

My Summer Vacation from Hell

The time was quite a few summers ago, between years of college. The setting was the Kalahari Desert of Africa.

I sprawled, filthy and exhausted watching buzzards fly overhead. I looked down at my legs, wondering at how white sand could turn my skin black. Our two wheel drive pickup truck, buckling under the challenge of the soft desert sand, billowed smoke from something gone wrong under the hood. For a third day, we were pushing the poor thing to help it plough forward against unyielding sands.

Our goal was to reach a northern border town of Botswana, be reunited with our luggage and enjoy a few days stay at the resort before heading to Nairobi where we would catch a flight back to the U.S. This leg of the journey, dominated by laws of nature and Mr. Murphy, was taking much longer than expected.

It had been a total of seven days so far. We were on an alternate route from the initial one which would have taken us through tsetse fly infested swampland. This one took us along the fringe of the desert. Little did we know at the time it was an either-or choice between two evils.

The road, consisting of two tracks in the earth, was solid enough in the beginning. We had an adequate supply of food and water for four days. Food consisted of canned spam, canned fruit cheese and some bread. No change of clothes, though. We had given over our luggage to be flown ahead in a government plane on the promise it would be waiting for us at the border town.

What was left of the food and water at this point was being tightly rationed. The fruit and bread were long gone. We ate the remaining spam and choked down cheese that was seriously compromised from heat and lack of refrigeration.

On day eight we hit solid ground and made good time the final day and a half of the journey. I think we even sang silly songs like "99 bottles of beer on the wall." After the final challenge of outrunning a brush fire, we arrived at the resort and were greeted with polite but cautious formality. They were expecting a group of Americans but were no doubt unprepared for the dirty, smelly, ragged bunch that stood before them. Nine days with no change of clothes, grooming supplies or water with which to wash took a serious toll on making a decent first impression. We were uninvited to stay in inside rooms and instead shown the way to the campground.

Before boarding the train that would take us to Nairobi, we turned over the truck. What was initially a shiny near new truck was now in desperate need of mechanical repair and badly scratched from grazing thorny shrubs. In an almost ceremonial fashion, we circled the truck and bade it farewell in a mix of berating the truck for its inadequacy and of reflection on the high adventure we had come through. There was also a sense that we had formed a strange sort of partnership with the truck to get through the harrowing journey alive and intact.

We spent two days in the dorms at the university at Nairobi. The university offered us first pick from a pile of clothing they had collected for needy citizens of the city. We spent our time evaluating the success of the mission for which we were on the continent, sampling exotic night life and appreciating plentiful supplies of delicious ethnic food.

When it was time to begin our plane trip back home our luggage, including souvenirs, was still MIA. Airport officials emphatically denied that they had it. Unconvinced, our group leader insisted on being allowed to search for himself. Thirty minutes before boarding, he discovered it in a remote corner. He insisted on watching it be loaded onto the plane before he boarded. We suspected it had been taken directly to the airport by the government plane, days ago.

I went to Africa for a one-of-a kind summer adventure. As a writer in this group recently pointed out, "Be careful what you wish for."