

thetroublewithparadise:

the parable of the nodder and the leaner

In which our inveterate traveller visits Tanzania, Zanzibar and the border to Mozambique; is offended by the Zanzibar Revolutionary Council; gets sick on purified water; contemplates the failed Ujamaa collective farming policies of Julius Nyerere; considers the spectacular incompetence of the British forces in Tanganyika during World War I; gets left behind his rapidly retreating rucksack on the only road South to Mozambique; is forced to evaluate his security clearance in a land with no security; and is jammed between the nodder and the leaner, who severely try his patience.

The Trouble With Paradise is a book dedicated to the idea that travel is not about sitting on idyllic beaches sipping banana daiquiris. That funny smudge on the horizon might be a tsunami.

You see, the trouble with paradise is simply this: there's always something coming along to spoil your fun. From terrible acts of nature, to the bar closing after running out of pink umbrellas.

Presented here is a single chapter in the ongoing saga of a traveller seeking trouble in paradise.

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"All Foreign Tourists to pay only in US Dollars at twice the local rate. By Order, Zanzibar Revolutionary Council." The sign was taped on the wall over the torn and peeling press-board lobby desk.

I had stumbled off the boat from Dar es Salaam after a night spent listening to non-stop Islamic prayers piped over the boat's video system. My muscles and joints were an agony of screams and shouts. Food poisoning compounded by toxic shock from too many chlorine purification tablets in my drinking water.

Zanzibar aspires to independence from Tanzania and I was subjected to a cursory glance by border guards at the port. It was hot and my shirt stuck to me from the humidity. Condensation beaded on my rucksack after the cold climate-controlled air conditioning of the boat. I squinted in the brightness at a taped sign on the grubby wall exiting customs control. "Ramadan: all shops and restaurants to be shut during the hours of sunrise and sunset. By Order, Zanzibar Revolutionary Council." That Council. I didn't see why the tourists had to starve as well.

I swayed out of the port and onto a grey-brown dry, dusty road.

"I take you hotel!" exclaimed a short, dark-skinned Arab. I nodded, too sore and sick to bother fighting him off.

He lead me up the street a hundred metres from the port to a building that was leaning slightly against its neighbours. It appeared tired and crippled, not unlike myself. A man stood behind the lobby counter and smiled. Cracked, brown-red teeth, stained with beetle-nut. He indicated the sign. I sighed and nodded. These signs appeared all over Tanzania, they were not only the work of the rather ambitious Zanzibar Revolutionary Council. I wanted to down a few painkillers and sleep. I didn't care where.

We climbed a narrow, dark flight of stairs.

"No running water. Here toilet." He pointed to a regular ceramic throne toilet - unusual for an Arab country - and a massive drum filled with water alongside it. Fill the bucket with water, pour it into the toilet. It flushes.

"Here shower." Square room. No shower. Just another large drum of cold water. And a bucket. Fine. You don't need more than that in the tropics.

"Here room." Long hall with four massive four-poster beds. The mattresses were thin, stained and supported by a few, sparsely lined, strands of rope. Torn mosquito nets hung, dusty and blood spattered, above the centre of each mattress.

I had the room to myself.

"You sleep well." He smiled, displaying again his range of irregular, tattered teeth. "Breakfast in morning, half past eight." Then he left.

I closed the door. It was a single sheet of press-board. Old, warped by rain, and hanging skew. I latched it with a single sliding bolt held on with a bent rusty screw. Then I stumbled over to the bed, bathed in sweat, fatigue and pain. And collapsed.

Welcome to Stone Town.

Tanzania is a stable country. Poor, filthy, wretched, miserable, impoverished, illiterate, incompetent. But stable. No coups, no wars, little interference from the outside.

Unusual for Africa and the work of one man: Julius Nyerere.

Born in Tanganyika to a local Zanaki chief, Nyerere was known by the Swahili name *Mwalimu* or 'teacher' because of his profession before becoming active in politics. He had been trained in history and economics at the University of Edinburgh. At the time, he was one of only two people who had received an education to graduate level in Tanzania.

In 1961 Tanganyika became independent and, in 1964, joined with Zanzibar to form a union. The new country was called Tanzania with Nyerere as its new president and head of the one-party state.

He inherited a country with huge natural resources but with limited exploitation of these, and few exported crops. There was a lot of potential but Nyerere was a socialist and, in 1967, he adopted the Arusha Declaration. This copied the Chinese communist model to create a series of collective farms, the *Ujamaa* ("family") village.

He believed that all that Africans needed to do was return to their traditional mode of life and they would become successful. Each village was to be a self-sufficient agricultural commune producing everything it needed.

Education was re-engineered to promote a communal, co-operative mindset. All property and businesses were nationalised. People were forcibly removed from their homes and dropped off in their new collectivist villages. Hardly anyone wanted to be a farmer. Bribery and corruption of officials became endemic.

Price fixing cut imports and removed internal investment incentives. Infrastructure collapsed and all incentive to produce anything disappeared. Zanzibar, a major exporter of spices and culturally distinct from the mainland, agitated for independence.

Ujamaa failed to boost agricultural output and by 1976, the end of the forced collectivisation program, Tanzania went from the largest exporter of agricultural products in Africa to its largest importer.

With the economy in tatters, Nyerere decided not to run for re-election in 1985. With unusual candour for a politician, he stated in his farewell speech, "I failed. Let's admit it."

Tanzania is a perfect example of how Africa's problems are self-inflicted. The only thing Julius Nyerere did right in his entire rule was when he invaded Uganda to topple Idi Amin in 1979 after that dictator staged a war against him. Unfortunately, Tanzanian rule of Uganda gave rise to the excesses of Milton Obote who also committed genocidal atrocities against the Ugandans.

Tanganyika was an unhappy German colony until the end of the First World War when it was handed to Britain as a protectorate. Zanzibar had maintained centuries of trade links with Arab nations to the north. It was a hive of activity, from spice production to slave trading.

Tanzania has failed to capitalise on its natural resources through tourism. Badly advised regulations and tourist taxes and visas with poor infrastructure have encouraged tourists to go elsewhere. Even the backpackers rush through.

Mineral resources remain poorly exploited. Private companies have an incentive to husband their mines. The copper mines in the south are indicative. When copper prices are high, then private companies open new shafts and tackle the more expensive and difficult seams of the ore. Tanzania's state controlled firms hacked out all the easy stuff when the prices were high. Current prices are low and it is now too prohibitive to tackle the rest. Anglo American had a look see, purchased a few large mines, and then sold them a few months later when the horror of incompetence emerged.

A Tanzanian chap I know has a delightful business. He purchases second-hand Mercedes Benzes in South Africa and then drives them all the way to Tanzania. There he sells them for significantly larger amounts than in South Africa. Nothing is available in Tanzania, so this is the only way that wealthier Tanzanians can get a smart car.

Then this chap buys as much Tanzanite as he can get his hands on, and comes to South Africa to sell it here. He makes a very nice living. This is known as arbitrage; moving things from places where they are plentiful to places where they are scarce. Half of this arbitrage is self-inflicted. The other half is a rare mineral.

Tanzanite is the blue/purple variety of the mineral zoisite. It was discovered in the Meralani Hills of northern Tanzania in 1967, near the city of Arusha. It is a popular and valuable gemstone when cut, although its durability is somewhat lacking. Tanzanite is noted for its remarkably strong pleochroism, appearing alternately sapphire blue, violet, and sage-green depending on crystal orientation.

Pleochroism is an optical phenomenon where, due to double refraction of light by a coloured gem or crystal, the light is divided into two paths which are polarized at a 90° angle to each other. As the divided light follows different paths within the stone and are travelling at different speeds, they may have the result of differential selective absorption, thus when they leave the crystal they have different colours.

The name Tanzanite is a trade name coined by Tiffany & Co. shortly after the gem's discovery.

In June of 2003, the Tanzanian government introduced legislation banning the export of unprocessed tanzanite to India (like many gemstones, most tanzanite is cut in Jaipur). The ban has been rationalised as an attempt to spur development of local processing facilities, thereby boosting the economy and recouping profits. As with many bright government ideas, this one has simply fuelled the market in illegal exports, which is why my friend is in business.

Tanzania is not one of my favourite countries. As a tourist in a developing country, I recognise that I am wealthier than the locals and don't know what things should cost. I accept that I will pay more. I don't expect that this will be organised by the state in an orchestrated policy of tourism robbery. To be fair, the state robbed its own citizens of everything they had, so the only people left with anything to steal are the tourists.

Further away from the centre of tourist happenings the Tanzanians are delightful. I crossed the Malawian border and walked across a longer than strictly necessary piece of no-mans land before tapping through the Tanzanian side in minutes.

Both the Lonely Planet guide book and Paul Theroux in his Dark Star Safari had mentioned how terrible this border crossing is. In my diary I simply comment, "Easy border crossing. The Tanzanians are delightful. Hope the rest of the country is this pleasant."

I then caught a short bus ride from there to Kyela. Russ Ty, a retired American soldier joined me in the bus. He was direct, appraising me, "You sure go in for skinny, don't you?" He sure went in for portly, but I don't make comments like that. And never in a public forum.

We bounced around on a dirt road until we arrived at a remote bus stop outside Kyela. Lunch was to be had in a beaten wooden hut. Dust streamed in through the gaps in the boards which also provided the only light. Plastic sheets covered old beer crates upended for tables. Wooden benches against the walls. Some fire stove somewhere in the back. Chaos of people all eating rapidly prior to catching buses which ran backwards and forwards over the borders to Malawi or Zambia, or northwards to the interior.

Good thing the menu was basic otherwise they'd never keep all the orders straight. A big plate of *nsima*, a thick, hard lump of mealy porridge. This staple is prepared in 50 litre aluminium pots over a fire. The powdered maize is boiled in water, with more and more added until it becomes a thick, dough-like lump of white putty. It is not flavoured with salt. Or anything.

The accompaniment is a small bowl of meat or chicken boiled to rubber and from a previously unknown part of the animal. The cows have usually died of old age, peacefully in their sleep in front of a hurtling bus. The chickens suffer more, they are run to death.

Aside from that, and not toxic waste, is a bowl of green paste made from the ground up leaves of cassava. This plant is also a staple. The root forms a large bulb which is eaten boiled, fried or as a porridge. The leaves are boiled and thrashed into paste. It doesn't taste of anything in particular. It is quite poisonous if not cooked completely. There is little danger of that as everything is boiled until all flavour has been removed. At least this kills the bugs in the water as well.

East Africa will never be known for its cuisine.

I sat with my back to the wall and Russ faced me. We watched each other's stuff. My camera bag was between my legs under the table. We ate rapidly.

A shout went up, "Mbeya!" Our next stop. We leapt up.

The proprietor kept his foot on the camera bag and smiled at me in the hopes that I'd forget it. I smiled back and pushed him over as I grabbed the bag and leaped outside onto the crashing cantankerous old bus.

In a swirl of dust, the bust paused briefly as passengers hurled themselves on board, then it set off. But slowly.

The landscape was dry. Acacia trees, thorny with tiny, sharp leaves and low, flat spread branches in clumps on grass plains. Lots of dust.

The bus heaved. It sighed. It gurgled. Then it blew a cylinder head.

Everybody scrambled off the bus. A Tanzanian man became concerned that Russ and I may be in for a bad time.

"In Tanzania everyone steal. You come with me. I help you find a good place to stay."

He lived in Mbeya and was returning after visiting family close to the border. He was good to his word.

As we limped into Mbeya long after the sun had set, he guided us to a cheap hotel close to the station. The Athena Inn was cheap and popular with the locals. Always choose places that are popular with the locals.

This one had tiny cement-walled rooms with steel-spring beds below thin mattresses, outside showers and no hot water. Perfect.

For dinner, run to death chicken. I think my portion of meat came from the thyrox, a patch of flesh between the foot and the ankle.

Russ was sure that we could catch the next train from Mbeya through the Selous Game Reserve to Dar es Salaam. I knew that the train was infrequent. Russ was sure we would catch one soon.

The next morning we went to the train station. Once upon a time Mbeya must have been an important stop on the colonial route through to other German colonies. The station is massive and cool. An old wrought-iron fence leads in to a tastefully designed complex with floors that, if they aren't marble, look as if they should be. We enquired hopefully as to when the next train might depart. It was leaving that day at lunch time, and would take two days to get to Dar. This seemed like very good timing.

We bought our tickets and then went to breakfast with happy hearts.

My breakfast order was, perhaps, a bit optimistic. I discovered that eggs were on the menu. I asked for mine to be fried. This must have caused a lot of confusion in the kitchen. My eggs arrived. They had been fried. But first they had been scrambled.

We pattered onto the train.

On the second day we passed through the Selous Game Reserve. This, the largest reserve in Africa, provides an interesting tale for those wanting to have a better understanding of Africa.

In 1896, the German Governor stopped hunting in an area north of the Rufiji River and officially declared it a Game Reserve. This made the Selous region the first protected area in Africa.

After the British Empire declared Tanganyika a protectorate, it expanded the already existing German Game Reserves to more areas, and in 1922 it officially named the region "Selous Game Reserve." The park takes its name from the hunter and soldier Frederick Courtney Selous. He blasted a trail of dead animals while contemplating the idea of creating sustainable hunting reserves.

The tsetse fly eats blood from animals and can carry Trypanosoma protozoa which causes African sleeping sickness.

Symptoms begin with fever, headaches, and joint pains. If untreated symptoms spread to anaemia, endocrine problems, and cardiovascular and kidney disorders. The disease then enters a neurological phase when the parasite passes through the blood-brain barrier. The symptoms of the second phase are what gives the disease its name: besides confusion and reduced coordination, the sleep cycle is disturbed with bouts of lethargy punctuated with manic periods progressing to daytime somnolence and night time insomnia. Without treatment, the disease is fatal, with progressive mental deterioration leading to coma and death.

Since females only mate once in their short life, the International Atomic Energy Agency has been introducing irradiated males into the environment. This process sterilises the male and has led to a drop in reproductive rates, which has also led to a drop in sleeping sickness amongst humans.

The condition has been present in Africa from at least the 14th century. Drugs developed to combat the disease were often more harmful than the bug itself. Drugs developed in 1906 were arsenic-based and caused blindness. Those developed in the 1940's killed frequently and left survivors brain damaged. Sometimes the only way to combat the tsetse fly was simply to avoid areas frequented by them.

In the 1930's and 1940's, the British Protectorate moved villages outside the tsetse fly affected areas and declared those empty areas part of the Game Reserve. Brian Nicholson, Selous' last European Chief Warden, created wildlife hunting blocks inside the reserve to bring in finances to build infrastructure and establish an anti-poaching team. At independence, the Tanzanian Government imposed a hunting ban in the Selous. This led to poverty and the inevitable poaching which saw elephant and rhino numbers rapidly depleted.

In 1982, the Selous Game Reserve was granted "World Heritage Site" status by the United Nations, which formally put it on the map.

Then the Tanzanian government decided that they needed to improve access to the reserve to bring in more revenue.

In 2002, the park authorities secured funding from the German government and proceeded to grade a motorway through the park. Swathes of land, up to 60 metres wide, were cleared, flattening everything in a straight line that paid little attention to engineering or design. Where the old dirt road used to wind pleasantly, it now just ploughs straight through. Where it passed through forest, the route is now lined both sides with the remains of

great trees that have been ripped from the ground and pushed aside by heavy machinery. The road has been built with no consideration to drainage or maintenance and is subsiding and crumbling.

The ugliness of the road has already reduced tourism numbers. Who wants to visit a nature reserve to see a highway?

Fortunately, I passed through by train, long before the road turned up. This part of Tanzania is flat and, from the elevation of the train, you can see for hundreds of kilometres. There was a bad drought at the time and the grasses were grey stalks carpeting the veld. Dotted acacias and termite mounds were the plains' only adornment. We saw giraffe, impala, warthogs and baboon.

Russ and I chatted to pass the time. We had run out of Tanzanian Shillings and so couldn't afford to eat anything on the train. Russ regaled me with stories about being a homosexual in the American military. He seemed to think it was extremely fun. This topic presented itself after I asked him why he had avoided visiting Zimbabwe and he said that he refused to spend his dollars in countries that victimised gays.

I was drinking the tap water at this stage. With no harmful side effects. Russ was convinced this could only do me harm and passed me some chlorine tablets to purify my water. So it was Russ who poisoned me when I couldn't figure out how many tablets to use in my little water bottle.

The train rattled in to Dar late in the afternoon and Russ fled at high speed, clearly tired of my company. I tracked into the centre, rapidly discovering Tanzania's policy towards tourists. Prices were ridiculous. Particularly for the dark hovels that were on offer.

I was in Dar to go to Zanzibar, because Zanzibar is supposed to be pretty. Then I poisoned myself and didn't feel very happy about anything. Although, none of the other backpackers I met seemed to be very happy either.

Tanzania is the land of, "Look, Mzungu!" A country where locals point out the visiting foreigners with exclamations and pointed remarks. This is not as invasive as in India, but it does work on the nerves. Dar reminded me far too much of India with its partly completed buildings, poverty, decaying walls, squalid overcrowding and noise. The buildings are incomplete for a reason. The government offers rates rebates for any buildings still to be completed. So rusting iron rebar rises bent and confused out of degrading cement roofs. They will never be complete.

I walked around the city and down to the harbour. It was Ramadan and scores of beggars, most non-Muslim, queued outside the mosques to beg off the faithful. The wide bay of Dar looked as if it should be an important port. Rusty old ships lie beached on the shore filled with squatters and festooned with laundry. A surprised American flag fluttered on a flag post at a stand where a bulky chap was deep frying. Something was being deep-fried, anyway.

I booked a ticket on one of the many boats servicing Zanzibar. They leave in the afternoon and arrive at the island the next morning. They are large catamarans and hundreds of people crowd on board, camping out on the carpeted floors inside the air conditioned hull. I slept through, not feeling well.

Zanzibar is good either for the beaches or to do a spice tour. The beaches were only vaguely interesting after a much better time in Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique. So a spice tour it would have to be.

There is one principle town in Zanzibar: Stone Town.

Everybody's had a go at owning the place. The Portuguese in 1503. Persian emigrants from Shiraz arrived and then the Sultan of Oman took over in 1698. The Persians named the place Zangi-bar, meaning "Place of the Blacks". They set up the island as their gateway for the slave trade. The British government forced the cessation of slave trading in the late 19th century under the British-controlled Omani sultan Hamoud bin Mohammed. They then took over in 1890 and ran it till independence in 1963. For a few months the Zanzibarians ran the place themselves, then they handed their sovereignty to Tanganyika. They're still miffed about this.

The shortest war in history was fought between Zanzibar and Britain in 1896. Zanzibar surrendered after 38 minutes. This was fortunate for the British who excelled at sending incompetent generals to Africa.

The Battle of Tanga, or the Battle of the Bees, was the blundering attempt by the United Kingdom to capture German East Africa, later Tanganyika, during World War I.

Tanga was a busy seaport and the site of the crucial Usambara Railway, which ran from the city to the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro. It was to be bombarded by British warships, but this plan was scrapped when Tanga's population agreed not to start hostilities. Agreement extracted at gunpoint - said guns actually shipboard artillery pieces.

However, the British broke the agreement and launched an amphibious attack on the city. From the beginning the attack was a disaster. A few days before the attack, the British cruiser HMS Fox arrived, announcing the termination of the earlier agreement. The secret mission had already been betrayed in India where German spies had noted Indian askari's being loaded onto ships, their baggage labelled "German East Africa".

This gave both the German army and the citizens of Tanga time to prepare for an attack. The German commander, Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, reinforced Tanga's defences with soldiers brought in from all around German East Africa, eventually numbering about 1 000.

On handing over the termination of the agreement, the British officer concerned enquired if Tanga's harbour had been mined. The mayor apologetically declared that it had.

Hearing of this, General Arthur Aitken, the spectacularly incompetent man for the job, sent a minesweeper to fruitlessly scour the harbour while he cautiously landed three miles south of the city, on 3 November 1914. Aitken failed to scout out the area beforehand, and it was only by chance that the 8 000 poorly trained Indian reserves Aitken landed were not immediately obliterated. It had never occurred to von Lettow-Vorbeck, a perilously smart man, that the British would land in the middle of a mangrove swamp.

The next morning, Aitken ordered his troops to march on the city, again, failing to scout out the route beforehand. This time, he was not so lucky, and Tanga's garrison ambushed them and quickly broke their advance. By afternoon, the fighting had turned to jungle skirmishing, with fighting frequently interrupted by swarms of angry bees. The poorly trained Indian soldiers had never been to Africa before, were fighting in shoulder deep

water against well-placed German machine guns. A sand bar prevented the British ships getting close enough to the shore to provide covering artillery fire. That didn't stop them shelling their own retreating troops.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck's troops rapidly overran the poorly defended British positions, and the British troops were forced to return to their boats. In their hasty retreat, the British left behind rifles, machine guns and more than 600 000 rounds of ammunition, all of which von Lettow-Vorbeck captured. Instead of a speedy end to the war in Africa, von Lettow-Vorbeck was able to hold out till the end.

I don't think the British liked the place either.

Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck is one of history's great strategists. He knew full-well that he could not beat the British in direct confrontation. He had no intention of doing so. All he wanted to do was to keep the British sufficiently occupied that he would give his German compatriots fighting in Europe a better chance.

The British decided to match their wily German opponent with another guerrilla leader of genius, the famous Boer War commando Jan Smuts. Since the outbreak of war in 1914 Smuts, who had evolved from an enemy of Britain into a staunch and trusted friend, had had his hands full in crushing a pro-German uprising among his fellow Boers and then organising and leading the campaign to capture German South West Africa. This was completed by the end of 1915, and he was given command of the British forces in East Africa.

At the end of 1916, Smuts was recalled to South Africa. He left as a hero, claiming that his troops had driven the Germans out of most of their territory, and had captured the two main railways and the capital Dar es Salaam. In fact he had completely failed to defeat Lettow-Vorbeck, who was still in the field with a force stronger than when he started. The majority of South African troops left with Smuts. The men were exhausted, sick and fever-ridden, and the cavalry units were useless, having lost most of their horses to the tse-tse fly. One unit had lost forty horses a day, and had to leave the carcasses to the lions and the vultures.

Lettow-Vorbeck fought a highly mobile battle, moving all through East Africa. The end of the war came as an anti-climax to him. He was hurrying off by bicycle on yet another of his habitual reconnaissance trips when one of his officers caught up with him, with an urgent message from the British Commander-in-Chief, General Deventer, saying an armistice had been agreed.

He received the message with mixed feelings. Having been cut off from outside news for so long, he could hardly believe that the Kaiser had abdicated, and that there had been a revolution in Germany. He felt he could have continued the fight for another year. Bowing to political rather than military realities, however, he obeyed orders to release all British prisoners and to march to Abercorn to surrender.

The next day Lettow-Vorbeck was invited for coffee in the mess by the Colonel of the King's African Rifles. At Abercorn, General Edwards, the local British commander treated him courteously and hospitably. The Germans handed over forty machine guns and 1 000 rifles - nearly all British or Portuguese. He and his troops were treated as honoured guests by their British and Belgian captors. They were taken along Lake Tanganyika by boat, and then by train to Dar es Salaam.

General Deventer entertained his legendary opponent to lunch, and he was treated with respect and admiration. He left for home in January 1919 - five years since he had arrived in the colony.

Shortly before his death in 1964 at the age of 94, he made a sentimental journey back to East Africa where he was rapturously received by his surviving askaris. As a mark of respect, when he died, the German government despatched a banker to Dar es Salaam to pay long-overdue pensions to the askaris who had helped Lettow-Vorbeck to his place in the pantheon of great guerrilla chiefs.

More than anything, this life throws up just how strange we human beings are. Here you have a bunch of cultured, educated men who admire each other greatly while at the same time are living in ditches and trying to kill each other. I could see them all being great mates down at the pub having a quiet drink and arguing comparative philosophy. They clearly respect and admire each other, yet they're obeying orders and trying to murder each other. What happens if we all just said, "No. Thanks, nice idea. But I'll be down at the pub."

Stone Town is a higgledy-piggledy clutter of narrow streets, overhung by stone houses and wooden balconies. There are still a few of the elaborate wooden doors, buttressed with pointed copper or wooden studs, although most have been sold to collectors. The white-wash is giving way to black mould and the walls are crumbling.

The Beit-el-Ajaib, or House of Wonders, was the former sultan's palace and is one of the largest buildings in the town. Next door is a smaller palace where the sultans were moved to after 1911.

The Portuguese built a nearby massive, crenulated and bastioned fort in 1700. There is a paved, open area in front of the fort known as the Jamituri Gardens. At sundown throughout Ramadan these were filled with food stalls selling a wide variety of goods including a strange local version of pizza. A small piece of dough is flattened and fried in a pan. A few herbs and chopped onion and tomato are thrown on top. Then an egg is cracked and tossed on board. Once complete it is folded and served. No, not really delicious.

It seemed curiously subdued as tourists and locals milled about in pools of gaslight chewing on bits of food and chatting quietly. A lot of the backpackers were suffering from various styles of gut complaints and weren't feeling well. Most were also sensitive after putting up with price abuse all day long.

There wasn't a lot to do during the day in Ramadan, so I booked myself onto a spice tour with Mr Mitu who drove a group of tourists around the island. We sampled lemon grass, cloves, coffee, cocoa, and - my personal favourite - fresh liquorice. It grows on large trees with yellow flowers. The liquorice forms thick black disks between the seeds in long brown pods.

We visited a few old ruins, dissolving into the plants growing thickly over the shattered stone.

Zanzibar was tiresome. The beaches weren't as perfect as one would hope. There was nothing to eat during the day. The bed I was sleeping in broke dropping me onto the floor. On the morning that a Finish tourist came stumbling in, his face bedazzled, and announced that he'd just been robbed at panga-point, I decided to depart.

The Lonely Planet had this to say by way of advice:

“A few hardy travellers make the journey into northern Mozambique from Namiranga on the Rovuma River (the border). The only problem is likely to be getting transport from Mtwara to Namiranga, but once here there are boats across the river (10 minutes), from where it’s a half-hour walk to the Mozambique border post.

From the Mozambique border there’s at least one pick-up daily to Mocimboa, where there’s accommodation at a basic pousada. From Mocimboa to Pemba the road is a nightmare but there is regular transport.”

Mtwara is a large port in the south of Tanzania and is a short 400 kilometres from Dar. Between Kibiti and Lindi the road becomes the work of Salvador Dali. The journey gave me a sense of what Hell may have in store for the unwary.

A bus ride in Africa is a festive experience. Hardly anyone has their own vehicles and so a bus is to transport what boats were to the Victorians. It carries the mail, all trade goods, supplies and livestock. Passengers are incidental. Goats are mounted standing on the roof amongst boxes of chickens and ducks. The goats face forward, into the wind, baaing in terror - they don’t get to wear masks to protect their eyes. Goods are hauled up onto the roof in good-natured chaos. Soft perishable items are shielded from the sun by having heavy suitcases dropped on top of them. Then ropes are wound over everything.

Tickets are marked with seat numbers. It is best to try and be forward rather than aft. The suspension is only a hint of what it may have been and buses sway alarmingly at the back. Anything that doesn’t fit on top has to go at the rear, passengers or not. The front of the bus is at a higher elevation than the back and so organic waste dribbles to the rear along the floor.

It is best not to inspect your bus too closely. The tires will have gone so far beyond bald that the stitching will have frayed out onto the road. It doesn’t need a mechanic so much as a tailor to put it back together. Possibly a priest would be of more use. The front windscreen will be cracked. Indicator lights fallen off. The seats will be loose and the windows either seized full open, or closed. The only things guaranteed to work are the massive and distorted sound system, and the horn. Both will be played incessantly and at planet cracking volume. It isn’t an earthquake, it’s just the number 9 bus going past. I hope you like Bob Marley for that is the only musician to perform.

I took my seat on the small bench directly behind the driver, facing forwards. There was enough space for one other person beside me, and three people in front of me, facing towards me. Two men sat down beside me on either side. We squeezed together for warmth, only it was 35°C that day and about 90% humidity.

Across from me four men argued about sitting down. They swapped, they shuffled, they shrugged. Four others took their place, and sat. Boxes piled on. A goat went past. Clearly not enough space on top for the livestock. I was passed a brace of live chickens. They stared at me in manic stupidity. One pecked at my leg. I passed them back to their owner, who smiled at me. We sat in the sun for hours while everything was loaded on. It didn’t smell good. Lots of sweaty bodies, not all of them human.

With a roar and explosion of thick, black smoke, the bus grunted into to life. Stalled. Grunted again, and surged out of the bus station. Everything shifted around me, babies screamed, women shouted, men yelled, goats and chickens joined in. Once sorted, I sat.

It was impossible to move, barely to breathe. My legs were pinned in place against boxes and bags. On my left, a chap who fell asleep, against me. The Leaner. On my right, near the window, a chap sat without a shirt, sweating profusely and wearing a steel-lined baseball cap. He fell asleep, his head tracing random arcs with the bus' jolting. The Nodder.

The Leaner relaxed onto my shoulder, dribbling down my arm in his repose. The Nodder wobbled his head metronomically, the brim of his hat clapping against my brow. My arms held off the press of boxes threatening to fall onto me. Engine heat rose up out of the floor, competing with the boiling air from outside. I sucked in air through my ears and fought revulsion from my nose signalling that things were not a bouquet.

Only 400 kilometres. Only. Only. A mantra.

The road bounced, it swayed, it joggled. Potholes of significant depth betrayed an important fact. This was no road. It was a series of experimental mining shafts.

Gullies were forded by bridges. They were not indicated and the wide dirt road would suddenly become a single-lane cement bridge with no sides. I considered what would happen if we missed the bridge.

Then I saw the results of several buses which had. I tried to shut down that line of thought. On my left, the Leaner leant. On my right the Nodder, nodded.

Centuries went past during which civilisations formed, developed and decayed. Continents drifted.

With the sun still high overhead, we came to a gurgling halt. A 10 kilometre queue had formed ahead of us. Everyone emptied off the bus and went to sit in the shade. Up ahead, the Rufiji River. A place that Lettow-Vorbeck had fought over, bombing the roads and destroying his pursuers. Place had definitely gone downhill in his absence. There was no bridge and a single pontoon plied its way back and forth taking a single vehicle at a time.

I looked at my map; we had travelled barely 100 kilometres in four hours.

"Hey, Mzungu!" I looked around at my interlocutor. It was the Nodder. He smiled. "We go find lunch, okay?"

A long string of palm frond stalls had collected along the line of vehicles. They sold food, groceries, clothes and other essentials. Vehicles could wait for days for an opportunity to cross. This was the only highway going south connecting two large ports. There were no plans to build a bridge.

I joined the Leaner and the Nodder for lunch of boiled fish and nsima. I wandered down to the river along the trucks and buses. Some people were washing clothes and hanging them up to dry on lines tied between the vehicles. Clearly this was not going anywhere fast.

At the river people sat and bathed or pulled in catches of barbel. These are hideously ugly black fish with big square heads and a forest of whiskers jutting out of their chins. They looked like unhappy boxers. The fish were being dried over smoky fires on sticks. Piles of them were ferried up to the restaurants. This must have been lunch.

The road was red-brown clay, dry and hard. It must be a mess in the rainy season. Trees and thick undergrowth bordered the road. Cicadas whined their shrill sing-sing. The air hung limp and the sun burned.

I headed back to the bus. The Leaner and Nodder waved to me where they sat in the shade. I joined them and we all passed out.

I awoke late in the afternoon. The bus was gone.

This was concerning. The queue of vehicles was still there, but my bus wasn't. I had my camera, money and passport with me, but the rest of my belongings were still on top of that bus.

I walked down to the river.

"Ah, yes, Mzungu," said an old man standing on the bank. "They look for you and then the bus go." Turned out the driver had paid a bribe to get through faster.

There was only one road. How hard could it be? I'd bum a ride and try and catch them up. I stepped onto the pontoon as it was leaving. A new Landrover was perched in the middle. Its solitary occupant was dressed in a suit, despite the heat. The vehicle had air conditioning. He must be a government functionary.

I addressed him, "Sir, I am a traveller in your fine country. I appear to have missed my bus. Would you be able to assist me in catching up with it?"

He glared down his nose at me. His voice was muffled as he spoke, hand clutching a scented hanky to keep out the smell of the lower classes, "What is your security clearance?"

That broke my stride. "Security clearance?"

"Yes, security clearance. I am transporting top secret documents for the Tanzanian government. I can only give you a lift if you have security clearance."

I stared at him baffled. What could he possibly know that would be of interest to anyone? How to completely destroy the economy of a country with everything? I'm not sure anyone but Robert Mugabe wants to know that.

I persevered, "Sir, I am a traveller in your fine country. I appear to have missed my bus. Would you be able to assist me in catching up with it?"

He glared down his nose at me, his hanky puffed out in an angry gust, "What is your security clearance?"

A certain circularity was setting in. I was spared reaching through his window and throttling him when a cheer went up from the opposite bank.

My bus had waited. God bless African time.

I squeezed gratefully between the Nodder and the Leaner. Then Hell began again.

The road rapidly became a dirt track with plenty of wildlife in the form of scrawny, gangly baboons and guinea fowl. The sun set through the tropical haze, orange and red over the grey-purple jungle. Then it became dark. A thick, smothering curtain of blackness through which the bus thundered, never hesitating, never deviating. Despite myriad unexpected narrow bridges.

Then we stopped, rattling and snorting. A few boxes by the side of the jungle were an impromptu set of food stalls. I joined the Nodder and the Leaner as we ate whatever was put in front of us.

The driver was worried about one of the tires. He replaced it with another, equally hirsute. This took several hours. The passengers started to complain about the chill of the night air. I still felt that I was battling to breathe in the heat. I was attracting new friends, mainly flies and mosquitoes.

When we returned to the bus, all the windows were shut to keep warm.

The mainly male passengers removed their shirts releasing a grey-fudge cloud of pervasive body odour so crippling that the windows misted up. I hunched back into my Iron Maiden as the Leaner and Nodder leant and nodded.

The road buckled, it stormed, it pleaded, it demanded, it thrashed, it bawled. It never gave up. The Leaner dissolved into my left shoulder. The Nodder slapped the brim of his hat into my head. A newcomer, the Grabber, wrapped his hand in fronds of my hair from behind. And pulled. I thought I was going mad.

A few hours later, in the impenetrable blackness, I wanted to go mad. Then I could slaughter everyone and get it over with.

Dawn came. The sun rose. The temperature accelerated. I was screaming for fresh air and cool free space. I was jabbing the Leaner, the Nodder and the Grabber with my elbows. They pretended not to notice. It was war at close quarters.

Then, in mid-morning, Lindi loomed. Never have I been so happy to see the sea. Blue the colour of a baby's eyes hugged sand like a lover's bottom. It was a pretty town and I could have kissed it.

At the bus station, half the passengers got off. I was alone on my seat. My soul sighed.

We traversed a postcard perfect coastline subtended from the road by blackened, poisoned soil.

This area has seen a number of experiments by do-gooders from across the world. First they tried growing ground-nuts but without verifying that the soil could support the crop. It couldn't. By then vast plains had been cleared for planting that never happened.

Then they dug deep pans and flooded these with salt water to grow prawns. The infrastructure couldn't support it since the main road to market was the one I'd just come down. Most of the pans dried out and nothing can grow on the salt-encrusted ground. There are still plenty of people trying to sell dried prawns along the road.

With a splutter and a sigh, the bus clattered to a halt and then buckled in on itself. We had reached the end of the line, Mtwara.

Once a port of importance, Mtwara now dozes at the far end of Tanzania. No-one goes there, no-one cares. Yet it is a large town. The people who lived there when the port operated and the road worked had nowhere else to go. The town seems to have broken up into a number of villages that just happen to all be alongside each other.

I eased my cramped legs and hobbled down the road eager to find somewhere to stay and sleep after more than 30 hours of travel. There was one small hotel.

Ten rooms formed a U around a courtyard. At one end was a well. A rope led down to an elderly yellow plastic bucket. This was the shower. At least the squat toilets were in cubicles with doors. Washing was public.

I was given a key that appeared to have been beaten out of a tin can. Blood smears dotted the wall, testimony to midnight battles with mosquitoes. I collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

Day had given way to a tepid early evening when I ventured out. I walked to the harbour in the hopes of finding a boat that would be heading to Mozambique.

Concrete jetties stood barren behind high mesh fences. There were no boats there at all. Not even derelict ones. Soldiers guarded the gates, protecting the concrete from theft. I hadn't expected more. I was going to have to find a way over land.

As I turned to go, I was hailed, "Hey, Mzungu!" And so I met Andrew.

Andrew worked at the harbour, doing something. He invited me to his house for dinner. I accepted. His home was microscopic. An entrance hall led directly on to the kitchen and the only bedroom. Here he lived with his wife and three young children. The oldest, his son Jordon, was five.

I asked about the harbour. "No boats now. They all go north. Here, nothing."

He worked for the government. They paid him, even if he didn't do anything. Mainly paperwork. It's amazing how, when people have nothing to do but are paid anyway, the amount of paperwork escalates to cover the time. Soon it becomes impossible to achieve anything because there's so much paper to be filled in.

Andrew wanted to know about South Africa. Were there opportunities, should he take his family and go south? I thought of all the north African foreigners living in South Africa as car guards or selling plastic coat hangers and rubbish bags at traffic intersections. I shrugged.

"I don't know. Many people come. It is not filled with opportunities, but some do well. I don't know what you expect. There are so many unemployed."

He shrugged too, indicating his tiny home, the candle illuminating the narrow table where we sat waiting for his wife to serve dinner. She stood tight in the kitchen cooking on a primus stove, frying doughnuts and making coffee. Her children hid behind the door staring at their father talking to the strange white man, their eyes large and bright in the darkness.

I didn't know how to explain that he was living better than most South Africans. He had a job, no matter how puny.

"If they will build a road here from Dar, then this town will come alive again." I tried to look reassuring. He just looked down. Where is the future?

I had no answers for him and I walked slowly back to the hotel in the darkness. The sky alive with stars, observing, passing no comment.

In the morning I trudged in fine rain to the bus station and waited. A car appeared. It was a Landrover chassis bolted awkwardly onto another engine. A few people climbed aboard. It was a grey day.

The engine stalled frequently and then we would all get out, push it to start, clamber back in and travel on a bit. The road was a narrow cattle track. Trees pressed against the car. After a few hours the road stopped and we all got out at the four huts comprising Msimbati.

The driver pointed, "Go that way." I took a bearing with my compass and set out.

I walked for an hour through the jungle. Children hooted and ran alongside me. There were numerous villages and huts deep amongst the trees. I welcomed the children. They seemed to know where I had to go.

In a non-descript village they made me wait outside a locked, moulding hut, while they went running into the bush. After a while an elderly man came, pulled by the children. He was carefully buttoning up an old army shirt and putting on a dilapidated cap. The customs official was on duty.

He pulled out his key and carefully unlocked the door which sagged and almost fell out. He propped it against the wall and invited me in. Dust and cobwebs coated every surface across a room empty but for a desk and a book. Blowing off the dust, he opened the book and fished about in a draw until he found a stamp. It had corroded and decayed until it was just a lump of rubber.

I filled my name and passport number into the book with my pen - he couldn't find one. Then he carefully stamped my passport and smiled at me. This was a big moment.

Formalities over, he took me aside and whispered in my ear. "It is a long walk to the river from here. Men will come to take you across. Don't pay them more than R 10, South African. R 10." He tapped the side of nose and beamed at me.

He took my hand and ushered me outside where two men were waiting. Alerted by the children and looking for business.

Rain and fine mist had drenched the land and the path had become a swampy, sticky mush. Paul Simon's "Slip sliding away" played in my head as I followed my self-appointed guides. Mud oozed, it gushed, it squished. Deep into my socks and boots.

I was muddy up to my knees. Then my waist.

The jungle opened up into a wide flood plain dotted with palm trees. I saw one with a V at the top. Two fronds of palm leaves from the same stem. I assumed it had been hit by lightening which I'd heard could cause this effect.

Then I saw that all the palm trees were like this. I walked and slid in amazement, my mouth open. Not a good idea with all that mud spraying about.

After a long time of being smothered in clay we reached the banks of a wide river. The Rovuma. An open row boat lay on the shore. I climbed in and they paddled me across grey, clay-thick waters which delineated the border.

On the other side was a wide, steep bank of sand and a wall of jungle without any breaks in it. I could see no people. No villages. No roads. Nothing. Just a green wall of Mozambique.

As we beached, I pulled out a single R 10 note. I stepped onto the shore and made as if to hand it to one of the men. He shook his head and made an upward motion with his hands. I shook my head, pushing the money at him. He refused, again signalling.

I thought he was being foolish. I was already across. There was no point in negotiating now. He wouldn't accept. I nodded and flamboyantly placed the note in the sand at my feet. Then I walked away from him across the bank. When I turned the money, and the men, were gone.

I stood alone on a sandy bank before the vast green desolate landscape of Mozambique.