

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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ZAIRE, AFRICA'S jungle heartland, is the lost world of an adventurer's dreams. Waterfalls gush through misty, green canyons. Pygmies peer at the curious visitor and flee in horror from the lens of a camera. And crocodiles rule the muddy waters that swirl below the rusty propellers of the ferry barges.

Even if you know that the Tarzan scream and the splash you hear are the clowning of a fellow traveller diving into a shaded pond, the lush surroundings make the fiction seem true.

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On a journey from Kenya to the Central African Republic last winter, Zaire was easily the most thrilling nation along the way. At the eastern frontier, where we crossed the border under the shadow of the snow-capped Mountains of the Moon, we left behind the mortar-shelled reminders of an Africa gone insane under the former rule of Uganda's dictator, Idi Amin. The dusty, narrow trail ahead led through another century.

The lone route through Zaire's northeast corner penetrates a tribal world. Most enchanting were the pygmies, not much more than a metre tall, but well-proportioned. We camped near several pygmy villages and became fond of these people. The children, accustomed to the comings and goings of large tourist trucks like ours, were not intimidated by our 12-member group and were the first to surround our campsite. The elders, only slightly taller than the youngsters, but with telltale creases cut deep in their faces, later joined the group; 20 or 30 villagers would gather around, their faces, spears and bows shining in the firelight.

Often the chief or a spokesman would offer us firewood or, for a price - empty glass containers, T-shirts, even broken pieces of mirror - would present a chicken, eggs or a monkey for us to eat. We experimented with monkey stew for one meal. Just once was too much for the vegetarians aboard. We said it tasted like rabbit, but in all honesty it tasted like monkey.

The pygmies or villagers from other tribes along the road were happy to sell us big, juicy pineapples or papayas, onions, bitter oranges and potatoes. The price was settled after the essential round of haggling and we would proceed with a fresh dinner menu, our load lightened by one or two empty glass bottles.

We always stopped at the big rivers, to clean off several days' worth of grime and sweat. Camping in tents, cooking on a fire and living on a carefully managed drinking water supply made for a dirty dozen between rivers. We hurried to the riverside to wash before the inevitable crowd of locals gathered to watch the "wazungu" (Swahili for white persons) shampooing in the brown-green water.

Some of the rivers were forded by groaning iron bridges, hair-raising to cross. And crocodiles called most of the waters home. Sometimes the onlookers would warn us of crocodiles and we would simply have to stink for another day and wait for a safer river in which to bathe. One adventurous traveller on a trip like ours met an instant end off the bow of a ferry on which we rode.

On land, the only life-threatening creatures that crossed our path were soldier ants, although we saw unusual animals like the okapi (half-zebra, half- giraffe) and pet chimpanzees along the route. The tales of the ants are over- dramatized: they can't consume a sleeping victim, if only because their bite is painful enough to wake you up to take action. But the ants made a midnight snack of the groundsheet of my partner Mary Anne. They chewed through the heavy plastic, tunnelled into her mattress and gnawed on her mosquito net. She was unaware of this nocturnal savagery until morning, when she declared that never again would she sleep directly over a nest.

Ferry crossings were unquestionably our most memorable activities. They were also our worst nightmares. The problem was simple physics, comprehensible even to a drunken ferryboat captain - the weight of our 10- tonne Bedford truck on a feeble boat landing would force the rusty barge away from the shore. Two large, wobbling logs would be used as a makeshift ramp to bridge the gulf between ship and shore. A moment's hesitation on the ramp and the truck might join the crocodiles.

The ferryboat fare, too, was unconventional. The ferry driver would get five litres of diesel fuel, which he used to power the chug-chug-chugging barge. We were also required to uncouple our battery to jolt the ferry's motor to life. Dozens of villagers would sit on either side of the river for hours, waiting for a vehicle like ours to bring fuel and provide transit for them and their goats.

Had the price been right, we would have taken a ferry down the length of the Zaire River from Kisingani to Kinshasa, near the west coast. Formerly the Congo River, whose gloomy banks dimmed the soul of Joseph Conrad enough for him to write Heart Of Darkness, the Zaire is Africa's answer to the Amazon. It drains this vast, green country, the largest in Africa after Sudan.

If you have ever wondered about the ultimate water slide, look no farther than the chutes of Station de l'Epulu. We stayed an extra two days. The curious okapi is kept penned up here and whether you take a photo or not the army officers will say that you have and charge you the photo fee.

With only one road to follow, directions were never a problem. And advice was always in good supply from approaching travellers in trucks and Land Rovers, or on motorcycles and even bicycles. We were warned of bad bridges and told of the appropriate bribe to have ready at the next checkpoint. A cigaret or two helped smooth the passport checks. Only at the Zaire frontier did we resort to speeding the painfully drawn-out red tape process with a bottle of Johnny Walker. At another border, we had to sell our motorcycle to the customs official who forbade its entry into the country. He paid in U.S. dollars.

The border-guard sting is as inevitable as it is aggravating. Ah, but if travel through Zaire were any less difficult and unpredictable, the enchantment would fade. The physical hardships and the rubber-stamping officialdom keep a lot of people away. But whether it's the dreaded bilharzia infection that lurks in sluggish streams or the machine-gun- toting soldiers who, when drunk, should be avoided or at least left unprovoked, common sense is the best policy. Plan your trip, get and heed advice while inside Zaire, and don't take photographs of the guys in the red berets. (I did, accidentally, and only saved my camera and film by not speaking any French to the furious soldier. Playing the stupid tourist can be helpful sometimes.)

The obstacles are more than made up for by the people of Zaire. Villagers at every bend in the road would greet the truck with squeals of "Touri, touri]" in their French-Lingala-Swahili dialect.

A visual feast by day and a symphony of drums and the haunting cries of hidden creatures by night, Zaire still evokes the Africa of the nineteenth century, when Henry Stanley explored the jungles to find Dr. David Livingston, 114 years ago. The greetings of "jambo, bwana," and the thatched-roof and mud huts will not change for another 100 years, if ever. IF YOU GO

More and more African adventure companies are starting up, offering trips from London to South Africa. They cost about \$3,000 per person; many, despite the exotic advertising, are whirlwind tours in cramped quarters. Up to 20 people are packed into a truck. Shop around and check the British travel magazines (such as Lam) if you want something more independent than the organized tour provides. On the other hand, if you are concerned about time, the bigger companies with the bigger brochures are the only ones that will guarantee the completion of a trip by a certain date. You could also buy your own four-wheel-drive vehicle in London, or share expenses with a small group.

Encounter Overland operates the most frequent and expensive of the Africa trips. One of the "best buy" tour companies is Dragoman Adventure Travel. For more information, write: Dragoman Ltd., 10 Riverside, Framlingham, Suffolk, England, IP13 9AG. The company we travelled with is called Mullup Expeditions, 66 Peter St., Boxhill North, Victoria, Australia, 3129.

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