



TRAVEL JOURNAL

# The way back

Over the past eight months, we've travelled with **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** through Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Uganda. Now we join them on the final leg of their 50 000 km trip as they meander through Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe on their way home to South Africa.

THE LUANGWA RIVER IN ZAMBIA'S SOUTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK

It was November and stinking hot. Thank goodness for the lake! And the people... The Malawians I met were inquisitive and friendly, and the countryside wasn't crowded. The presence of Lake Malawi seemed central to the country's sense of peace and quiet.

The border crossing from Tanzania into Malawi at Songwe was simple – our Carnet de Passage for the Hilux again proved its worth. Marie was still away in Johannesburg for a quick business trip, having flown out from Selous in Tanzania a few days previously, so I was by myself. I stayed at Sunga Moyo Campsite and Lodge at Nkhata Bay – what a surprise! The campsite has rolling lawns with big trees for shade (it was 36°C) and it was my rustic home for five nights. Three other overlanders told me: "We keep saying we'll leave tomorrow, but we never leave!"

Marie and I had already spent some time in Malawi on previous trips, so we didn't intend to hang around too long this time. After my stay at Sunga Moyo, I drove south to collect Marie from the airport at Lilongwe. The six-hour, 375 km journey was exhausting, and the Hilux's brake pads also (finally) gave up. Two nights in Lilongwe allowed for the pads to be replaced, and for a quick oil and filter change. Then we were off to Zambia, with South Luangwa National Park in our sights.



### *Luangwa's elusive leopards*

We covered the 190 km from Lilongwe to the park entrance in four hours, which included an easy border crossing at Mchinji.

We stayed on the banks of the Luangwa River at Track and Trail River Camp for three nights – it's just a five-minute drive from the Mfuwe entrance gate into the park. You can order meals or a G&T at the pool while shifting your binoculars around the amazing riverbed. Each campsite comes with its own water and electrical points, a cooking area – gosh, there's even an outside gym!

The weather was changing at this point: Zambia's bright blue sky made way for a low blanket of cloud and light, patchy rainfall. We had come here to see leopards and the weather made them hard to find. We scanned each and every tree along many kilometres of park tracks, but never saw one.

We did see huge flocks of southern carmine bee-eaters, plus lots of pukus, which are the impala equivalent of South Luangwa. The landscape of the park is unique: huge floodplains, oxbow lagoons and savannah, accompanied by trees like mopane, leadwood and vegetable ivory palm.

Compared to Africa's other super parks, South Luangwa is relatively small at "only" 9050 km<sup>2</sup>. (Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, by comparison, covers 50 000 km<sup>2</sup>.) Despite its size, it has a huge concentration of animals around the Luangwa River.

It's also not super pricey: Entrance cost us US\$30 (R443) per person per day, and camping was a meagre US\$5 (R74) per person.

**South Luangwa, tick.** Zimbabwe was next, but the 1 150 km drive to Livingstone would have to be broken up. We spent a night at Moorings campsite, which was simple, pretty and spacious.

The following day we stopped at the Choma Museum to see the original bush clearing equipment used in the 1950s to clear the Gwembe Valley basin in preparation for the flooding of Kariba Dam. A few huge metal balls (still on display in the garden) were strung together using a massive anchor chain and pulled by two Caterpillar earth movers, flattening and uprooting all the vegetation in their path. It was effective – and revolutionary at the time.



MEETING OTHER OVERLANDERS (TOP) IS PART OF THE FUN OF A LONG TREK LIKE THIS, AS IS HAVING YOUR VEHICLE FIXED FROM TIME TO TIME (BOTTOM).

CAMPING AT SUNGA MOYO, NKHATA BAY, LAKE MALAWI



SOUTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK, ZAMBIA

## Zim's decent tar roads

I was born in Zimbabwe and the country holds a special place in my heart. The people always make a plan; they're humble, helpful and respectful. We last travelled through Zim in 2011 and this time we noticed that lots had changed.

Shops were well stocked and all the big retailers were present, but the money situation was confusing: You can pay with Zim dollars (ZWL) in the form of bond notes, or you can pay with US dollars; you can even use rands. You can draw US dollars from a bank, but you're limited to US\$50 (R740) per person per day, and it's technically illegal to pay in US\$ cash – you're supposed to convert at a bureau de change for ZWL bond notes. Yup, clear as mud. But somehow it works. We could use our foreign credit cards at any of the Pick n Pay stores, and diesel was available if you paid US dollars cash.

We crossed the border at Vic Falls, where the foreign currency brought in by tourists has had a major effect – it's like a whole different country to the rest of Zim. We spent a night with a friend, Cesare Braccioli, who has been a Vic Falls resident for the past 20 years. He took us around to all the cool spots.

The next day we headed to Hwange National Park for a few nights. Having travelled through nine other African countries on this journey, and taking into consideration Zimbabwe's past 30 years of turmoil, the country still has some great tar roads. At one point we passed a section of original two-track tar strips that must have been laid down half a century ago – amazing.

We entered Hwange and camped at Sinamatella for a night. It was tidy but quite run-down. There were signs of new construction though, and the staff keep the place clean with a great sense of pride. Leaving Sinamatella, we crossed paths with a leopard, breaking the voodoo that had hidden them from us in Luangwa.

One of Hwange's best features is that you can book a picnic site and camp there – it's all yours come nightfall. We chose Mandavu, which is next to a big, permanent lake. The water was gorgeous to look at, but there wasn't much game. We stayed one night and would only recommend it as a lunch stop if you're driving around the park.

Masuma Dam, however, was packed full of elephants and other wildlife. We slept there for two nights. Other tourists can visit during the day, but you have it all to yourself from 5.30 pm to 6.30 am.

There was more construction evident around here, too: A few new lodges had sprung up and there seemed to be more effort going into bringing all the facilities up to scratch.

**Bulawayo was next on the list**, where we planned to visit friends. We watched a local pantomime production of Rumpelstiltskin one night – it was incredible to see what they managed to produce on a non-existent budget!

Spending time in Zimbabwe is always cathartic; I feel a sense of belonging without position or question. I grew up here and only left when I was 17 years old. I remember everything from those years – my first kiss, getting drunk for the first time...

Our last stop in Zim was Matobo National Park. We camped at Mtshelili Dam for three nights and it was beautiful to see all the green bush and a full dam. Another memory flashback: Years ago, my eldest brother dropped my father's prized Rolleiflex camera into the same lake. There was deranged panic to fish it out – and it still worked when we found it!

CAMPING AT MTSHELELI DAM,  
MATOBO NATIONAL PARK, ZIMBABWE



## Where's the champagne?

We'd been warned about the Beit Bridge border crossing. It was December and the Christmas holidays were in full swing, but the crossing turned out to be a breeze. We arrived at 9 pm and were through both sides in just under an hour and a half. I think it might be a record!

I almost expected to see fireworks and champagne when we crossed into South Africa after 18 months of being on the road... Alas, there was no fanfare, it was just me and Marie high-fiving each other in the car, smiling and crying. We'd made it!

We wanted to see the northern part of the Kruger Park, so we took a "sho't left" at Musina. We camped at Pafuri for a few days but it was extremely hot, so we eventually left to find cooler weather in the forests around Graskop in Mpumalanga.

We'd been on the road for so long, it allowed us to see South Africa with fresh eyes. For example, having a choice of restaurants in a national park is fantastic – we never saw this in any other country. Also, being able to drive on a tar road, in your own car, at 15 km/h looking for wildlife is unique. We are so fortunate in South Africa to have a place like the Kruger. We have great roads, good service and access to almost anything a person could possibly want: wine, hummus, cheese, koeksisters... We also have an incredible depth of culture that we all take for granted.

**Taking everything into account**, the true superstars of the journey were Marie and the Hilux. Okay, it's probably easy to find a Toyota that will manage some 50 000 km over harsh terrain, but the same can't be said of finding a woman who is willing to camp for 520 nights.

It takes tremendous communication to get through a trip like this. We talked through almost every imaginable subject and developed a few amazing road-trip playlists. Jasmine Thompson's version of "Rather Be" was a lifesaver when Marie had a meltdown in Ethiopia: I was climbing up and around an old burnt-out truck, which she thought would topple over. After that day, "Rather Be" became a top singalong tune for us.

We danced in the desert, floated in the Red Sea, slept in hammocks, drove 47 mountain passes, trekked to see mountain gorillas and chimps, and watched religious pilgrims in Jerusalem and Lalibela.

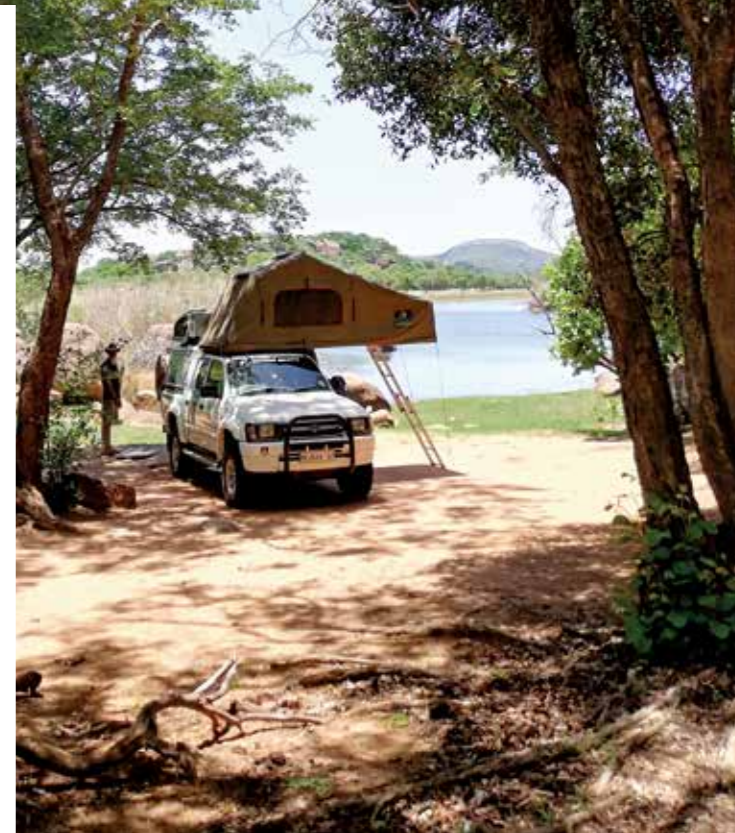
You drive, you cook, you clean, you laugh, you cry, you whine. Sometimes you scream, but mostly you love. You love deeper and with no filter.



GROCERIES AND FUEL WERE READILY AVAILABLE IN ZIMBABWE



A THEATRE SHOW IN BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE



A LEOPARD TORTOISE AND DUNG BEETLES IN HWANGE, ZIMBABWE



## Overlander Q&A

Patrick & Marie Gurney set off from Valence in France (Marie's home town) on 3 June 2018. Eighteen months, 23 countries and 50 000 km later, on 19 December 2019, they arrived back home in Johannesburg.

### Did this trip take a lot of planning?

Not really. We had a rough idea of where we wanted to go, but we decided the finer points on the road. Time was the main ingredient for success – we had 18 months. Crossing a border is easy when you've allocated an entire day to get through. Most national parks and private campsites require no prior booking, provided you don't mind what you get.

We saved for almost nine years. Our main goal was to step back and get a perspective on life. This type of journey changes you, whether you want it to or not. Exploring cultures and countries is something that everyone should

### THANKS TO THE GREAT DRAWER SYSTEM, EVERYTHING HAD A PLACE

do if they can; it helps you reflect on your own values.

### How did you manage to stay married?

**Marie:** It takes exceptional communication and buckets of humour. Not everyone is built for a trip like this. You need to stay centred and look for the small joys each day – and allow yourself to scream if you don't find those joys. We learnt to love the raw version of each other.

**Patrick:** Good coffee, music and an almost endless supply of diesel! Nothing is a problem unless you make it a problem. Marie is a planner by nature, but this journey threw curveballs at us all the time. Her ability to manage me and all the extraneous stuff was inspiring to witness.

### Did you ever feel unsafe?

**Marie:** No. When you put your authentic self out there, humanity has a way of welcoming you no matter what the situation.

**Patrick:** One night in Egypt, I camped

next to some illegal miners and nearly tasered myself. (See *go!* #158) We really wanted to travel through Syria and Lebanon, but Turkey had closed the border so we shipped the Hilux from Turkey directly to Haifa in Israel. We stood out while travelling between Israel and Palestine – we were the subject of many phone calls and radio chats between young soldiers and their superiors, getting approval to let us go where we needed to go.

### What were the benefits of getting a Carnet de Passage (CDP)?

It makes most border crossings easier. We had two CDPs, which we arranged through the AA in Kyalami. The one we got for Europe was unnecessary since you can get a TIP (Temporary Import Permit) and drive around Europe for up to six months. The second one was specifically for Egypt and cost us a R4 500 processing fee, plus the AA held a R160 000 deposit to make sure the vehicle returned to South Africa.

There were some African

countries that preferred their own TIP system and wouldn't process the CDP at all.

**What about insurance?** For Europe, we insured the vehicle through Gefion Insurance for about €100 (R1 600) per month. Later in the journey, we got a COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa) insurance document, which was a blessing. We purchased this for R1 200 in Ethiopia and it covered us all the way to Zimbabwe, for a period of eight months.

### Tell us about your car and gear.

We drove a 19-year-old double-cab 4x4 KZTE Toyota Hilux. It performed to perfection, only requiring CV boot, brake pad and shock absorber replacements over the 50 000 km distance. (She now has 323 000 km on the clock.)

The Hilux has been our baby for 11 years and we understand her well. She's a mix of second-hand 4x4 equipment, which we purchased over time, plus some newer gear.

We were helped in part by 4x4 Megaworld, who sponsored us with an Engel 32 l fridge, a dual-battery system, a Projecta charger and a solar unit. Escape Gear also kindly replaced our very tired canvas seat covers.

Other than that, we ran a fairly simple setup, with an indestructible stainless steel canopy from Korn Steel and two roof racks from Front Runner. A Howling Moon RTT Stargazer Tourer rooftop tent provided us with a little extra covered patio area for when it rained.

Dual fuel tanks gave us a range of 850–900 km, and we installed a 50 l water tank from Pioneer Plastics. We also installed a drawer system – by Custom Leisure Tech in Pretoria – which cost R20 000 but it was worth every cent as it made life so easy. Our drawers were the envy of most other overlanders we crossed paths with.

We did the whole journey on a set of BF Goodrich A/T tyres. We didn't get a single puncture despite much punishment, hence we never had to use our Takla air jack... We got stuck about 10 times and we didn't have a winch so we had to make other plans. No problem!

**What medical precautions did you take?** We couldn't take anti-malaria medication for 10 months in a row, so we opted to use Tabard lotion and cover up at night. We updated our yellow fever and tetanus shots before we left and carried a very simple medical kit.

We got medical cover from an international company called April. This cost about US\$4 000 (R59 000) per year but included repatriation, which gave us peace of mind.

**Give us a rough idea of your budget.** We had a budget of US\$35 000 (R517 000) for the 18 months, and we managed to stay within it. We camped wild through most of Europe (eight months),

**Countries visited:** France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt (see *go!* #158), Sudan (#159), Ethiopia (#160), Kenya (#161 and #165), Tanzania (#162 and #165), Rwanda (#163), Uganda (#164), Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe (this issue).

which saved us a fortune. The most expensive country was Israel – it was pricier than Switzerland – and the cheapest country was Sudan, where fuel cost an average of US\$0.18 per litre (R2,70). If fuel was that cheap in South Africa, you could drive a Unimog to work and back!

Average daily food expenditure was around US\$3 (R44) in Africa. We made our own food and mostly ate vegetables. The average border crossing cost us about R450.

### How did you find your way?

We mostly used Maps.Me and iOverlander, but also Google Maps and Google Earth to find some secret wild camping spots. Maps.Me allows you to download maps for an entire country at a time so you don't have to worry about losing cellphone signal. iOverlander is a non-profit community resource driven by overlanders. It's a bible of places to see and stay, plus it's free, faster and more current than Tracks4Africa (at least for the info we needed). In Europe we used an app called Park4night, which has great information on where to camp wild.

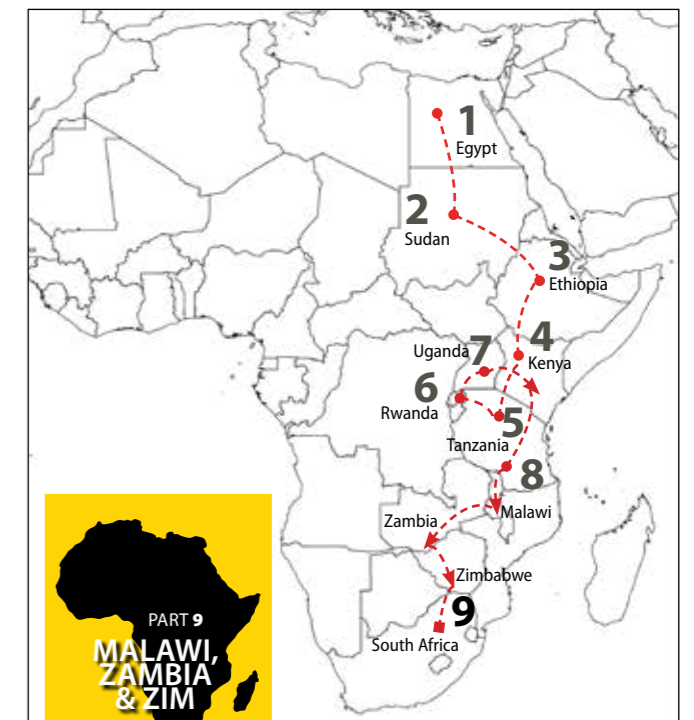
### Final advice to others keen to do a similar trip?

Travel slowly so you can soak up more. Camp wild when you can – it brings you closer to people and allows you to feel the soul of a country. Listen to your car: Take heed of funny noises and fix it before it gets serious. You don't have to pack a tonne of gear and food either – buy what you need along the way and keep things simple. We travelled alone but could usually find help or someone to talk to in the next campsite.

**Would you do a trip like this again?** Yes! We're hatching a plan to do a part of the Silk Route in Asia, probably in 2025. It will be a shorter trip this time, around six months.



THE GURNEYS DROVE A 19-YEAR-OLD TOYOTA HILUX



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