apparatus becoming overwhelmed and tell you to go to bed until it has processed your poorly chewed meal. That won't do.

- **Enhancing your exterior**

In countries with a lower level of costs than your own, you can get things done cheaper than at home. Have your hair cut on the day before you go home from a trip instead of the day after, and you may save good money. Women who want to treat themselves to time-consuming hair enhancement projects, can in some cases let their vacation pay for itself by having it done abroad.

- You can also save money by going to a dentist or enjoying various beauty treatments abroad, and then bring the result with you home without paying any import taxes. Not to mention plastic surgery! In certain countries a wide

OMOS Hair SALON	
Human Hair Fixing	R 250
Relax Cut & Set	R 70
Cut & Set	R 40
Popcorn	R 40
Pineapple	R 50
Braiding	FROM +/- R 60
Plaiting	FROM +/- R 30
Extensions	R 150
All Relaxers with Free Set	
Dark & Lovely	R 60
D & L. Excellence	R 60
Calvil	R 60
Ladine	R 50
Revlon	R 40
Perfect Choice	R 40
Soft'n Free	R 40
S-Curl & Cut	R 40
Cut Only (Easy)	R 10
Pomade	R 40
Wash & Set	R 30

*From a Pretoria hairdresser's menu*

range of options are available to foreigners who want to upgrade their bodies at a relatively low price. If you find the right place, the quality of the work will be at least as good as in your home country. Now, I don't have any personal experience with these things, but I *have* been backstage after a transvestite show in Thailand. It was a little bit like walking around inside a Playboy magazine. Only infinitely more confusing. Should I ever feel the need to have some silicone inserted anywhere in my body, I know where I'll go to get it done!

- **Half-used tickets and free entrance**

Some national parks and major museums sell tickets that are valid for more than one day. They do this because seeing them properly does indeed take several days. Many visitors, however, still spend only one day there. You can often find backpackers willing to part with a still valid ticket for free or at a discounted price. Another option is to find people on busy bus tours. As you see them being whipped onto their tour buses to leave the place after having stopped all too briefly, try smiling at someone and ask if you can have his or her ticket.

Sometimes you will find "half-valid" tickets hanging on hostel notice boards. There you can also often find invitations and vouchers for cheap or free food and drinks from nearby restaurants, clubs and bars. They are so desperate to have young and trendy backpackers come visit them, preferably Swedish blondes, that they're willing to risk that some less attractive freeloaders will show up as well.

Even in museums where you have to pay to enter, there are usually certain days you can get in for free, like on the first Tuesday of every month or something like that. The intention is to give school classes and people who have little money a chance to visit the museum like everybody else. There's no reason why a tourist like you shouldn't take advantage of this. The local tourist information can tell you about available options, but don't expect them to do so without you asking.

Botanical gardens can often be visited for free, and at least in certain seasons they may be well worth your time. In really excellent countries, taxpayer money is used to run good museums where entrance is free to the public.

- **Be a movie star**

In some Asian countries, foreigners stand a good chance of finding work as extras in commercials. It's an option if you look relatively good and you're patient. For some reason, Asian PR agencies like to use people with non-Asian looks to present all sorts of products. If you look even remotely like a celebrity, you'll be wise to play that card to

its extreme. Asians are just as bad at telling one European apart from another as we are at distinguishing between Asians, so this works even if you doubt it.

Addresses and more information about this option can be found on notice boards in hostels in cities like Singapore, Bangkok and Tokyo. If you're determined to do this, you can also try contacting PR agencies directly and ask them if they want to use you for something. The work is relatively well paid and most of the time all you have to do is wait. The waiting is not a problem. You can read or talk to the others there, it's interesting to learn how commercials are made, and besides you can have as many soft drinks as you like.

- **Write about your trip**

If your journey is anything more than a package holiday, and it takes you to places that neither you nor your friends knew much about before you went there, you really should keep a detailed diary of what you see and what you make of it. Mainly because it will help you remember things later, but also because the more you write down and reflect on your observations, the richer your own experience will be. In addition it *may* be possible to sell what you write. Local papers and to a certain extent large newspapers with travel pages will print and pay for good stuff to fill their pages with, particularly during the summer, when other news may be scarce.

More dedicated travel magazines may be interested in your material and pay much better, provided that what you come up with is really good and from decidedly special places that also make for good travel destinations. And if you travel a *lot*, you may even end up writing a book about it. It probably won't make you rich, but it's certainly a fun challenge to yourself.

—



Phew!

We're almost done. All that remains to be said is that I hope you have enjoyed the book, and that what I've told you will be of use to you. Just keep in mind that I'm not quite sure that everything I have written is correct or true. As far as I knew when I wrote it, it certainly wasn't far away from the truth. Unfortunately and luckily the world keeps changing. My sources are mainly my own notes, memories and ideas. They are the results of what I have seen, heard and read while travelling. It must be worth something, but it will never amount to a complete picture. I hope you understand that.

We're lucky enough to live in an age where even books can be corrected and updated fairly easily. This book is complemented by a Web site where you can find corrections and additions from other readers and myself. If you want to comment on anything I have written, please do so through the Web site. On the same site I keep a large number of colour photographs that accompanies the text in this book, as well as more detailed and updated information about how to travel properly and safely. Do come by and help me improve the Web site with your input. Whether you have questions or answers for me, I look forward to seeing you there.

I thank you for your company. Happy trails!



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## One More Thing...

This is a message to those of you who read the book without buying it.

Doing that is perfectly okay, and I thank you for it. I wanted people to read my book, so I made it available as a free download on the Internet, and I placed paper copies of it in book exchanges at various hostels and backpacker centrals so that people could pick it up, read it and pass it on to other travellers.

However, I would like to keep track of where my book goes. You can help me with that by dropping me an e-mail at [bjorn@bjornfree.com](mailto:bjorn@bjornfree.com) or by sending me a postcard from wherever you are. You can always find my address at [www.bjornfree.com](http://www.bjornfree.com). Please tell me how you discovered the book and what you think about it.

I also accept voluntary donations. See my web site for instructions about how that works. Any amount is welcome, but it is of course completely up to you if you want to contribute.

Thank you.



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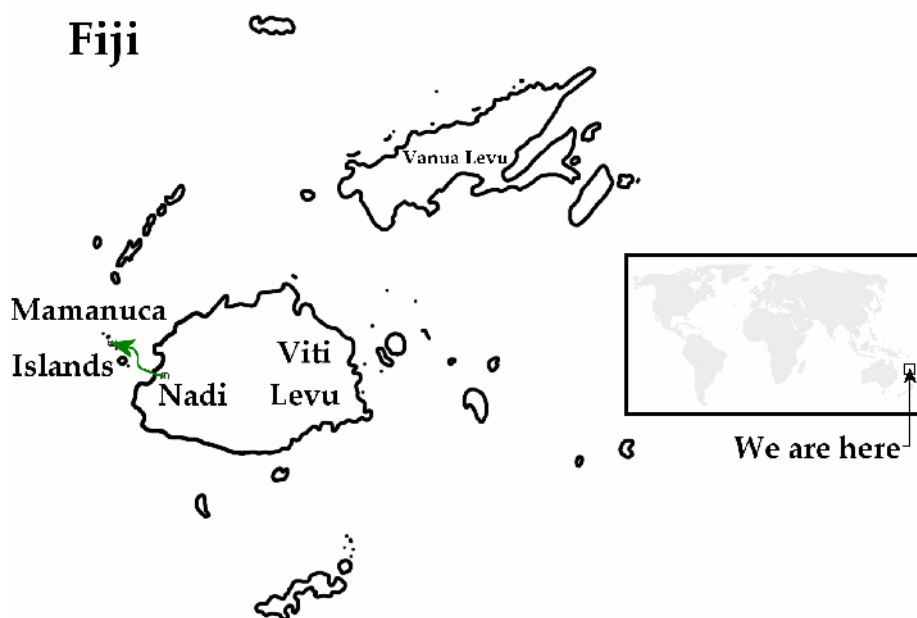
## The Maps

For your convenience, on the following pages you will find maps that show where the action in the various chapters of this book takes place. Each map can also be found in the chapter where it belongs.

**Notes:**

## "Swimming to the Airport", pages 13—30:

Fiji



**Notes:**

**"The Utterly Deep South", pages 39–101:**



**Notes:**



"In and Out of Africa", pages 103 – 250:



**Notes:**

## "Summer in the Pity", pages 251—361:





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