

AFRICA TRAVEL JOURNAL

KENYA 1995

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11/03/95 9:00A TEXAS

I am going home because I am lost and need to catch fire.

Africa has the most fantastic displays of wildlife on Earth and this will truly be the adventure of a lifetime. The call of the wild is an ancient one. It is not often heard, and even less often answered.

It is an interesting fork in the road that leads there, but I am going anyway.

It is called the Dark Continent, perhaps because it is so very mysterious and because so much remains unknown about it.

I have dreamed for years of a safari and the opportunity now presents itself, although the timing is not exactly right (or is it?). Carpe diem. Seize the day. I am nervous about going back to where it all began.

I wasn't exactly born there, but the Great Rift Valley is indeed the cradle of humanity. My tree has roots there and like the prodigal son who is long lost, I am returning home.

In any environment, I inevitably find that the people matter most. Funny that I should say that for although I will not be alone literally, I will be alone figuratively. I need to find my way and it is my sincerest hope that the Dark Continent will get me back on course and help me see the light of day.

Having never been on an extended visit anywhere, the apprehension is thick. The winds will be taking me to a far away place.

The inspiration for this particular adventure comes from both Walt Disney and Wild Kingdom. Much of my childhood was spent watching the Wonderful World of Disney and Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. With respect to the latter, I owe many thanks to Marlin Perkins and Jim Fowler. I never thought I would get to experience it first hand.

It is always good to visit with family and friends before an undertaking such as this. You never know what is going to happen and it is best to be at peace.

I had breakfast with my folks. They are the most kind and decent people you could ever meet, but they are afraid for me and worry about my safety.

I am afraid myself. I have no experience in these matters. I have never traveled. I do not know anyone who has been there.

I say what comes naturally, "I love you. I promise I will take care of myself and come back safely." My words seem empty.

Although I am ostensibly going for the adventure, I suspect the trip will be much more than that.

I start the long journey today. I am nervous going to such a far away place.

I'm glad I had the opportunity to visit family before leaving. I am at peace in some ways. Interesting that one ponders their mortality at these times.

I have so much to be thankful for and have no right to complain. Yet, I am very unsettled in a significant way.

11/03/95 12:30P TEXAS

The plane is on the move to Houston. It will take many hours to get there.

11/03/95 1:30P TEXAS

I am in Houston. There is a three hour layover before the trip to London. I'm watching people. It is quite enjoyable. My Dad says you can learn a lot by watching and listening as opposed to talking.

Some people are happy and carefree. Some are frustrated and upset. I am in the former category.

11/03/95 6:30P TEXAS

As the plane rises up from Texas and heads toward distant lands, I am reminded of those whom I love most, my parents and sisters. I wish they could be with me.

I just finished reading The Face of Fear by Dean Koontz. It is a fine book.

11/03/95 7:00P TEXAS

I am sipping on a Glen Ellen Cabernet Sauvignon. It has some bite and needs to open up.

The plane is over the Atlantic Ocean. My first time, but if things go well, it will not be my last. I want to visit all seven continents. I've wanted to do this since I read National Geographic as a child. That is a tall order. Can I do it?

11/04/95 12:30A TEXAS

It is during this second day of travel that I start sensing just how far away I am from that which means most. Like the Energizer bunny, this plane just keeps going and going and going. It makes me a little lonely. The magic of flight has made this possible. Could Orville and Wilbur have ever imagined such things? Perhaps that is why they tried.

The plane is close to arriving. I am tired and have not rested well. I had some rap with a Brit living in Houston and with a Houstonian living in London.

11/04/95 12:45A TEXAS

Earlier, they showed Something To Talk About. Mediocre.

It is 28 degrees in London. Brrrrr!

A long layover awaits. The sun is rising over Europe.

11/04/95 9:30A LONDON

London Heathrow Airport is very modern and cosmopolitan. Many beautiful people. I am not one of them.

The drive from London Heathrow Airport to London Gatwick Airport is a bit surreal as the driver is maneuvering his vehicle on the wrong side of the road.

The winds toward Africa leave from Gatwick.

11/04/95 11:45A LONDON

The final leg toward Nairobi begins. Next stop, Africa. The Dark Continent.

11/04/95 3:45P LONDON

I'm watching Apollo 13 (fantastic movie) as I feast on a nice steak with some Indian vegetables. The next movie is The Net with Sandra Bullock.

Before I can begin pondering my destiny and desert which I sometimes find myself in, the matinee begins. On long flights, to help pass the time, movies are routinely shown. The current cinema du jour is Apollo 13. As with all good movies, it provides a temporary, if much needed, escape from the worries of the day. This movie is damn good. It is an engaging tale about one of the greatest near catastrophes of all time. Jim Lovell, Fred Haise, and Jack Swiggert were on their way from the Earth to the Moon (aboard Apollo 13) when an oxygen tank in their command module exploded. Because they lost so much oxygen and power, they

were forced to move into their lunar module and use that as a lifeboat of sorts. Over the next several days, they hurtled toward the Moon, around its dark side, and eventually on a return trajectory back to the Earth. They needed every bit of their own resourcefulness just to survive. Although they did not land on the Moon, their miraculous journey and survival make their mission a wonderful story of success. The movie is great, but Jim Lovell's book, *Lost Moon*, is even better.

It is an uplifting story that will provide much needed strength for the days ahead

The silver transport has passed over Cairo—and before that, France and Italy. We are now over a vast expanse of desert (Sahara?) and the Nile River. There is an abyss of nothingness below. How could Moses have made it for forty years? He was not alone.

The sun appears to be setting as we continue onward toward the final destination.

11/04/95 9:00P AFRICA

I am here in Nairobi, Kenya and the adventure begins. First, however, some much needed rest as I have been on the move for over 24 hours.

Thirty hours after leaving San Antonio, I have arrived. Will I find what I am looking for? Yes. I can feel it.

I was greeted at Jomo Kenyatta (first president of the republic) International Airport by armed soldiers as opposed to the welcome wagon. It is troublesome to make it through customs when you do not speak the language or any dialect of it.

Perhaps these chaps need to revisit Mahatma Ghandi who said “There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.”

One of the easiest ways to adapt, in any country, is to speak the language. Swahili is spoken in these parts and thankfully, I had my trusty dictionary to help me along. I found that "Jambo!" (Hello) and a smile is a good way to start. After that, it was sometimes tricky.

Because Nairobi is the capital city of Kenya, with its 1.5 million inhabitants, more than a few people were willing to experiment with English as I tried my hand with Swahili.

My bed tonight is at the Windsor Hotel, a lavish stop to get a good night's rest before the adventure begins.

It is a strange twist of fate that has brought me here. I am so fortunate to be here. When given opportunities, you must make the most of them. That is the true lesson of the day. Embrace life. I will.

11/05/95 9:00A AFRICA

I am feeling very well rested and frisky this morning. I am ready to go into the heart of Africa and make a proper inspection of these premises.

Hakuna Matata (no worries).

After a nice breakfast of fresh fruits, the winds are taking me to the Aberdare National Park. It is a two hour bus ride from Nairobi.

If you want to get anywhere, matatu is the way to go. These minibuses, if you can figure where they are going, will get you there. However, there is a universal truth about the matatu. They are always overcrowded and the drivers are uniformly reckless. I was pleased, nonetheless, that the drivers do not discriminate against any passenger. All are welcome, whether you are man, woman, child, goat, or chicken.

As I make my way around Nairobi, I am in awe that I am walking over the very same soil as some of the earliest human ancestors. The Great Rift Valley of Kenya and Tanzania is well known in anthropological circles as the cradle of humanity. Some of the most significant finds in the quest for our ancestors have been made in the Olduvai Gorge region of Tanzania and the Lake Turkana area of Kenya. The first family of anthropology is that of Richard Leakey.

The interesting thing about Nairobi is that it was part of the African savannah until the Kenya-Uganda railway was constructed in the late 1800s. It quickly became the capital of British East Africa. When Kenya gained its independence from Great Britain in 1963, Nairobi remained the capital of the new republic. Today, there are over 1 million inhabitants here. Kenya, itself, which straddles the equator, has over 25 million people and its economy is primarily agricultural.

11/05/95 11:00A AFRICA

The bus ride here winds through the Kenyan countryside. It is an area filled with farms and villages. The foliage is lush and seems conducive to the ancestral way that predominates.

From sunrise to sunset, it appears that tending to the crops or livestock takes precedent over all else. Whether it's plowing the fields, tending to the crops, harvesting nature's bounty, milking the cows, or feeding the chickens, what has to be done has to be done.

As our bus makes periodic stops, I have the chance to talk to some villagers, or farmers if you prefer. Their interest in me is no different than my interest in them. They simply want to learn more. The human touch is what we all seek.

I am not asked about my country, but my village. One asks what crops I grow and whether there is much rain. The language barrier is tricky.

If I could have any magic superpower, it would be to have the ability to speak to anyone in their native tongue. That would be cool.

After several hours of winding through the mountainous rainforest and moorlands, we arrive at the town of Nyeri. Nyeri seems to attract villagers from small outposts, and the produce market is where many come to sell the product of their daily labor. It is the gateway to the Aberdare mountain range. Nyeri is a dialect of the Kikuyu language. It is also the burial place of Lord Robert Baden Powell, founder of the Boy Scout movement. He once wrote, "the near to Nyeri, the nearer to bliss." The Boy Scout motto, "Be prepared." Or, as my hermano John puts it, "Never wait for trouble."

The Aberdare National Park is my first of three major stops and provides the first views of wildlife. Created in 1950, it is situated in the Aberdare mountain range at an altitude of approximately 10,000 feet, with some peaks soaring to 14,000 feet. It is a rarely visited park because the high annual rainfall often causes mud slides, making maneuvering rather tricky. In addition, the thick, almost impenetrable, bamboo forest makes game viewing quite difficult.

In Africa, most safaris are conducted from jeeps under the watchful eye of local guides. My guide in these parts is an English lady by the name of Wendy. She has been in Kenya most of her life and I gather from her that she truly cares about the wildlife and the people (in that order).

The park is in a rather lush area of hills (very green). I am pulling back the curtain to time and following in the footsteps of my ancestors, who have been walking these lands for thousands of years.

As we meandered through the muddy roads earlier, the first beast we came across was a water buffalo (mbogo) taking a dump. There was a herd of about 50, which have the reputation of being rather mean. They can weigh over 1,500 pounds (heavy).

11/05/95 4:00P AFRICA

I am taking an afternoon siesta. I had a sandwich for lunch while sitting on a rock overlooking the "Green Hills of Africa" (read the Hemingway book).

I've seen water buffalo, elephants, rhinos, and hyenas. Apparently, rhinos are pretty scarce and the chances of seeing them after today are slim.

Rhinos (kifaru) have been nearly poached into extinction, with perhaps 500 remaining in the wild. Their horns are sought after in the markets of the far east. The horn on this beast, are not bones, but rather akin to hooves and toenails. This

one has a very long horn and the elephants are nervous at its presence. As the gray mass nears the water, each of the mother elephants puts herself between the intruder and her baby. Although no stranger to them and probably not much of a true threat, the elephants are understandably wary.

11/05/95 11:00P AFRICA

I'm sitting next to the fire (by myself) although I have a bottle of wine as my company. It is chilly.

My dinner, earlier this evening, was a baked African Turkey (with potatoes and vegetables). Having sampled each November some of its distant cousins, I was pleased that this fowl was cut from the same cloth.

Earlier, I took a picture of an elephant and rhino facing off near a watering hole. They were dancing around each other right at dusk.

Also, I had a chance to see a leopard (chui) on the hunt for a nearby bushbuck (pongo). The episode lasted about 15 minutes. The cat chased its victim into the bush (not sure about whether there was success).

Right after dark, I saw some hyenas although I could not get a picture. This camera is too new and I didn't properly familiarize myself with all its features.

11/06/95 9:00A AFRICA

Today, I catch a bus to the Samburu Game Reserve. It is a three hour bus ride from the lush highlands to the dry lowlands. I had fresh fruit for breakfast today.

In the distance, a rumbling can be heard in the bushes. It is unmistakable sound of a gentle giant making its way in my direction. The Big Five are the lion, buffalo, rhinoceros, leopard, and elephant. I have already seen one (buffalo) and out of the bush, comes another. Tembo (African elephant). A small herd of them. It is the largest land animal, can be as high as 10 feet tall, weigh as much as 12,000 pounds, and have a 60 year life span. These leviathans feed 16 hours a day, eating about 80 pounds of vegetation and drinking up to 90 liters of water. It is indeed sad that poaching is causing their numbers to dwindle.

11/06/95 1:00P AFRICA

I made it to the Samburu Game Reserve. Our camp overlooks the Ewaso Ngiro River. It is dry and hot here. But that's okay, because I had a Tusker beer that quenched the afternoon thirst. It doesn't get any better than this.

For lunch, I sampled a Nile Perch.

11/06/95 10:00P AFRICA

I'm relaxing on the edge of the camp, listening to the sounds of silence. I can hear the water running and the wind blowing. My mind is at ease. I am alone again, naturally.

The afternoon game run was excellent. I saw lion, cheetah, giraffe, bush buck, dik dik, kudu, antelope, gazelle, zebra, crocodile, baboon, monkeys, gerenuk, and what seemed like thousands of birds.

Late in the afternoon, I saw some crocodiles feasting on the carcass of a giraffe in the middle of the river. It was an excellent sight!

The trees most often associated with these parts are Acacias.

After dinner, and earlier this evening, I saw a leopard chowing down on a recent kill of antelope. Apparently, they are solitary cats (like me in a way).

It was absolutely incredible to see such wildlife. I never, in my wildest dreams, could have imagined seeing such a spectacle. The scenery is stunningly fantastic.

For dinner, I had a steak of some sort (the steak was skinny as are the cows I have seen). The Tusker beers went down well.

The guide in these parts is a local dude named Lucas. He is quite friendly and knows the area well. He speaks English, which is great as my Swahili is inferior and almost non-existent.

11/07/95 9:00A AFRICA

I was up early today to do a morning game run. I saw a beautiful leopard in a tree as the sun was rising over the reserve. Fantastic.

There is a beautiful ridge in these parts that overlooks the valley below. I sat there and contemplated my happy past, my unsettled present, and my hopeful future.

11/07/95 2:30P AFRICA

The only question at hand is whether to have another Tusker beer. Lunch was delicious (some local poultry). It is very hot in these parts. The beer is a heavy brew with a bold flavor.

There is a chapter that is coming to an end. As much as I try to analyze matters from all angles, the conclusion remains the same.

11/07/95 11:00P AFRICA

The afternoon game drive was glorious. We spent most of it tracking three cheetahs that were stalking a herd of impalas. I took some good pictures (I think).

I also saw some vultures scavenging on a giraffe carcass. What is it with the dead giraffes?

Dinner was tasty (another local fish). It was prepared Mexican style, with a salsa of some kind that incorporated lemon and local peppers.

After dinner, we saw some Samburu tribesmen in the area. They were doing some sort of dance where the men jump up and down in an apparent display of virility (the higher you jump the more masculine you are). Did I ever tell you about my vertical leaps?

11/08/95 7:45A AFRICA

I had eggs and fresh fruit for breakfast this morning. The local bus is leaving for Mt. Kenya and I aim to be on it.

I walked the area earlier and tried to take it the scene here. The dry morning air, the light winds, and the smell of my remote locale were almost too much to appreciate.

11/08/95 2:30P AFRICA

The drive to Mt. Kenya was nice. The roads were almost respectable. It seems that people are walking everywhere around here. No well nourished souls here. All are lean (but not mean).

The accommodations here will be quite different than the rest of this trip. I am staying at the Mt. Kenya Safari Lodge. It was founded/started by William Holden. It is a beautiful lodge with perfectly manicured grounds that sits close to the base of Mt. Kenya (second highest mountain in Africa next to Mt. Kilimanjaro).

For lunch, I was served a very tasty antelope (accompanied by a cool glass of South African Chardonnay).

11/08/95 10:30P AFRICA

I am sitting by the fireplace, deep in thought once again. With no radio, no newspaper, and no television, things seem very clear. I am gathering strength to weather the coming storm.

I had impala for dinner (with a South African Cabernet Sauvignon). These feasts for lunch and dinner were splendid. I could get spoiled and just remain here at this lodge.

But alas, what I came to see will be coming next. It is the Masai Mara. I am almost there and can feel it.

11/09/95 8:30A AFRICA

The sunrise over Mt. Kenya was incredible! I sat and watched the sun come up over the mountain. I could hear nothing except the crackling of the morning fire. It was dark and then it was light. As with me. I have been in the dark but am beginning to see the light.

The winds today will take me back to Nairobi and then to catch a plane for the Serengeti Plains of East Africa.

11/09/95 1:00P AFRICA

I am at a local airport in Nairobi about to get on a vintage plane. You might also call the plane antique, experienced, well traveled, etc. It is a silver hunk of metal, 1940s style, with the back tail that sits on a tiny wheel just above the ground.

It looks worthy and as if it will take me where I need to be.

For lunch, I dined at Carnivore, an open air restaurant specializing in meat. As I walk in, two signs tell me all I need to know: "All The Meat You Can Eat" and "A Beast Of A Feast."

A very pleasant gentleman greets me. "Jambo! Habari?" (Hello! How are you?). My reply is the standard, "Mzuri" (I am fine).

I sat at a simple wooden table and ordered a cold Tusker to start. The crowd is lively and the background music is a tribal sort (heavy on the drums).

The meat is served on skewers, with no real side dishes. The sides (for lack of a better term) are varieties of sauces/marinades (mint, chili, garlic, sweet-n-sour, barbecue, etc.). I feasted on zebra, impala, hartebeest, ostrich, and crocodile. They were all excellent, except for crocodile (which I could do without).

In addition to my old friend Tusker, there is a local drink called the Dawa Cocktail. In Swahili, it means magic potion and is apparently intended to revitalize the spirit, cleanse the soul, and cure almost any ailment.

As many of you may know, I have been ailing for some time. Therefore, I consumed three Dawas. It is a mixture of vodka, lime, sugar, and a splash of honey.

11/09/95 6:15P AFRICA

I have made it to the promised land! I am in the Masai Mara. Praise God!

The plane ride here was a bit of an adventure but I am none the worse.

The plane from Nairobi flew over The Great Migration. As you know, millions of wildebeests, zebras, etc. travel each year from the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania north into the Masai Mara of Kenya.

My tent in these parts is very comfortable. No complaints from me.

The afternoon game run was phenomenal and the scenery exactly as I had imagined. Thank you Marlin and Jim.

There were herds of elephants here, herds of zebra there, prides of lions napping, thousands of wildebeests yapping. It was better than the rest of the trip combined.

With the migration in these parts, there were many dead carcasses and skeletons on the savannah.

There were also many topi, impala, and antelope (all looked good enough to eat).

11/09/95 11:00P AFRICA

I am sitting outside my tent. It is a wonderful night. I am in Africa. Unbelievable. I have no company but I am not alone.

I had some local poultry for dinner and rapped with the local guide in these parts. His name is Peter. He looks young, but knows the area well.

The vast expanse of the Masai Mara is truly unsurpassed in terms of its beauty.

I finally made it. I've wanted to come here since I was a child. I am at peace and one with nature.

11/10/95 5:30A AFRICA

I couldn't sleep all night. This place is everything I dreamed it would be.

I could hear the elephants trumpeting, the hyenas calling, the zebras barking, and the monkeys chattering all night. It was a wonderful concert of sound.

11/10/95 12:30P AFRICA

I am back from the experience of a lifetime. I took a hot air balloon ride earlier this morning over the Masai Mara. The view of the migration from up high was heavenly.

It was so serene to have quietly floated over the migration as it awoke for another day in paradise. There were thousands upon thousands of animals: elephants, zebras, hippos, impalas, topis, giraffes, lions, baboons, warthogs, wildebeests, etc.

The scenery was out of this world. After the balloon ride, there was a champagne breakfast in the bush to celebrate the majesty of these surroundings.

The late morning game run was only icing on the cake. I lay witness to a cheetah that stalked, chased, and killed an impala. She had five cubs. I caught the whole thing on video. It was magnificent.

I am completely on fire in these parts.

11/10/95 10:45P AFRICA

This has been a day that I will not ever forget. It is all so clear now. My past, my present, and my future will be forever defined by today.

I am sitting in front of my tent with a belly full of food and just a measure of red wine. Red, red wine you make me feel so fine (Neil Diamond—or UB40 for the younger crowd).

I don't know what else to say without being repetitive. I have run out of adjectives.

This is the land where it all began. It is a wild country and I have embraced its offerings fully.

There is nothing that can do justice to what my eyes have seen, to what my ears have heard, to what my nose has smelled, to what my hands have felt, or to what my mouth has tasted.

I cannot explain my feelings. I can only say this: I am completely at peace. I am home. My dreams are fulfilled.

11/11/95 7:30A AFRICA

This is the last full day in Africa but it's all right now. The slow trek home begins, but first a stop in Europe for a few days of rest and relaxation.

Farewell to the Masai Mara. Happy Birthday to Tio Martin.

11/11/95 4:00P AFRICA

I am back in Nairobi and waiting to catch the all night flight back to London. I am a changed man.

The chaos of civilization has crept back into my head, but my path is clear.

11/16/95 6:00P TEXAS

After some days in Europe, the winds have brought me home. The journey is at an end. The mission has been successful. The future?