



TRAVEL JOURNAL

The long road home

After exploring East Africa for several months, our intrepid adventurers finally start heading back to South Africa. But first **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** find reasons to linger in Kenya and Tanzania...

Our journey started in mid-2018 when we left Marie's home town of Valence in France. We arrived in Africa in May 2019. Now it was early October and suddenly a bit surreal to be contemplating our last two months of this epic overland trip.

After our ramble through Uganda, we basically made a U-turn and started the southward leg. We crossed into Kenya via the little border post of Malaba. There was a 7 000+km drive between us and Joburg and we planned to be home for Christmas. But despite the promise of gammon and mince pies at the finishing line, we still had a few spots we were keen on exploring as we passed through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.



SHETANI LAVA FLOW



TSAVO'S RED ELEPHANTS



LIONESS, TSAVO EAST

Red elephants and man-eating lions

Kenya's Tsavo National Park was our next destination. The 800 km journey across Kenya to get there would require two overnight stops – at Lake Baringo and Lake Naivasha.

Between Malaba and Lake Baringo we passed through Iten, a small town on the Rift Valley escarpment. Kenya is famous for its long-distance runners, and many of them hail from Iten, which is at 2400 m above sea level. Kenyans fondly call Iten "The Home of Champions" and we quickly understood why – we saw runners all over the place.

In the same region, we stopped to see the crazy cliff divers at the dramatic Cheploch Gorge. These local boys willingly flirt with death, diving from a 20-metre-high platform into a super narrow section of the Kerio River. As they jump you inadvertently hold your breath, and then you hear the splash with perfect acoustic amplification coming up from the cliffs before a head pops above the surface.

We crossed the equator for the third time on our way to Lake Naivasha, then we made tracks to Tsavo. The park is roughly the same size as the Kruger and split into two sections (East and West) by the Nairobi-Mombasa highway. Tsavo is famous for the terror unleashed by two lions in 1898 – the pair killed at least 30 railway construction workers and villagers over a 10-month period, before they were eventually shot and killed by Colonel John Patterson.

To access both sides of the park, we paid a US\$52 (R748) per person per day entrance fee, plus 300 Kenyan shillings (R42) per day for our vehicle. Camping was reasonable at US\$20 (R288) per person per night.

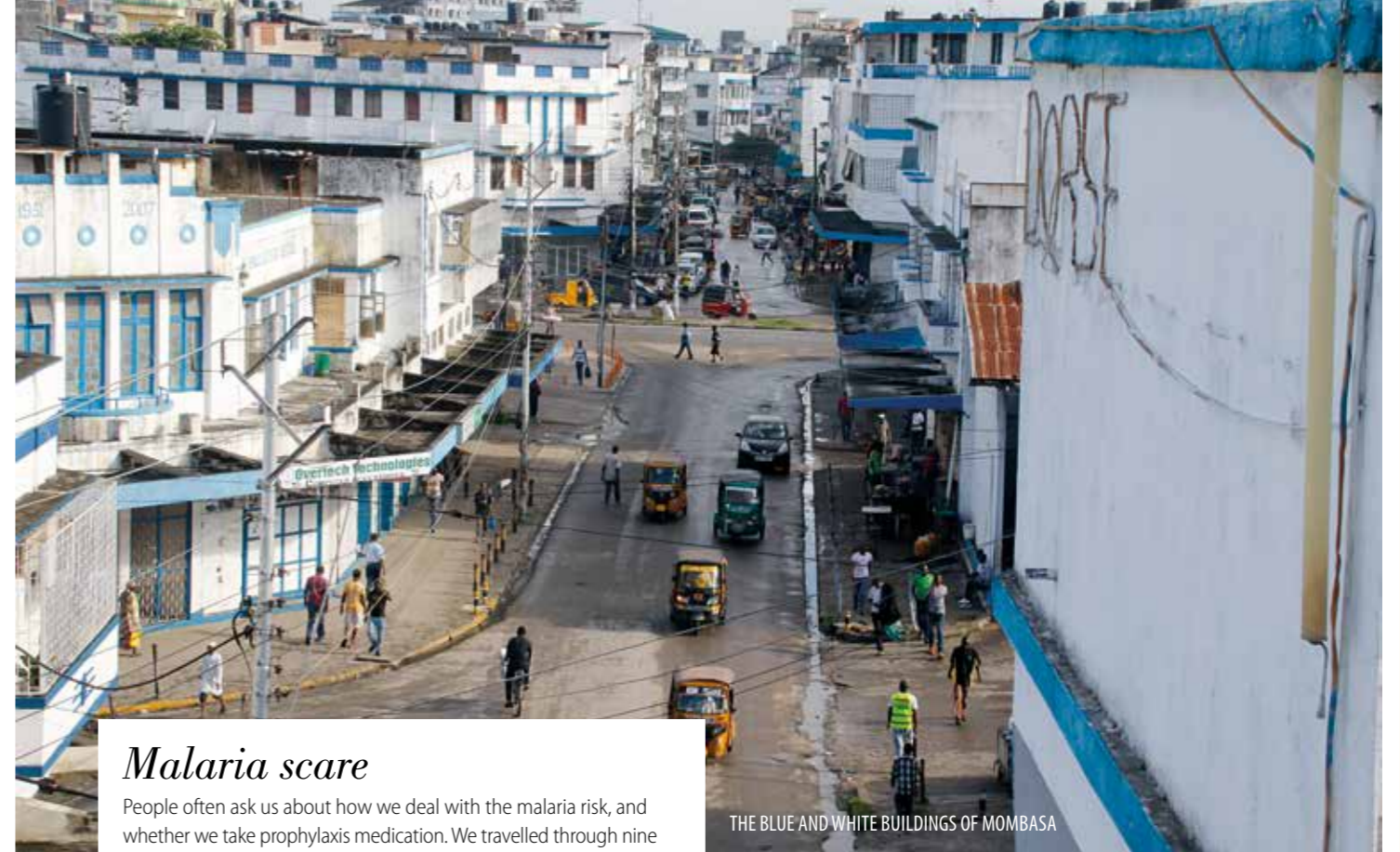
We visited Tsavo West first, entering through Chyulu Gate. The dramatic scenery caught us by surprise: rivers, thick bush, mountains and even lava flows (the largest is the Shetani Lava Flow, covering 50 km²). We also climbed the Chaimu volcanic crater, up a tough, treacherous scree path of porous volcanic crumble that sometimes required us going on hands and knees. The slog was worth it, with spectacular views of the lava field and Chyulu Hills from the top.

We camped for two nights and went out on game drives. Unfortunately these were hampered by heavy rain that made many routes impassable. However, on one drive we did bump into Tsavo's famous "red elephants", so called because they dust-bathe in the fine, red volcanic soil.

Tsavo East is more popular with tourists because of higher concentrations of game, but we found the scenery to be less dramatic. There are vast plains of scrub and savannah, and riverine areas of thick acacias and raffia palms. We entered via the Manyani Gate and camped at Lugard's Falls, on one of the prettiest stretches of the Galana River.

From there we drove to the southern section of Tsavo East. Although busier here, it's nothing like the well-trampled Serengeti, for example, and the road conditions were also mostly a pleasure. We spent two nights at Ndololo public campsite – it only has basic facilities, but the shade trees are enormous. A beautiful lioness posed for us on one game drive; on another we watched a cheetah catch and kill an impala. One minute the cheetah was drinking water, the next it had a baby impala in its mouth – the speed of these cats is unbelievable!

We exited via the Voi Gate and set our sights on the coastal city of Mombasa.



THE BLUE AND WHITE BUILDINGS OF MOMBASA

Malaria scare

People often ask us about how we deal with the malaria risk, and whether we take prophylaxis medication. We travelled through nine high-risk malaria countries, but taking the pills for such a long time (in our case, for up to 10 months) isn't advisable. We chose to rather protect ourselves by applying mosquito repellent (Tabard lotion) and covering up as much as possible.

After a few days in Tsavo I started to develop malaria symptoms – it felt like I had a minor case of flu, with night sweats and a constant headache. We had a self-test kit, which I used, but the test came out negative so I figured I was probably just dehydrated. Two days later, however, I still had the same symptoms. So when we arrived in Mombasa I went to the Aga Khan Hospital for a second test. The doctor told me that the self-test kits sometimes give a negative result if the malaria is still in its early stages. He gave me a four-day course of malaria medication, told me to drink loads of water, eat plenty of fruit and get some rest.

Three days in Mombasa at the Regency Park Hotel allowed us to plan our Zanzibar beach break, get a new battery for the Hilux and pay a short visit to Fort Jesus, a Portuguese fort built in 1595. Many of the downtown commercial buildings are painted blue and white; in a way, Mombasa reminded us of Greece. We asked some residents why these colours were so commonly used and the answer was: "I don't know, somebody started it and the rest just followed." This in itself seemed a bit Greek!

Most of the malaria symptoms had eased after three days, and we were good to go. From Mombasa we travelled south along the coast for 120 km towards the border with Tanzania. En route we spent a night at Diani Beach where we watched a goat derby! It's a charitable event hosted annually by the East African Women's League. Punters place their bets as 40 – 50 entrants wildly chase their goats around a makeshift course for fame and glory.

We used the Lunga-Lunga border post to cross into Tanzania. It was painless, only taking one hour. From there it was an eight-hour (420 km) drive to Dar es Salaam. We parked the Hilux at Mikadi Beach Lodge (US\$10 – R144 – per day) and caught the ferry to Zanzibar the following morning (we used Azam Marine).



FORT JESUS

CENTRAL MARKET, MOMBASA



GOAT DERBY, DIANI BEACH



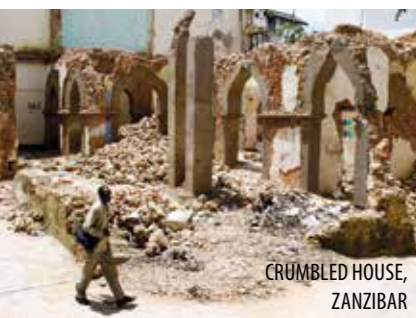
NUNGWI MAIN BEACH, ZANZIBAR



WALKING DOWN TO THE BEACH AT STONE TOWN



MARIE BUYING DINNER, FORODHANI GARDENS



CRUMBLD HOUSE, ZANZIBAR



OUTSIDE THE EMERSON SPICE HOTEL, STONE TOWN

Island magic (and a touch of mould)

Zanzibar offers balmy weather and warm tropical water. To get a feel for the island, we stayed for 10 days, spread over three locations: Pwani Mchangani (on the east coast), Nungwi (at the northern tip) and of course Stone Town.

We melted into island life, drinking piña colodas and strolling along gorgeous white beaches. One thing that took us by surprise, especially at Pwani Mchangani, was waking up to find that the sea had disappeared! Tidal change is one thing, but Zanzibar has wide, shallow beaches that exacerbate the effect.

The tidal change was less pronounced at Nungwi, which also had a good selection of little bars and restaurants to visit.

In Stone Town, we stayed at a boutique hotel called Kisiwa House. I guess its shabby look could be described as “romantic”, but Stone Town seems to be falling apart and really needs some TLC. Forodhani Gardens Square at the seaside was our go-to dinner spot. There are dozens of open-air stalls that offer everything fresh from the sea. Along with all the Arab, Portuguese and Indian influences, you’re guaranteed to find something delicious.

Taking a break from the Hilux and its roof-top tent was priceless – we relished the opportunity to eat out, walk the streets, take hot showers and sleep under crisp, white hotel linen.

Back in Dar es Salaam, we had a small crisis to sort out. We had hurriedly packed up a wet tent and we’d left two damp towels in the Hilux. After 10 days of festering in the heat, the mould was at Guinness World Record level! It covered most of the tent as well as the interior of the Hilux (both the cab and canopy) and it had even colonised the gas bottles.

We made a vinegar-and-water mixture and scrubbed off what we could. Marie’s essential oils came in handy, combating that awful damp smell. With the mould monster tamed, we left Dar es Salaam and headed south to Kilwa Kisiwani, where we wanted to visit the ruins of this old trading town.

The tar road was fairly decent, but the 320 km still took us more than five hours. You drive through lots of small villages, which slow you down.

Africa’s ancient trading hub

When the Portuguese arrived on the East Coast of Africa in 1502, they found a flourishing Swahili trading city called Kilwa Kisiwani. Today, the only reminder of the glory days – when its influence stretched from Malindi in the north (present-day Kenya) to Cape Corrientes (Inhambane in Mozambique) in the south – is the fact that it’s a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

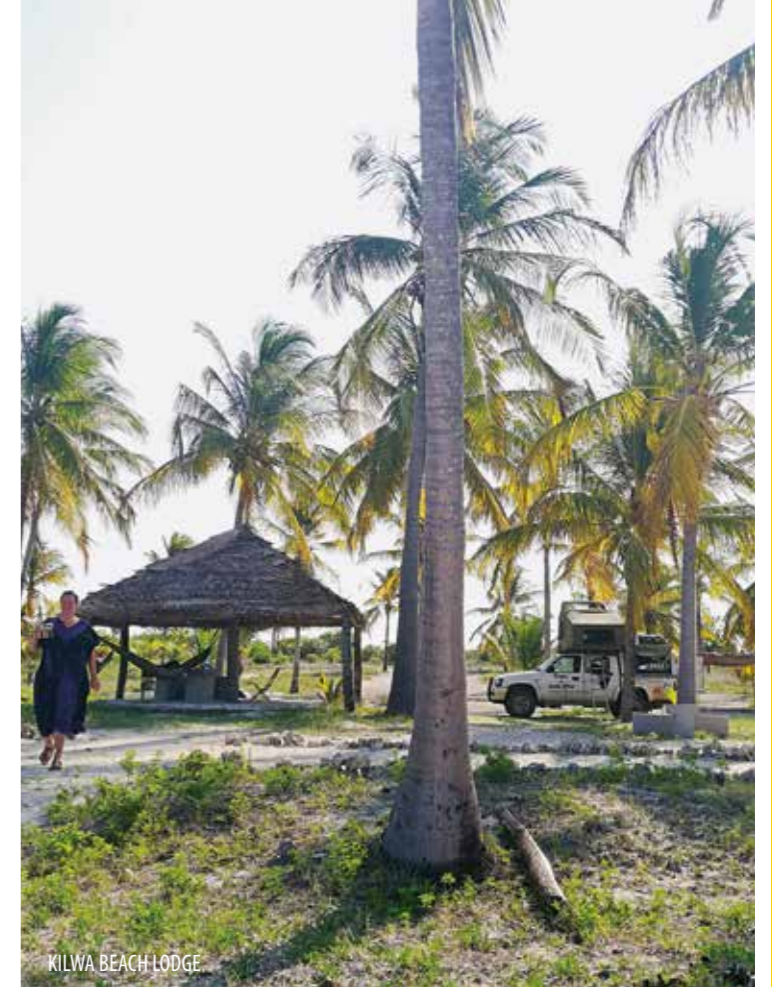
The old settlement is on a small island just off the coast. It was founded in the 10th century by Persian sultans and the majority of the ruins date from the 14th and early 15th centuries, when sultan rule was at the peak of its power. Kilwa’s wealthy residents built grand houses from massive coral blocks cut from the coastal bedrock. Ships brought in porcelain from China and spices from Arabia to trade for gold from Great Zimbabwe and ivory from the interior. Kilwa acted as the principal gateway between Africa and Asia.

We camped at Kilwa Beach Lodge on the mainland at Kilwa Masoko, a tiny fishing town. Our seafront stand had a private banda – a palm-roofed gazebo. We booked a tour to the Kilwa Kisiwani ruins with the local Tour Guides Association. The US\$50 (R718) per person price tag included the boat trip across to Kilwa Kisiwani Island, as well as the service of an energetic, interesting guide.

The Great Mosque, Sultan’s Palace as well as a few other buildings are all still partially standing, which gave us a sense of the former grandeur of the site.



RUINS OF THE GREAT MOSQUE, KILWA KISIWANI



KILWA BEACH LODGE



BOAT RIDE TO KILWA KISIWANI



GEREZA FORT, KILWA KISIWANI



SELOUS GAME RESERVE, TANZANIA



ISIMILA STONE AGE SITE, NEAR IRINGA



ISIMILA STONE AGE SITE



MARIE'S FLIGHT OUT FROM SELOUS

Scouting out Selous

From Kilwa we turned inland again, to Selous Game Reserve. The roads were mainly tarred, but there was a 90 km dirt section that was muddy – the Hilux soon had a “Camel Trophy” look going.

Selous is a truly wild park, visited by few tourists. We camped for three nights just outside the park at Selous River Camp. It's a private lodge, but they also have space for overlanders. The facilities, including a bar and swimming pool, were good. Camping was good value at US\$15 (R216) per person per night. (It was too expensive to stay inside the park: US\$150 – R2 156 – per person for a day permit, including vehicle and other fees.)

We did one drive into the park, using the Mtemere Gate. Selous is full of fantastic miombo woodland and has a dense network of lakes, lagoons and river channels along the Rufiji. There was sticky, black soil everywhere and we were on our own without a winch. We didn't see much game, which might be because we saw 20-odd trucks along the main routes. The government is currently building a hydro-electric dam inside the park. Some luxury lodges in Selous have closed their doors, waiting out the disruptive construction time, which will apparently take another five years.

At this stage, Marie was needed back in South Africa for a few work meetings. She flew out from Selous on a cold and wet morning – the plane needed two attempts at take-off due to the mud! We would meet up again in Lilongwe, Malawi, in 10 days' time.

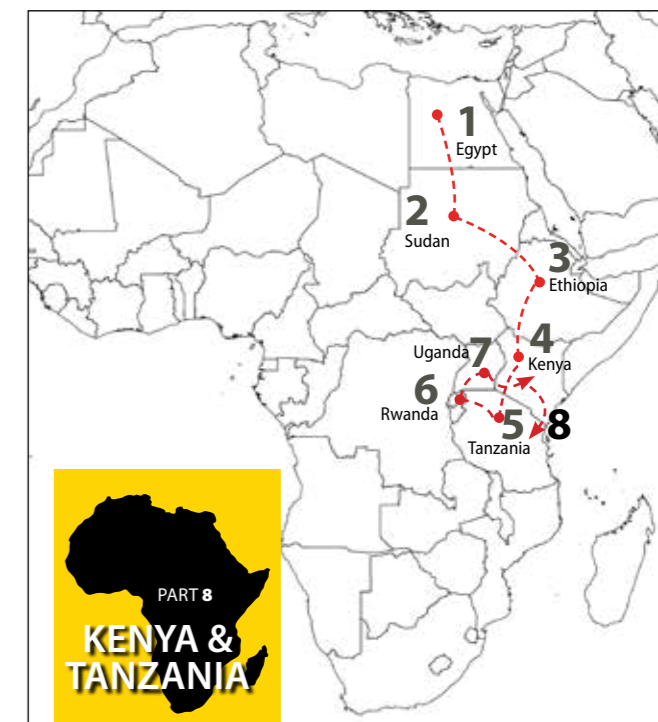
I packed up the Hilux and made my way through Selous, driving north-west through the park and exiting at the Matambwe Gate. It was a gruelling five-hour journey to cover just 80 km and I still had another 155 km (four hours) to Morogoro, where I planned to spend the night. Relentless rain on the clay roads made the driving “interesting”, especially on the mountain pass sections.

From Morogoro, I was back on the main road between Dar es Salaam and the interior of Tanzania. I headed west and passed through Iringa where I visited the Isimila Stone Age Site. The dramatic landscape of eroded sandstone pillars is an important archaeological site and there's a little museum where you can see ancient stone tools, some of which are up to 100 000 years old.

I spent my last two nights in Tanzania at The Old Farm House on Kisolanza farm (a great spot with a really good restaurant) and at Mala Green campsite (not a good experience; avoid at all costs). Mala Green is near Kasumulu, where the border post between Tanzania and Malawi is situated.

It was time to head to Lilongwe to meet Marie, but first I had a few leisurely days to spend along the shore of Lake Malawi – not a bad place to be!

MORE INFO: You can e-mail the Gurneys if you have questions about their trip (✉ info@skultcha.com) or visit skultcha.com. Follow them on Facebook ([skultcha](https://www.facebook.com/skultcha)) and Instagram ([@skulcha](https://www.instagram.com/skulcha))



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NEXT MONTH: *The Gurneys arrive home! It's the final instalment of their Travel Journal. For parts 1 – 7 see issue #158 (Egypt), #159 (Sudan), #160 (Ethiopia), #161 (Kenya), #162 (Tanzania), #163 (Rwanda) and #164 (Uganda).*