

EUROPE

Part 1

TRAVEL JOURNAL

Europe in a Hilux

You've already travelled through Africa with them, now it's time to go back to the beginning – to May 2018 – when **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** set off on their 18-month overland journey from France to South Africa. In this first part of their trip, they drive through France, Italy and Croatia.

Patrick enjoys *padkos* on the shores of Lake Annecy in France, while testing out the Hilux's new kitchen system.



From the top: The Alpine town of Anney is famous for its lake and tree-lined canals. The Gurneys' visit to La Thuile, Italy, coincided with an annual event called the battle of the goats. A taste of Italy: decadent *affagato*, a coffee-based dessert, and Parma ham and salmon on fresh baguette. A snow-covered landscape greets the Gurneys' crossing into Italy.

The first hurdle was getting our 2001 Toyota Hilux KZTE (affectionately known as Kukuza) to Marie's home town of Valence in France. From there, we'd drive to Johannesburg, my home town, through Europe and Africa.

The vehicle was shipped from Cape Town to Antwerp in Belgium. What should have been a six-week voyage turned into a three-month ordeal. The clock was ticking and we were eager to get going, but first we had to navigate some red tape.

We were disappointed by our shipping agent, who tripped up on the paperwork early on. They insisted on presenting our Carnet de Passage to customs officials in Belgium, whereas the AA instructs that you should simply complete a Temporary Import Permit. The TIP would have been far less of a hassle, and that early mistake came back to haunt us later in the journey.

On 28 May 2018, we finally had Kukuza delivered to Valence. We packed hurriedly and set out a few days later, heading straight for the magnificent Alps. We whisked through the French countryside and overnights in Annecy, next to a lake at the foot of the mountains. From there we headed to Mont Blanc, where we stayed in Chamonix.

Our plan was to camp whenever we could, and that first night in Chamonix was our first time in the tent. We had bought a second-hand Howling Moon Stargazer rooftop tent in South Africa, and we hadn't even opened it yet!

It was a 15-minute puzzle to figure out, but then we were sorted. The rooftop tent turned out to be an absolute blessing in the months to follow, because we seldom found that perfectly level spot to pitch a traditional ground tent.

The following day we took the cable car up to a place called Plan de l'Aiguille, from where we could admire Bossons Glacier. The sheer size of the ice-blue glacier was something to see.

It was summer in Europe but still chilly. That night, in a campsite nearby, we lay bundled up in our cosy tent listening to the gunshot-like sounds of the cracking glacier echoing in the distance.

Crema di caffè junkies

Travelling through Europe is wonderful – it's so easy without border crossings. Suddenly you're in another country; you can tell by the different language on the road signs.

Rather than using the 12 km Mont Blanc Tunnel – the most convenient way to enter Italy – we opted to take Kukuza on a 150 km route full of mountain passes. This took us a few days on a mix of dirt and tar roads, and we camped wild in the pristine, partially snow-covered mountains. We were getting quicker at setting up the rooftop tent: four minutes was our new record, including chairs and table out and coffee on the go.

We got our first taste of Italy in the town of La Thuile in the Aosta Valley. Many of the houses there have roofs made from coffee-table-sized slabs of slate. We saw a large number of goats and people gathered together in a field. Our first cultural event, as it turned out, would be the annual *Batailles des Chèvres* – a goat battle!

Locals explained how it works: Two goats lock horns until a persuasive push from the victor turns away the challenger. Along the way there is much excitement and cajoling among the 100-plus competitors.

Even though we had allocated just over one month in Italy, we knew we'd never make it all the way down to the end of the "boot". We decided to focus on the central region of Tuscany instead – the countryside surrounding cities like Genoa, Pisa, Sienna and Florence.

The Italians certainly have a flair for ornate buildings. In Pisa we saw the Leaning Tower and in Florence the most beautiful churches.

But for us, the real Italian triumph was not architecture but *crema di caffè*, a deliciously smooth coffee ice-cream drink – perfect for the warm summer temperatures we were experiencing in Tuscany. *Crema di caffè* was available everywhere and Marie was addicted. In fact, it was impossible to find a terrible coffee in Italy.

To find quiet, hidden camping spots, we used a mix of free apps like Google Earth, Park4Night and iOverlander. These off-the-beaten-track spots really made our journey memorable. Our routes through the Italian countryside revealed plantation forests, natural bush, vineyards and abundant birdlife.

Entering the cities posed a new challenge for our camping-only approach. We weren't in a camper van, which you can simply park anywhere, so we had to find actual campsites, which were usually just outside the cities or on the city limits.

Sienna had a quintessential Italian village feel, with a beautiful piazza. Florence was much bigger, with hordes of tourists jostling for the perfect selfie.

Italy is a place where you can happily yell, "Ciao!" to your mate 150 m down the street – nobody cares. As in France, food is an integral part of the culture and each dish has its place and history. We both love pasta and there are more than 500 different kinds in Italy. It's impossible to choose! The buffalo mozzarella available in the supermarkets is outstanding, and there are so many flavours of *gelato* (ice cream) that you should always ask to taste a few first, just in case you miss out on a spectacular new variety.

We camped along an ancient Roman stone road about 20 km from Sienna. Exploring on foot to the nearby village of Fonterutoli, Marie happened to locate a country restaurant called Osteria di Fonterutoli. The confit rabbit and liver we had there was one of the best meals we'd ever eaten.

At this stage, Marie flew back to SA for work. I spent a week with friends exploring Perugia in the Umbria region. Rural and quiet, Umbria is just as scenic as Tuscany but less touristy.

I also visited Assisi, an immaculately kept town, filled with churches and the famed tomb of St Francis, the patron saint of animals and the environment.

Before meeting Marie again in Venice, I had a few maintenance things to take care of. I got everything done over the course of two days in Perugia. Most important was sorting out our big solar panel, which was taking up valuable space on our back seat. With the help of a local engineering workshop, I moved it to the inside of the canopy roof and fastened it inside a hanging tray. Our table had been bouncing around the back, so we fastened it to the rear canopy door with brackets. The bakkie's CV joints also needed replacing – I had these done at the local Toyota garage. Sorted.

It took two days to drive the roughly 350 km from Perugia to Venice. Reaching the east coast, I did a quick one-night stopover in the Po River Delta – the largest protected wetland in Italy and a hotspot for European birders.

Most Italians told us not to visit Venice since it's overcrowded with tourists. But Venice is magical, especially at night. It has great architecture and the mode of transport – all boats, no cars – is unique. Our drink of choice was Aperol Spritz, a bright orange aperitif mixed with white wine, prosecco and ice in equal parts. They have a tradition here of eating *cicchetti* – gorgeous, neatly cut discs of white bread with mouth-watering toppings. While we were there, we also popped over to the next-door island of Murano, famous for its glassworks. I was on the hunt for a few old Venetian trade beads, which I managed to find.



From the top: Plan de l'Aiguille is about a third of the way up Mont Blanc and a good spot to view Bossons Glacier. Marie next to an old stone chapel overlooking Lake Roselend in the Alps. The Leaning Tower of Pisa was completed in 1372. Despite its precarious appearance, it has somehow remained standing, even surviving a few earthquakes.



Island-hopping in Croatia

Our last stop in Italy was the city of Trieste. From there, we drove through Slovenia for 20 km before entering Croatia, where we'd spend another month. Our first stretch was a beautiful 160 km drive down the Dalmatian Coast to the town of Pula, home of a large Roman-era amphitheatre.

Near a small village called Zagorje, we drove the Hilux onto a ferry to cross to Cres Island. The sea journey was a mere 5 km, and it took 10 minutes, but loading all the people and vehicles onto the ferry took at least an hour.

It was Saturday 18 July 2018. When we arrived in the village of Cres, the World Cup soccer final between France and Croatia was three hours from kick-off. We had bought Croatian flags for the Hilux, although of course Marie was secretly supporting France...

We searched for a good beach restaurant with a big screen and cold beer. A place called Sumica was perfect – it had good pizza and plenty of Tomislav, a strong local beer. Unfortunately Croatia lost the game, but that didn't stop the party from going on until 3 am.

Across the bay from Cres, we found a massive olive grove where we made camp for the night. We met a young couple, Raphael and Carol, travelling in an old Mercedes van. They had driven down a steep dirt road and we had to help them get back up the incline. That evening we camped side by side, sharing dinner and drinks while discussing life on the road. They were just some of the many people we would meet on our trip, with whom we're still in contact today.

We settled in for four days at a super spot called Camp Bijar, next to the pretty village of Osor. We did laundry and chatted to the other campers. We invited our "street" of campers to join a long table for drinks and snacks. One couple, Katia and Joseph, invited us to come stay with them in Hungary if we wanted, and another camper – Peter – cooked us the most delicious fish.

It was absolute bliss. Idyllic and simple, Camp Bijar even had a bakery making fresh baguettes and croissants.

Our sons Kai and Callum flew in from Paris to meet up for a quick 10 days. Kai was 20 at the time; Callum was 18. We collected them in Split then headed to Pag, Croatia's "party island" further down the coast.

From the mainland, Pag does not look inviting – like a chunk of barren moon rock plonked into the Mediterranean. The boys had never heard about Pag and its "Little Ibiza" reputation, so it was a case of the oldies showing the youngsters where the party was at!

We booked an Airbnb in Novalja, which totally delivered on the party front – the boys loved it. There were hundreds of young holidaymakers around, all in summer gear hanging out at beach bars, restaurants and markets. The nightclubs were on Zrće Beach, 7 km away, and super organised, shuttling the partygoers back and forth until the early hours. One night, Marie and I even managed to get to one of the clubs for a boogie.

From the top: Venice's famous canals are not just for tourists. The canal boats are the city's main mode of transport – even if you have to move house. This scenic camping spot was on an old Roman road in Tuscany. The tiny Valdarke Beach is one of Cres Island's many attractions.



Krka and Plitvice

Back on the mainland, we drove to Krka National Park, about 120 km to the south-east. The park wraps around Lake Visovac and the first thing we did was a three-hour boat trip from Skradin (the park entrance) to a monastery built on a tiny island by Franciscan monks in the 15th century. The easiest way to see Krka's landscapes is by boat, but we were also keen to explore on land – specifically, we wanted to hike to the natural pools and waterfalls along the river that drains the lake, which we'd seen in our guidebook.

We got off the boat at Skradinski Buk and a gentle stroll led upstream along a series of crystal-clear river pools and waterfalls. I'd never seen anything like it. Eventually we reached a viewpoint over the Skradinski Buk waterfall. All the other visitors were swimming, and 10 minutes later we also took the plunge – spectacular!

The boys flew back to France from Split. From there, Marie and I drove 200 km north to Plitvice Lakes National Park. Plitvice has a series of long, wide wooden walkways taking you past terraced pools and waterfalls, created by nature over many centuries. The limestone naturally occurring in the spring water forms a build-up that grows about 1 cm per year, eventually resulting in 5- to 10-metre-high waterfalls. The clarity of the water is mind-boggling – you can easily see the bottom of a 5-metre-deep pool. It felt as if we were walking around on the set of some fairy tale movie, with each turn revealing more beauty. Plitvice is prettier than any picture can do justice.

From the top: Croatia's Plitvice Lakes National Park is a wonder world of turquoise pools, waterfalls and forest. One of the joys of being on the road is meeting new people all the time. Patrick and Marie spent a few days at Camp Bijar near the village of Osor and had time to share a drink with their neighbours in the campsite. A drive through the olive groves on Cres Island.





Clockwise from top left: Zagreb is a city of quirky museums and friendly felines. It's easy to see why Pag is Croatia's party island. Kai and Callum with Marie on Pag. Boardwalks in Plitvice Lakes National Park take you past crystal clear pools.

Kissing our way through Zagreb

Zagreb is one of the quirkiest capital cities around. It has the world's shortest funicular railway (only 66 m) and some weirdly interesting museums. One of its major attractions is a "kissing route" that leads you through town.

We checked into a centrally located Airbnb for two days and set out to visit the Museum of Broken Relationships. Yes, that's right! It displays a collection of objects each representing a broken relationship (for better or worse), which have been donated by people from all around the world. Each object is accompanied by a note explaining the role of the object in the break-up. There are touching, sad and some really funny stories.

We also visited the Museum of Science, which was straight out of the 1970s and more like an educational antique shop. The map on the wall still had Zambia and Zimbabwe as Northern and Southern Rhodesia...

We loved visiting all the odd little shops, stopping for a coffee, and eating local specialties like *štrukli*. There are savoury and sweet versions of this gratinated dish, made with pasta and a mixture of cheese, egg and sour cream.

The lower part of Zagreb is the most "recent" addition to the city. Built mainly in the 19th century, it's a lively quarter full of shops, cafés, markets and some pretty parks. We bought all our fruit and veg at the huge Dolac Market with its red umbrellas in the main square.

But back to the "kissing route"... It's such a clever way to get tourists to explore a city. You get a map with different "kissing spots" noted. As you follow the route, you keep bumping into other couples doing the same thing, and we shared many smiles and laughs.

We visited the Strossmarter Promenade in the upper part – the older section – of the city, for a view over Zagreb complete with deckchairs, snacks, drinks and music. It was the perfect setting for our final sunset in the city.

We found Croatians to be straightforward people who are true to themselves. Their intent is clear; you never have to second-guess what they're actually thinking.

We'll definitely be back one day, for all the amazing attractions we still want to see, but mostly for the cats. They were everywhere: in the street and on the pavement, and they were social, engaging and beautiful; rolling over for a tummy rub whenever we approached, and not relenting until the fix was provided.

How does a country get that right?



The Zagreb funicular might have the world's shortest track (66 m), but this quaint public transport system has lots of character.



Fast facts

COSTS

The prices below are estimates. The Gurneys travelled in Europe in 2018; the rates will have gone up since then.

SHIPPING

We shipped our bakkie from Cape Town to Antwerp (Belgium) at a cost of R33 000. The shipping agent we used has since gone out of business (not surprising, considering our poor experience with them). In 2019, quotes from other companies were in the vicinity of R38 000 to R42 000.

ITALY

- **Accommodation:** The campsites we used near Sienna and Florence generally cost in the region of R500 per night for the two of us.
- **Transport:** In Venice we used a *vaporetto* (canal boat). Trips cost about R135 for a 75-minute cruise around the canals. We did this a few times as it was really worth it!
- **Food:** A *crema di caffè* cost around R20, going up to R30 for the fancier *affogato al caffè*. A plate of five *cicchetti* cost R80 to R100. An Aperol Spritz cost about R125.

CROATIA

- **Accommodation:** The Airbnb in

- Novalja cost about R15 000 for the four of us for six nights (it was peak season); and in Zagreb we paid R1 000 per night for two people. Camp Bijar near Osor cost about R500 per night, without electricity.
- **Transport:** The ferry to Cres Island cost about R300 one-way, for us and the Hilux.
- **Entrance fees:** R85 per person for Krka National Park (this included the boat trip to the monastery on the island); R360 per person for Plitvice Lakes National Park (this included a panoramic train ride). It cost R80 per person to enter the Museum of Broken Relationships.

MORE INFO

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NOTE: We published the African leg of Patrick and Marie's journey in issues #158 to #166. Read about their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. In the end they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km before arriving back home in Johannesburg on 19 December 2019.

EUROPE



Part 2

TRAVEL JOURNAL

From Romania, with love

Peleş Castle was built as a summer residence for the Romanian royal family in the 1800s. The detail of the interior woodwork is astonishing, and the whole castle was powered by its own water turbines. Visionary!

On their 18-month trip of a lifetime from France to South Africa, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** head into Eastern Europe, looking for castles, bears and berry wine.





From left to right: Marie at a wild camping spot on the beautiful Soča River, Bovec. Down town Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. At Vintgar Gorge in Slovenia, wooden walkways lead you into a narrow valley.

We left Croatia in August 2018 and arrived in tiny Slovenia – about the size of the Kruger Park – where our first impression was that it was extremely tidy. We drove through pristine-looking villages full of traditional Alpine chalets and bright flower boxes.

Our first destination was Postojna Cave, where a mini train took us underground for 3,7 km through lit-up halls and galleries. We even saw the famous “Baby Dragon”, a type of aquatic salamander called an olm. Olms, we were told, can live up to 10 years without food and have a lifespan of 100 years!

Our admission ticket also included a visit to the beautiful Predjama Castle, which is perched halfway up a towering cliff and partially built into a cave.

Slovenia only has one national park, but when it’s as spectacular as Triglav, the country really doesn’t need any more. Triglav is famed for its crystal-clear glacial river systems that descend from the Julian Alps. The drive there took us along the exquisite Soča River to Bovec, a small town known as the country’s adrenaline capital. It was still late summer in Europe so we kayaked and hiked and tried out Europe’s longest zipline: 4 km in total, with the longest single line at 650 m.

Using the park4night app we found a wild (i.e. unofficial) camping spot right on the Soča River. It was crazy beautiful! But we weren’t the only ones there... Three other campers had also parked, and in the morning we were woken up by a policeman. He was intrigued by our rooftop tent, the South African number plates on the Hilux, and our 18-month itinerary.

“You are driving to where?” he asked with a massive grin.

“Africa!”

He just shook his head. “You can go, but the others must pay the fine – they know the rules.”

It was a valuable lesson learnt: Always find a quieter spot if possible, something we would perfect over the coming months. This time we dodged a R550 fine.

A road trip through Slovenia is not complete without tackling Vršič Pass, which is also in Triglav National Park. Nicknamed the “Russian Road”, it was built by 10000 Russian prisoners of war in 1915. The pass is 20 km long and

gains 1600 m in elevation along 50 hairpin bends – they’re numbered so you can keep track of your progress. With an average of one hairpin per 500 m travelled, our Hilux – nicknamed Kukuza – was taking strain. I loved the deft road construction with nail-biting drop-offs, but Marie wasn’t as enamoured. She kept wondering how quickly she’d be able to open the door and dive out...

Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, was calling. Because the country is so small, it meant we were only 80 km away. En route, we stopped at Vintgar Gorge where 1,6 km of suspended wooden walkways take you deep into the narrow valley.

Next was the charming town of Bled with its lake and island church. It was hot, so we took a dip (with a few hundred other swimmers), then we had a quick lunch followed by coffee and the local culinary treat – Bled cream cake, a delicious flaky pastry with custard and cream.

Arriving in hip Ljubljana, we chanced upon Odprta Kuhna, a buzzing street-food extravaganza where top chefs share their latest creations every Friday. Then we checked into a pricey Airbnb for two nights. (In general we found Slovenia to be the most expensive country on this leg of the journey.) We met the owner who gave us the keys, a cup of *kava* (coffee) and a customary shot of *snops* – moonshine with a 40% alcohol content. (It was barely 9 am...) After seeing the poor state of our room, I went back to the bottle for another throat-stripping experience.

Expense aside, Ljubljana had an arty, laid-back feel. We visited the Metelkova – a cluster of ex-Yugoslavian military barracks that squatters took over in 1993. The state has been trying to tear it down for years but to no avail. Today it houses youth organisations, art institutions, bars and coffee shops.

We were heading to Hungary next, and then Romania. Sitting in a *kavarna* (coffee shop) in Ljubljana researching the latter country, I came across a website describing a huge cultural festival near Prislop Pass, which would take place in a week’s time. We’d have to rush through Hungary if we wanted to make it...

Blue cowboys and a rally driver

The day we crossed into Hungary, we drove 400 km along a network of picturesque, rural tar roads, alternating with highways to make up time.

We stayed with new friends in the town of Pecs – a couple called Katia and Josef whom we’d befriended earlier in Croatia. In Hungary, they drink a smoother but stronger moonshine called *pálinka*. Josef and his two neighbours were excellent home distillers of this national elixir – the next two days were jovial!

We camped wild along the Danube River on our way to beautiful Budapest, which we loved for all of one morning. The city is split into two by the river and it has a similar sense of romance as Paris.

Back in Kukuza, we headed out of the city to meet the Csikós, also known as the “Blue Cowboys” because their traditional costume is blue. Hortobágy National Park is Europe’s largest ranch land and home to these horse herdersmen – we were captivated by their horsemanship. There were plenty of Hungarian Grey cattle in the park; it’s tradition for farmers to let their cattle graze here in summer. But we were amazed to see Hungarian water buffalo as well.

Sadly, we had to cut our Hungarian visit short: The Prislop Folk Festival was only days away...

We crossed the border into Romania late one evening, at 8.30 pm. We usually arrive in a new country in daylight so that we have time to look for a secluded camping spot for the night. While eating dinner in the town of Satu Mare, we used Google Earth to find a quiet spot just out of town on the banks of a river. We went to bed but we were woken unceremoniously at 2 am by some chap who seemed to be practising his Dakar Rally skills in the countryside! It was a taste of things to come...

The next day, we drove 120 km to Maramureş, a region famous for its 17th-century wooden Orthodox churches, built with tall spires and roofs with oversized shingles. Perched right on the Ukrainian border, this is a land locked in time. There’s nothing odd about seeing a horse-drawn cart filled with hay, or locals dressed in folk costumes. Maramureş is basically a living museum.

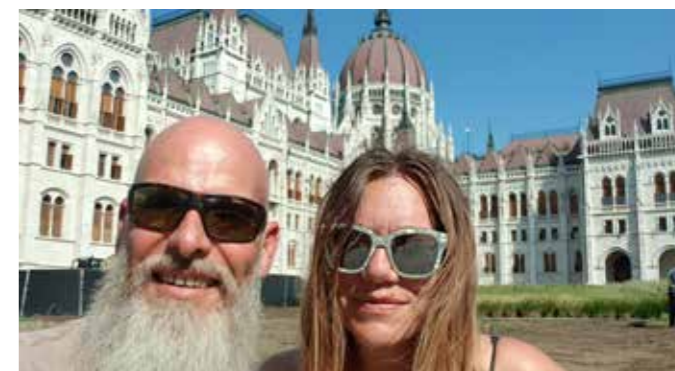
We visited a village called Săpânța, home to Romania’s tallest wooden church with its 75 m-high spire, and the Săpânța-Peri Monastery. When a citizen of Săpânța dies, an artist is commissioned to carve and paint a pictorial homage of the deceased onto a wooden headstone in the tiny “Merry Cemetery”. We took a guide to help us decipher the verses – some were sad, some funny. As much as this was “modern” Europe, it felt somewhat magical.

Miraculously, we were still on track to make it to the festival in Prislop on time. To get there, we drove the winding Prislop Pass. We turned the last corner and arrived in the village, but hang on... Where was the festival? This celebration of folk dance supposedly draws 20000 people, but we saw just two parked cars at a wooden hut selling Romanian souvenirs.

We asked the shopkeeper where everybody was. “Ah,” he replied, bemused. “No party now, come in 2019!”

The website we’d seen clearly said it was taking place in 2018, but now it seemed to have been postponed due to funding issues.

Disappointed, we headed into the hills to find a campsite for the night. We met a sheep farmer feasting on cheese and shared some of our Hungarian *pálinka* with him. A few shots later, Marie and I had drowned our sorrows. We vowed to never let our route be influenced by outside factors again – we’d simply let the road unfold.



From the top: A “blue cowboy” shows off his skill on horseback in Hortobágy National Park, Hungary. The Hungarian Racka sheep is best known for its unusual spiral horns. Patrick and Marie outside the Hungarian parliament building in Budapest. The Zsolnay Fountain in Pecs has four spouts shaped like oxen heads.



From the top: Horse-drawn carts are still a popular mode of transport in Romania. With its colourful wooden crosses, Săpânța cemetery makes for a pretty resting place. Romanian sheepskin coats, for sale on the Transfăgărășan pass, are guaranteed to keep you cosy.

Romanian chicken

Many people in rural Romania still use horse-drawn carts, but just as many seem to be trying to fast track themselves into the present. They've been buying up Europe's discarded vehicles for next to nothing, unleashing a dangerous mix of too much horsepower and too little driving experience onto the roads.

Take "Romanian chicken", for example: If you see an oncoming vehicle in your lane, it's *your* responsibility to get out of the way! We didn't see a single accident, though, so everyone at least seemed to be on the same page.

The further we travelled, the more we experienced Romania's strong cultural heritage. The food is a little heavy, but the slow-cooked lamb stew served by a local shepherd on the side of the Transfăgărășan mountain pass was the best I'd ever eaten. We enjoyed the local wine – Marie was particularly partial to berry wine.

Romanians are welcoming and always willing to assist. We met the seasonal pickers – usually Roma people – who pick wild berries and mushrooms in large quantities to be exported.

We also loved that Romanians let you camp anywhere. Wild camping is celebrated and viewed as a national right. We camped on farmland, in forests, next to rivers. . . We even drove up a mountainside (no road!) to get a good view, and nobody flinched.

Besides Transfăgărășan, we also traversed several other beautiful passes such as Transalpina, Bicz Gorge, Buzău Pass and Rucăr-Bran Pass. Every 100 km delivered another authentic village, castle or church – and, of course, the obligatory Romanian chicken contestant. . .

We continued east to the Churches of Moldavia. These huge churches and monasteries are masterpieces of Byzantine art. Entire walls both inside and out are decorated with elaborate 15th- and 16th-century frescoes that brought the stories of the Bible to life for many Romanians.

There was still one prime Romanian attraction we were keen to see: a bear! After all, Romania has the largest concentration of European brown bears on the continent. Marie was less keen. . . I kept teasing her, saying that when standing up, a bear would "only just" be able to look us in the eye in our rooftop tent.

Each night, ignoring "Do Not Enter" signs, the advice of the local residents and Marie's pleas, we chose camps in the most remote corners of the biggest forests we could find – all in the hope that we would encounter a bear. Then, one night deep in the Șureanu Mountains, we got lucky.

"Did you hear that?" Marie whispered.

"No," I answered, but then I *did* hear it. And it didn't sound happy.

It sounded like the bear was right outside our tent, but it was probably 500m away. Petrified, we didn't even peek out. The bear moaned every 30 seconds or so, while walking away from us through the forest. Marie finally came up for air and there was much nervous chatter between us before we could get back to sleep.

But we still hadn't *seen* the darned bear. So, after three weeks of wild camping, we decided to use a professional tracker to find one. We joined Absolute Carpathian tours on an outing and saw more than 10 bears in two hours at a feeding station high up in the mountains. The bears are fed to dissuade them from rummaging through bins in the nearby town of Zărnești.

It was special to see European brown bears in the wild. They're huge but very shy and their group behaviour was fascinating to watch from the comfort of a secure wooden hide, which pleased Marie no end.



Near Zărnești, we also visited Bran Castle, often believed to have been a former home of Count Dracula. (Not actually true, but who cares? It looks the part!) Unfortunately, we arrived five minutes after four tour buses, so we were only able to take a few snaps from the outside.

Way more impressive was Peleș Castle, 50 km away, which was built in the 1800s as a summer residence for the Romanian royal family. The detail of the interior woodwork is astonishing, and the whole castle was powered by its own water turbines. Visionary!

Bucharest was next, the beating heart of Romania – a mix of old-world Paris and Soviet-era apartment blocks. We booked into an Airbnb for two nights and saw the gigantic Palatul Parlamentului (Palace of Parliament), believed to be the heaviest building in the world weighing an estimated 4.1 million tonnes.

We dined at Caru' cu bere – "The Beer Wagon", a restaurant in operation since 1879 and so named because the beer gets delivered by wagon from the family brewhouse around the corner – and we visited the beautiful opera house and lunched in the parks.

We also visited Nicolae Ceaușescu's opulent residence – he was Romania's final communist-era leader. Our guide was an incredibly dry, funny man. Showing us around the different rooms, he would say things like, "Look my comrades, at these humble gold taps and Persian carpets!" or, "See this humble cinema room, this is not the same Romania I lived in, comrades!" Through his almost forced laughter, we could feel the pain he must have suffered in those years.

We spent a month in Romania and fell in love with this wild and free place. It was also a very affordable country to visit.



Top: Over time, Patrick and Marie became experts at finding beautiful wild camping sites, like this one on the banks of the Lake Bicz – the largest artificial lake in Romania. Above: Sunset over Romania's capital, Bucharest.



Blasting through Bulgaria

It was mid-November in 2018 and getting colder by the week. Bulgaria was to be an eight-day stepping stone into Greece as we searched for sunshine.

Crossing the Danube River via ferry, we landed in Silistra and drove to Varna on the Black Sea coast. We followed the coastline south towards the ancient city of Nessebar, famed for its cobbled streets and wooden houses – and because some of Europe’s earliest coins were minted here in 400 BC.

Heading inland again, we completed the short but beautiful Shipka Pass and camped next to Bulgaria’s “UFO”, or Buzludzha Monument, which looks like a flying saucer sitting on a hill. Built in the 1970s to celebrate socialism, the abandoned concrete behemoth is yet another relic of Eastern European communism.

Further back in time, Thracian kings and other nobles left burial mounds all over central Bulgaria more than 5 000 years ago. We visited a few of these elaborately decorated tombs in the Kazanlak Valley. Bulgaria is a relatively new archaeological tourism destination in Europe and there are many sites spanning at least 8 000 years of history, with new discoveries being made each year.

The Kovan Kaya archaeological site was our last stop in Bulgaria. We slept in the parking lot and visited the following day. This massive lump of granite has more than 100 mysteriously carved rock niches. Some believe it was a place of remembrance – each niche holding an urn of ashes.

We enjoyed driving through Bulgaria’s mountainous countryside, and there was unique food to be tasted, which exhibited both Balkan and Middle Eastern influences. Highlights included *kufta* (meatballs) and *banista* and *broek* (both phyllo pastry dishes).

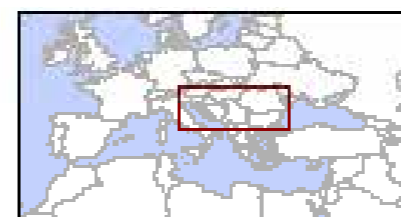
But the best thing about Bulgaria was discovering a Russian-built, retro-looking 4x4 and former army troop carrier called the UAZ350. We saw them often in the countryside where they seem to be used for just about anything. I’m on the hunt to buy one and Marie and I would love to return to Europe one day and explore further in this adorable vehicle.

For now, we had Kukuza. We pointed the nose of the Hilux towards Greece. The olive groves were calling...

From the top: This unofficial site outside Varna, Bulgaria, consists of just a few clearings where “hippies” camp in summer. The monolithic Soviet-era Buzludzha Monument looks more like a spaceship on a hill. Various theories exist about the origins of the carved niches at the Kovan Kaya archaeological site, but the mystery remains.



Some 5 000 years ago, Thracian nobility were buried in tombs like this in the Kazanlak Valley in central Bulgaria.



Fast facts

The prices below are just to provide an approximate idea of Patrick and Marie’s costs during their trip. Keep in mind that they travelled in 2018 and prices will have changed.

SLOVENIA

Postojna Cave entry: R750 per person.
Standard café meal: R250 per person.
Bled cream cake: R120 per person.
Ljubljana Airbnb: R3 650 for two nights for two people.
Triglav National Park: Free to drive through.
Vintgar Gorge entry: R170 per person.

HUNGARY

Hortobágy National Park entry: R320 per person (including the Blue Cowboys).
Săpânța graveyard and monastery: Free

for the graveyard; R120 per person for the monastery.

ROMANIA

Churches of Moldavia: R100–R150 per person (per monastery).
Brown bear trek with Absolute Carpathian: R950 per person.
Peleş Castle entry fee: R120 per person.
Bucharest Airbnb: R3 800 for two nights for two. Caru’ cu bere restaurant: R250 per person – included mains and a good local beer.

BULGARIA

Ferry over Danube River: R550 (one-way).
Buzludzha Monument entry: Free.
Kazanlak Valley tomb visit: R153 per person.
Kovan Kaya entry: R36 per person.

NOTE

We have already published the African leg of Patrick and Marie’s journey – see issues #158 to #166 to read about their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. Read Part 1 of Europe in go! #175. In the end, the Gurneys visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km, arriving back home in Johannesburg on 19 December 2019.

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Akrotiri Lighthouse on Santorini was built by a French company in 1892. It is one of the oldest lighthouses in Greece and gets its name from the nearby ruins of a Minoan town that was inhabited as early as 4000 BC.

Dolmades and diesel: a Greek odyssey

Starting in 2018, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** set out on an 18-month overland journey from France to South Africa. In Greece, they fell in love with mountain roads, rustic islands and epic historical sites.



Clockwise from the top: The Parthenon is a temple and part of the Acropolis – it towers over Athens. Made entirely out of marble, the Panathenaic Stadium is a construction marvel. Nightlife in the Athens suburb, Monastiraki. A guard stands outside the Greek parliament in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a war memorial to fallen soldiers.

It was late October 2018 when we left Bulgaria and entered Greece at the Makaza-Nymphaea border post.

“Kalimera, where are you going?” asked the customs agent. “Good morning.” He checked the Carnet de Passage for Kukuza, our Hilux, and smiled. “Enjoy! Greece is the best!”

We were looking forward to the next six weeks chasing the last rays of summer around Zeus’s backyard, on a fairly packed itinerary. As we dropped down the escarpment via the Makaza Pass, everything changed. Conifer forests were replaced by scrub bush. It got warmer. It even smelled different.

We had a two-day, 1 000 km journey to Athens where we’d booked a service for Kukuza. Arriving there, we checked into our Airbnb in the arty suburb of Exarcheia and set out to explore the 3 400-year-old city. It’s a sprawling metropolis with orange tree-lined streets and mostly cream-coloured buildings, many of which sport canvas awnings with either white and blue, or white and green stripes.

Nobody does laid-back better than the Greeks! It seemed as if Athens had absolutely no sense of urgency: a capital of restaurants, bars, coffee shops and people watchers. The Greeks love people watching so much, they have a special word for it: *peratzatha*.

The birthplace of philosophy, democracy, and home to the Acropolis and the famed Parthenon, Athens has that inescapable holiday feel that we thoroughly enjoyed. We explored Plaka, a busy historical district, and we drank ouzo at rooftop bars in Monastiraki, a flea market neighbourhood. In Kolonaki we gorged on *gyros*, a local type of shawarma, and battled to decide which amazing yoghurt dessert to choose next.

Wherever you are in the city, you can almost always see the Acropolis towering over the landscape. We wandered around the Temple of Athena and between the enormous columns of the Parthenon. We couldn’t miss a visit to Greece’s best-preserved theatre, the Odeon of Herodes Atticus. Built in AD 161 by the Romans and partially refurbished in the 1950s, this 5 000-seat theatre is still in use today.

Finally, we explored the Panathenaic Stadium, which was rebuilt (entirely out of marble!) on the site of ancient ruins, to host the first modern-era Olympic Games in 1896. It is perfectly sleek in design, an architectural photographer’s dream.

Kukuza, having covered 11 000 km since the start of our trip back in France, was in for a well-deserved spa treatment. Toyota Giannitsas replaced oils, filters and CV boots, and sorted out a faulty locking hub. With the maintenance completed, we fitted the Hilux with a fresh set of BFGoodrich All-Terrain tyres, which were nearly 40% cheaper than in South Africa. Our Deltec deep-cycle battery had given up too and needed to be replaced.

Santorini and Naxos

Choosing which island to visit in Greece isn’t easy. There are literally thousands (2 000 to 6 000, depending on what size rock you classify as an island) of which only 220 are inhabited.

We eventually settled on Santorini and Naxos – part of the Cyclades island group – which would afford us two different experiences: touristy Santorini and local fave Naxos.

With Kukuza safely on board the Blue Star ferry, we departed Athens from the Port of Piraeus and settled in for a comfortable eight-hour journey across the Aegean Sea to Santorini, near the south of the Cyclades.

Trendy Santorini has many gorgeous accommodation options where you can take selfies while sipping cocktails around infinity pools. But although Marie and I both love trendy properties, we have a bakkie with a rooftop tent and therefore the whole island was a potential overnight spot.

Santorini’s landscape is arid and rocky – it’s an ancient caldera with desolate-looking cliffs, black volcanic beaches and very little vegetation. Life in the small villages seems surprisingly rural and raw the minute you’re away from the sassy spots.

We spent our first night at what we call a “placeholder” – not a great spot but isolated and fine for our first night in a new place. The following day we hunted for a good wild camping spot and got lucky as we found a perfectly level area with amazing ocean views, out of the wind and private to boot. Here, far from the glitzy side of Santorini, we camped for a few nights, taking in the sapphire-blue water and sipping white wine from the famous Boutari Winery, while playing music on our JBL speaker and waving at the party yachts sailing by. We even had our very own staircase for beach access.

We visited cafés, restaurants and beach bars all around the island, lunching on lamb and quaffing local wine. Santorini has its own endemic vine species and what’s more surprising is how these vines survive and produce grapes. The island’s soil is porous and extremely poor in organic matter yet high in mineral content. Strong winds blow in all directions, rainfall is rare and peak summer temperatures are high enough to kill the weeds. Passing by vineyards, all you see are hundreds of little green “balls” in fields of sand. These “balls” are the result of a unique pruning practice called *kouloura*. The farmers purposefully train the vines on the ground, shaping each one in a spiral that forms a basket or ring on the ground, which looks like a ball when you see it from afar. The grapes then hang on the inside, protected from the elements by the trunk and leaves – brilliant!

Above: Patrick and Marie found this amazing (secret) wild-camp spot on Santorini island. Below: This farmer demonstrates the technique of *kouloura*: training vines into a basket shape. Bottom: Early evening in the village of Oia shows Santorini at its romantic best.





Clockwise from top left: Kitron liqueur is only made on the Island of Naxos. Beetle and bougainvillea in the tiny village of Chalkio, on Naxos island. This causeway links Monemvasia to the Peloponnese mainland. The small island consists only of the village Monemvasia and the ruins of a citadel on a hill, overlooking the village square (pictured).

Naxos is a two-and-a-half-hour ferry ride from Santorini. It's the biggest island (420 km²) in the Cyclades group with about 20 000 permanent residents and 20 villages spread across lush valleys, mountains and white beaches. Greek mythology claims that Zeus was born in Crete, but he grew up on Naxos, hence the highest peak is called Mount Zeus (1003 m).

We spent a week enjoying this amazing island with its homely feel. We circumvented Naxos by camping in various spots, two of which stood out: Itonas Bay and Alyko Beach.

Alyko is adjacent to a protected cedar forest (one of the largest in Greece) and at the beach there's an abandoned hotel building site from the 1970s – the ruin now sports some great graffiti. We set up camp for three nights, hidden between dunes and vegetation. Our only visitor was an old man who would pass by each day selling a handful of olives, fruit and fresh bread.

We used an app called Windy (popular with kitesurfers) to find some of our campsites. Wind is a key consideration when choosing an overnight spot. You're exposed to any wind in a rooftop tent, with nowhere to hide. At the coast, where wind is a given, it's better to find a sheltered spot than one with an epic view. We quickly learnt to sacrifice a view for a peaceful night's sleep!

Naxos stole our hearts. It has pretty towns with winding streets, and houses painted blue-and-white with classic Greek slate floors. At one fishing village we enjoyed excellent octopus salad, and in Halki we tasted their own unique liqueur called Kitron, a lemon-citrus spirit similar to limoncello (but stronger) and made from the fruit and leaves of the citron tree. The first distillery was established in 1896 in the village. We bought a few bottles to keep us warm in the coming winter months.

Olive country

Once back in Athens, we took a "sho't left" and drove 100 km towards Corinth. We snapped a few pics of the Corinth canal – a 6,4 km long shipping groove cut into the limestone by French and Greek engineers in the 1880s. This canal creates a convenient shortcut from the Aegean Sea to the Ionian Sea.

From Corinth, we set off to explore the wild and rugged Peloponnese peninsula, which is full of natural and historic treats.

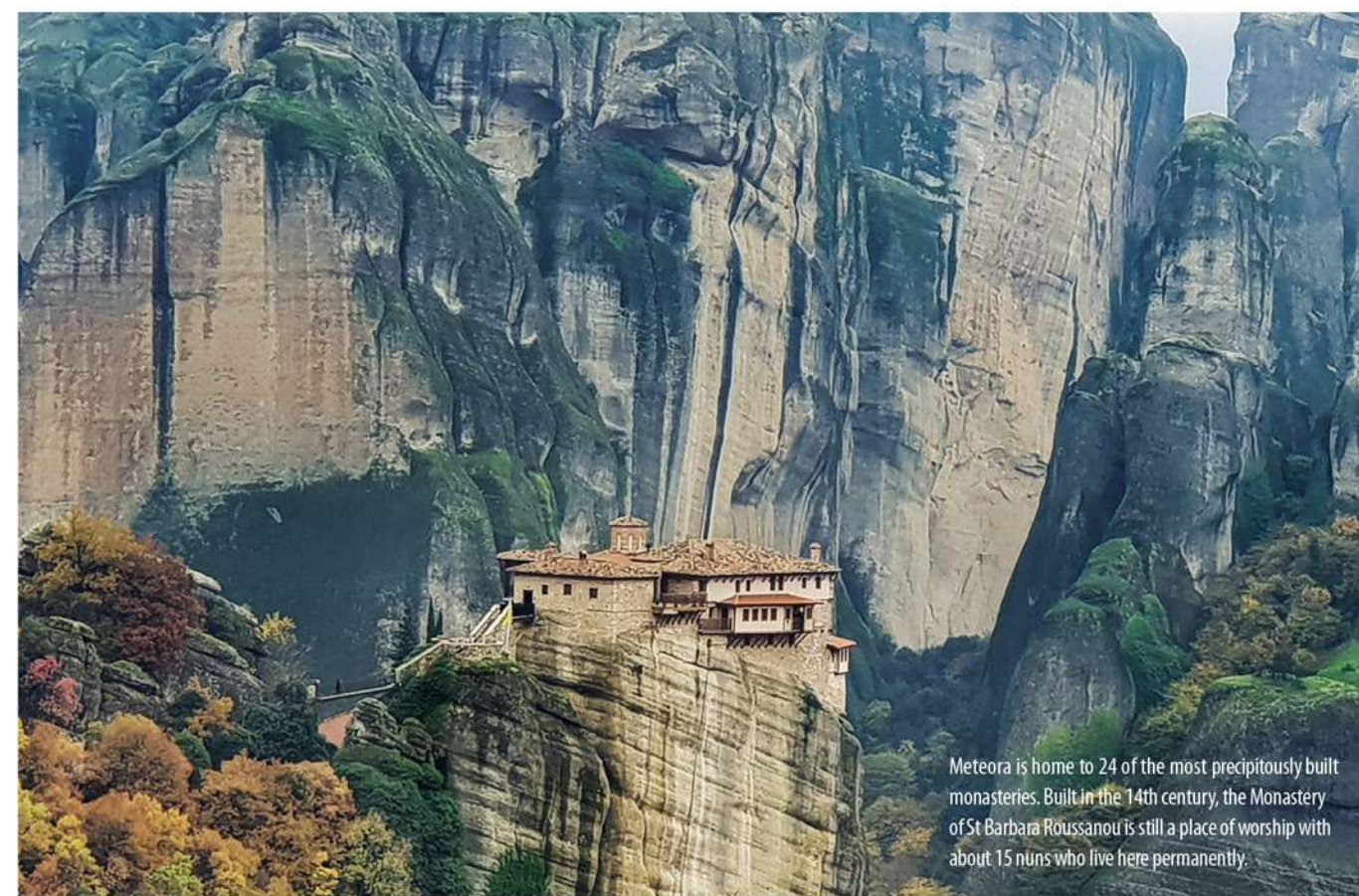
We drove to the fortress town of Monemvasia on the eastern side of the peninsula. Situated on a tiny island, it's linked to the mainland by a narrow, 200m-long causeway and surrounded by an impressive wall.

This very romantic town – once an important commercial centre of the Byzantine Empire – can only be accessed through one small entrance. Inside, we were transported into a labyrinth of narrow streets, quaint squares, ancient stone houses and a few swanky hotels and restaurants. We hiked the upper part of the town and explored the ruined citadel dating back to the 6th century AD.

The Peloponnese peninsula is olive country and we arrived slap-bang in the middle of harvest season. Every village was a hive of activity. Enormous nets lay under trees everywhere, awaiting the assault, while tractors hauled off big drums filled to the brim with olives.

We were keen to learn more and popped in at the Olive Museum in Sparta. First produced in the Middle East around 2 000 BC, olive oil was once three times more valuable than wine and mainly used for household lighting, soap manufacture and as a beauty product. Everywhere we travelled on the Peloponnese, we saw countless stone mills with piles of fruit waiting to be ground. The produce would mostly be consumed by local families or sold into the local markets.

Marie had some work to catch up on, so we booked a gorgeous (and fairly reasonable) Airbnb in Drosopigi. This tiny village only has 50 permanent inhabitants and is in a mountainous region down one of the "fingers" of the Peloponnese – points of land that jut into the ocean at its southern end. We spent most days taking early morning walks and having leisurely



Meteora is home to 24 of the most precipitously built monasteries. Built in the 14th century, the Monastery of St Barbara Roussanou is still a place of worship with about 15 nuns who live here permanently.

breakfasts (Greek yoghurt, nuts and honey) before settling down to work.

For me, that meant cleaning out the Hilux and doing research on our next destinations! We started referring to these mini breaks as "getting extracted" and they were important to keep us sane during our long months of overlanding. Taking a hot shower or casually rummaging through the contents of an upright fridge are as good as a week in Bali if you're used to roughing it. By this stage we had been on the road for seven months and we were starting to appreciate the challenges of being truly nomadic.

With Marie's work completed and both of us recharged, we set out to finish our Peloponnese circular route. We headed north, past the city of Kalamata (yup, where Kalamata olives originate from), to the Temple of Apollo Epicurius. The winding drive along tar and dirt roads through the Arcadia mountains took six hours (150 km) and cut across beautiful valleys.

The temple was built on the slopes of Mount Kotylion in the 5th century BC and is one of the best-preserved examples of classical Greek architecture. It was totally worth the long drive to see it.

Next up was Voidokilia Beach on the nearby Messinia coastline, which we had seen while scouring Google Earth. Seen from above, the beach perfectly resembles the Greek letter omega (Ω). The bay has crystal-clear water, a white beach and is shielded from the wind. We set up camp for a couple of days to take in the natural beauty and met some other van-life campers. Everyone enjoyed sharing stories from the road.

Our last stops on the Peloponnese peninsula included a visit to Olympia (site of the Olympic Games during Classical Antiquity from the 8th century BC to the 4th century AD), the ancient city of Messene, and the beautiful Foli forest, which is considered to be the oldest self-seeded European forest of beech and oak trees. Autumn was in full swing and the entire area was bathed in the enchanted golden yellow of falling leaves.

Delphi and the Monasteries of Meteora

We left the peninsula and returned to "mainland" Greece, aiming for Delphi. The ancient Greeks certainly chose stunning sites for their temples. Delphi sits on the steep slope of Mount Parnassus, with panoramic views of the valley below. I can see how its location would tantalise any pilgrim seeking wisdom from the famed Oracle of Delphi, but it beats me how they transported all the enormous chunks of rock up to the site!

Delphi peaked in influence between the 6th and 4th centuries BC and was considered the centre of the world to many. Our guide told us how important rulers all sought consultation with the High Priestess, or Oracle. In return for her prophecy, she would accept lavish gifts or money.

"And yes," he added dryly, "the larger the gift, the quicker you could jump the queue..."

We drove further north to the Monasteries of Meteora, a site of pure spiritual majesty. Two things make Meteora special. Firstly, you have these 300–500m-high sandstone pinnacles that stand out from the landscape like candles on a cake. Secondly, each one is topped with a gorgeous stone monastery built hundreds of years ago. Of the 24 originally built, six are still active places of worship.

Visiting Meteora feels like taking a giant leap back in time. I could easily imagine monks being hauled up the sheer cliffs by rope and basket. Nowadays, access is by less scary stairways and bridges. The whole place is jaw-dropping – one of the world's grandest views, in my opinion.



Greece is a fantastic road-trip country. Its beaches offer some of the Mediterranean's best spots for swimming and it's a 4x4 enthusiast's dream as there are so many mountainous routes, especially in the north. Greek culture is welcoming and easy-going, and the street food options are great.

One of our best food encounters happened after we left Meteora and started heading north-east, towards Thessaloniki. I'm not even sure what the little mountain village was called, but when we reached it, we'd been driving for hours and we were hungry. Marie scoured Google for a place to eat. She found a place, but as we drove into the seemingly deserted village – there wasn't even a cat walking about – we had to stop and ask where it was.

Walking down an empty street, we looked left and there it was: full of people, or rather, full of men! We were told to sit on the street (like tourists) while they found a table. Five minutes later we were shown to a table inside. It was Saturday lunchtime and the place was full of farmers and louder than any restaurant I've ever visited. Everybody stared at us. It was definitely a locals-only joint.

We told the waiter we had €15 (R250) per person as budget and we wanted to taste as many dishes as possible. It would be the chef's choice as to what we got. What a result! We feasted on beef dolmades with a slightly sweet flavour, delicious courgette fritters, lamb moussaka, beef and tomato meatballs (keftedes), fried fish and plenty of grilled meats, olives, local dips (including fava, a yellow pea purée) and assorted bread.

Other diners insisted that we try other plates at their cost, so we also sampled *stifado* (beef stew), *kritharaki* (rice pasta with chicken) and *papoutsakia* (stuffed aubergine). The waiter was even scolded by the local patrons for giving us the cheap ouzo, so he quickly came running with complimentary retsina (a white wine infused with pine aroma). It all ended with me giving a speech to the patrons and staff, thanking them for their unbelievable hospitality. What an experience!

Christmas was a few weeks away and we had plans to meet our two sons in Cappadocia, Turkey. It was time to say goodbye to Europe – we were heading into the Middle East, and the relics of the Ottoman Empire were beckoning...



Fast facts



These prices are from 2018 and are meant to provide a rough idea of what the Gurneys spent on their trip. All prices would have gone up since then.

- ATHENS**
- Airbnb: R3 500 (five nights)
 - Acropolis entrance fee: R500 per person (included the museum and Agora)
 - Gyros: R35 each in Kolonaki
 - Yoghurt cup: R75 at the Fresco yoghurt bar at the Acropolis
 - Bakkie service and replacement of CV boots at Toyota: R7 200
 - BFGoodrich tyres (set of four): R6 800
 - Dual battery: R1 800

- DROSOPIGI**
- Airbnb: R2 700 (five nights)

- SANTORINI & NAXOS**
- Ferry from Athens to Santorini: R2 700 (two people, one-way, including bakkie)
 - Ferry from Santorini to Naxos: R1 550 (two people, one-way, including bakkie)
 - Ferry from Naxos to Athens: R2 700 (two people, one-way, including bakkie)

- DELPHI**
- Entrance fee: R160 per person

PREVIOUS GURNEY ADVENTURES

We have published the African leg of Patrick and Marie's journey – see issues #158 to #166 for their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. See issues #175 and #176 for their travels through France, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

In the end, they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km before arriving back home in Johannesburg on 19 December 2019.

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Clockwise from top left: Marie and Patrick in the village of Fira, Santorini. The Temple of Athena Pronaia, at Delphi. Patrick looks out over a deserted Alyko Beach. The Greek islands offer fantastic food and wine experiences, from fresh seafood and meat dishes to yoghurt desserts, and of course the traditional ouzo – an aniseed-flavoured spirit.

Above, right: Voidokilia Beach.



MIDDLE
EAST

Part 4

TRAVEL JOURNAL

Turkish delights

On an epic overland journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** take a turn through Turkey, a country of deep-rooted culture and calming coastlines.

From Iztuzu viewpoint (between Bodrum and Fethiye), you look out over Iztuzu Beach, Lake Sütlüngür and Lake Köyceğiz in the distance.



Left: A small mosque outside Edirne.

Below, left: This is what a typical fish shop looks like in Edirne.



When we crossed the border from Greece into Turkey, winter finally caught up with us. It was December and snow had started to fall. Midday temperatures barely reached 10°C and sank to -4°C overnight. We had two sleeping bags each, plus beanies and scarves – Marie even wrapped herself in a few plastic bags to keep out the cold!

The evenings were bearable; it's the mornings that were bitter. Camping in a rooftop tent has its challenges: We had to wipe down interior condensation before folding up the frozen tent, then we had to get Kukuza started. Our beloved 2001 Hilux has a 3-litre diesel engine that struggles to get going in the cold. We'd fire up the car's heater and wait for water to boil on a stove so we could have coffee. Slowly, life would return to our clumsy hands, our mobile phones would warm up, we'd set the GPS and start our day of driving.

We crossed from Greece into Turkey via the Kipi/Ipsala border post with one thing on our minds: Get the Carnet de Passage stamped to prove that the Hilux had left Europe. If we didn't get this stamp, we would lose our R90000 deposit made to the AA in Johannesburg. After a few frantic conversations with Greek officials, it was eventually stamped and handed back to us.

We headed over to the Turkish side where we had no issues, besides having the entire vehicle scanned while trying to explain what the large military-coloured thing – our rooftop tent – was.

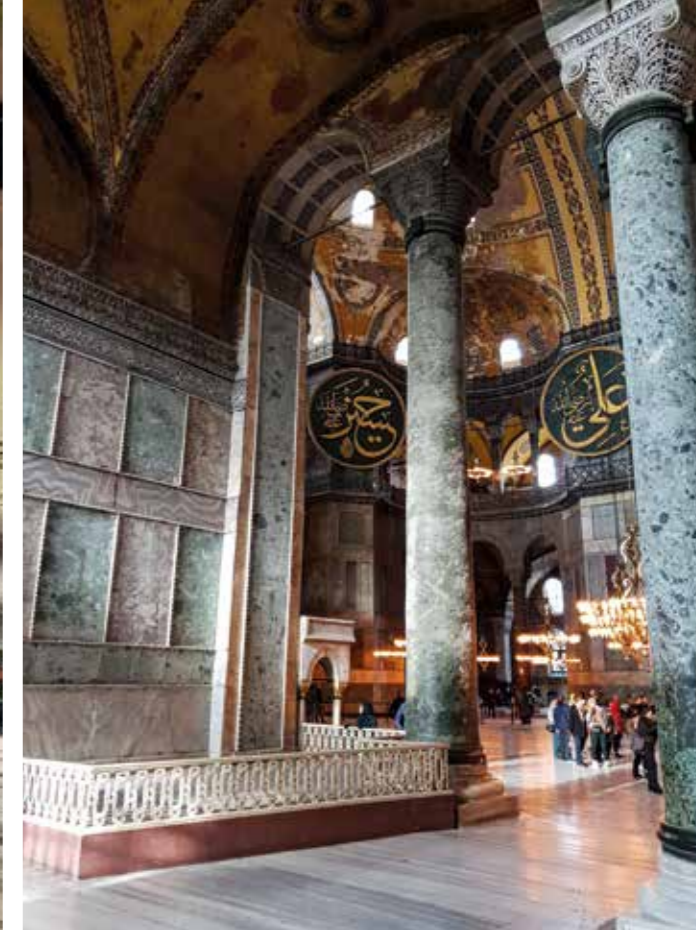
We were finally free to enter Turkey and, more importantly, to find a warm place to sleep in the town of Edirne, which was a 200 km drive away.

The first few days in Turkey gave us three happy moments. The first was checking into Hotel Edirne Palace where the temperature in the lobby was a balmy 28°C, the second was buying a proper winter duvet, which improved our lives considerably, and the third was discovering Turkey's cheap and cheerful (and tasty) fast food.

After a few months on the road, we had learnt that the best way to ensure delicious local eating was to support the fullest restaurant, no matter how grubby it seemed. Turkey had dining establishments that were simple on decor but rich in the variety of food on offer, usually served as a buffet. You point to what you want and a healthy spoonful is added to your plate. Our standard became pilaf rice, beef stew and vegetables, with a bowl of lentil soup. Turkish tea – simply called "chai" – was always offered for free after a meal.

Once the capital of the powerful Ottoman Empire, Edirne (pronounced Eh-der-neh) has a rich history. We were a little perplexed about the buses full of Bulgarians we saw everywhere. "Turkey is cheap," a shopkeeper told us. "Bulgarians come across the border on weekends and buy clothes, food, cigarettes, shoes, perfume. . . It's even cheaper here than in a duty-free shop!"

We visited the stunning Selimiye Mosque, built in 1575 with its four minarets, beautiful calligraphy and famed 999 windows. We also popped into the Sultan Bayezid II Complex (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), originally built as a hospital and medical school. Today it houses a medical museum showcasing the progressive techniques and procedures that were taught to students in the past. This included, for example, treating mental illness using music and aroma therapy.



Above, left: One of the trams to Taksim Square in Istanbul.

Above: The Hagia Sophia's interior is as fascinating as its history.

Pulsating Istanbul

Avoiding the highway, we drove 250 km (five hours) on rural roads directly towards Istanbul. There was no mistaking that we were approaching Europe's most populous city, however. When we were 50 km out, newly built 30-storey residential apartment blocks began to appear, plus massive shopping centres and eventually, jammed highways.

We settled into our Airbnb in the suburb of Balat for a few days. Balat is next to the Golden Horn, a stretch of water that connects with the nearby Bosphorus. It was the cutest, cosiest neighbourhood, crammed with antique shops, street art and trendy cafés – there was even a film crew busy shooting a local soap opera (*7de Laan*, Turkey-style).

Our two sons, Kai and Callum, flew into Istanbul to join us for a while. Before heading to Cappadocia for Christmas, we ticked off a few of the important nearby sites in this old part of the city.

The Blue Mosque (also called the Sultan Ahmed Mosque) has six towering minarets and gets its name from the 20 000 blue Iznik tiles (made centuries ago in a town called Iznik on the Asian side of the Bosphorus) covering the interior floors and walls.

Then there's the Hagia Sophia – over the course of its history, it has been used as a church, then a mosque, then a museum, and more recently as a mosque again. Huge calligraphy panels adorn the marble walls and the whole structure humbles you with its sheer size.

The Basilica Cistern is Istanbul's largest Roman-era subterranean water tank – it has a capacity of 80 000 m³! A wooden walkway took us deep into the cistern to see the two enormous stone Medusa heads, and the 336 marble columns (each 9 m high) which support the spectacular vaulted ceiling.

We took a walk around Topkapi Palace, which was once home to the sultans and Europe's largest harem. Back when dating more than 100 women was par for the royal course, it contained more than 300 rooms, nine baths, two mosques, a hospital and laundry facilities.

After visiting the Galata Tower, built in 1348 as a "Tower of Christ" and later used as a vantage point to spot fires in the city, we went to the Grand Bazaar and did some shopping for much-needed thermal gear. The bazaar is one of the largest and oldest covered markets in the world, with 61 alleyways and around 4000 shops.

We loved exploring Istanbul. We took a tram to Taksim Square, enjoyed *lokum* (the original Turkish delight) and ate fish wraps on a bridge over the Bosphorus, where hundreds of fishermen gather each day.

Before leaving Istanbul, we needed to have a box built for our roof rack. This storage box would hold a number of items that were getting in the way of everyday life on the road. Google recommended a fabricator on the outskirts of Istanbul. "It's going to be a challenge," I told a man called Korkut when we got there with our bakkie. "I need it done in six days. . ."

"No problem," Korkut said. "Let's measure what we need to do. . . Oh, and how do you want it to lock?"

Amazingly, within four days, the massive trunk was cut, bent and welded using galvanised metal – and only cost R500! They even added a dust-proof foam seal around the lid. Turkey is truly an industrialised nation of can-doers. Most items you buy in Turkey are indeed made in Turkey, which was refreshing to see.

Our Made-in-Turkey trunk would travel another 38 000 km over the course of the following year, not once leaking water or dust, only to be destroyed when we arrived safely in South Africa and pulled into a friend's garage in Randburg. I sent Korkut a photo of the smashed box and he replied: "When you come back to Istanbul, I'll make you a new one for free!"



Left, from the top: A roadside stall just outside Göreme sells traditional earthenware pots. Cappadocia is known for its unique, cone-shaped rock formations. It's easy to see why they're called "fairy chimneys".

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Compared to these mammoth overland trucks, Patrick and Marie's Toyota almost looks like a toy. Pamukkale's white travertine formations surround a mineral spring, said to have healing properties. Sons Kai and Callum wait for their *testi kebab* – an Anatolian speciality usually made with lamb, and prepared in a clay pot or jug.

Christmas in Cappadocia

Cappadocia is 800 km by road from Istanbul – it's a region in Central Anatolia famed for its bizarre scenery, where honey-coloured rocks have eroded into sculptural forms resembling minarets, mushrooms and what are called "fairy chimneys". Since we had limited time with Kai and Callum, we tucked Kukuza into a warm and secure underground parking area and took a cab to the airport.

A one-hour flight delivered us to the town of Göreme. We booked a family room in the Sakura Cave Hotel which, you guessed it, is partially built into the hollowed-out rocks.

We awoke the next morning to find 30 cm-deep snow covering the landscape. We scurried into the hotel restaurant to fill up on breakfast before heading out with our driver/guide. He told us that the area had been inhabited since the Bronze Age, first by troglodytes (could there be a better place to be a cave dweller?) and later by Christians fleeing persecution from the Roman Empire.

Impressive tunnelling into the soft volcanic rock has resulted in entire subterranean cities like Derinkuyu, where up to 20 000 people once lived underground. Walking along the cold labyrinth of passageways to see cave houses and churches kept us busy for a while, but we eventually had to get out of the snow and heat up. We ordered some *boza*, a warm, smoothie-like fermented drink made from cracked wheat and yeast. It has a tangy, sweet flavour that almost everyone finds addictive.

Kai and Callum both love cooking, so Marie booked us a cooking class hosted by a local family. Fried liver is serious business in Turkey; we were given the inside track on this and a few other local dishes. A highlight was making tiny ravioli and trying Turkish coffee. The art of brewing the latter is thought to date back to the 16th century. Rich, thick and delicious, it's brewed in a copper pot called a *cezve* (jazz-vah).

Christmas in Cappadocia was a special time for us as a family. We discovered cool cave bars together, and restaurants serving Turkish feasts. Unfortunately, we never got to open our "family" Christmas present. We had booked a hot-air balloon ride for Christmas morning, but unseasonal wind plagued the balloon pilots that day. (On peak tourist days, up to 80 balloons take to the air above Cappadocia.) They tried to accommodate us the following day, but to no avail.

We had to return to Istanbul, where we saw the boys onto their flight back home to France. With two days to go to New Year's 2019, we were at a bit of a loose end. On a whim, we booked tickets for a boat party on the Bosphorus. It ended up being a fantastic night spent in the company of locals, other tourists, a belly dancer who thought I was part of her act, a crazy-bad DJ, cheap wine and way too many shots of *raki* (a clear brandy made with grapes).

The countdown to midnight started a few minutes early, but at that point nothing mattered besides screaming "Happy New Year!" and taking dreadful selfies and making those embarrassing calls to friends far away. What a night!



Hello, Asia!

After collecting our new storage box and bolting it to the roof rack, we left the European side of Turkey and entered the Asian – or Middle Eastern – side. We took a southerly route along a combination of tar and gravel roads, first aiming for the UNESCO site of Ephesus at the big town of Izmir.

A lot of travellers don't seem to realise how many amazing archaeological sites are dotted around Turkey – easily as many as neighbouring Greece, including some of the best-preserved Greco-Roman sites. Take Ephesus, for example. Once an enormous port city on the Aegean, Ephesus houses the remains of the Temple of Hadrian, terrace houses, colonnaded streets, temples and a huge amphitheatre with a capacity for 24 000 people! The most arresting sight of all is the impressive Library of Celsus, a columned, two-storey building that was the third-largest library in the classical world.

Our next stop was the town of Bodrum, about 230 km down the coast from Izmir. Once a sleepy fishing village, Bodrum has transformed into one of Turkey's most popular holiday spots. Sunshine was predicted over the few days of our stay – we hadn't made any plans, so we just drifted along, soaking up the relaxed vibe.

We camped wild along the coast in quiet little coves, where the water sparkled so bright and blue it almost hurt your eyes.

After Bodrum, we headed inland for about 280 km, to a town called Pamukkale. In Europe, on the first part of our road trip, we had mainly crossed paths with standard-sized motorhomes. But approaching Pamukkale, we encountered a few huge overland trucks huddled together. Since we were looking for a campsite, we pulled in to say hello.

The enormous rigs dwarfed our Hilux. Someone had a 1964 Magirus Deutz Mercur truck (a decommissioned fire engine) and there was also a 1968 IFA 4x4 (a type of East German troop carrier). These amazing vehicles had everything you could imagine – one even had a wood-burning fireplace! My FOMO was peaking until we started discussing fuel consumption. On average, these beasts gulped 28–32 litres per 100 km! I was happy to be driving Kukuza, which consumes a measly 8–10 litres per 100 km. Marie and I reasoned that we would use the money we were saving on fuel to occasionally splash out on a nice Airbnb.

Pamukkale means "cotton castle" in Turkish – the name refers to the strange white calcite formations that have formed into terraces around a mineral spring over thousands of years. The terraces almost look like the tiers of a wedding cake. The Romans loved this healing spring and its travertine pools so much that they built a spa town called Hierapolis at the site. Apparently, Cleopatra had her own private hot tub here.



Burning rocks and stuffed mussels

Our Turkey guidebook had a substantial section devoted to the Lycian civilisation, which piqued our interest. We pointed Kukuza south on a 250 km journey to the town of Fethiye, back at the coast. Along the way we camped at Lake Köyceğiz, which also had a hot spring.

This southern section of Turkey is seldom visited, but no less impressive than the north. Long before the area came to be influenced by the Greeks and Romans (around 500 BC), a group of people called the Lycians inhabited a large stretch of this coastline. They had a fierce desire for independence, spoke their own language, were very resourceful, and are credited with the earliest application of a form of governance that inspired modern-day democracy.

Our 280 km Lycian route from Fethiye to the village of Cirali took us past beautiful cut-rock tombs at Telmessos (similar to Petra in Jordan), through the ancient city of Patara (the Lycian political capital) and finally to some strangely styled pillar tombs and sarcophagi cut from solid granite, around the secluded village of Kekova.

Hugging the coast, we eventually reached Cirali (also called Olympos Beach), which is known as a bit of a Mediterranean hippy hangout. The major attraction here is the "Eternal Flames" on nearby Mount Chimaera.

Guided by Bob Marley tunes filtering from a bar below, we navigated the steep footpath up the mountain, just as a drizzle set in. Soon we reached a bare patch of hillside, where about a dozen mysterious flames flickered. Mount Chimaera has been "on fire" for thousands of years. The mesmerising flames are fuelled by biogenic methane gas that comes from deep in the earth. Legend has it that this was where the Olympic flame originated.

We camped wild in the area, and the following day we popped into the hippy town to visit the Cactus Bar and try *Midye dolma* – mussels stuffed with aromatic rice and served with freshly sliced lemon. Super tasty.

A Zimbabwean makes a plan

From Cirali, we drove 600 km over two days to reach the port city of Mersin, which was where our two-month Turkish journey would end. Much like the Muslim call to prayer summoning the devout, Turkey is a country that calls you into its arms. We usually steer clear of the dreaded overlander question, "Which was your favourite country?" But in truth, Turkey is the answer that comes to mind most often. Istanbul is one of the most incredible cities on the planet – Marie and I decided we could easily live there for a few years.

But where to from here? We still hadn't worked out how to negotiate

Above: Fethiye is not as touristy as other parts of Turkey, but in terms of scenery, Ölüdeniz Bay can hold a candle to the more popular beaches.

Left, from the top: Turkey has many important archaeological sites, like these rock tombs – relics from the ancient Lycian city of Telmessos – and the remains of a temple in Ephesus. Mount Chimaera's flames have been constantly burning for thousands of years.

the less politically stable part of the Middle East, which now lay ahead: Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Most overlanders simply bypass this region as it's too much effort.

Marie flew back to South Africa for work, from Adana near Mersin via Istanbul, leaving me with 10 days to find a solution to our dilemma. It's difficult to enter Israel with your own vehicle. Information was scant on the Internet, but I figured out three certainties: Lebanon was a no-go because Israel wouldn't let us in if we had Lebanese stamps in our passports; Syria was out due to the ongoing conflict, plus the same passport stamp issue; and Egypt wouldn't allow us in if we had Israeli stamps! What a mess.

Turkey shares a southern border with Syria and Iraq, so we'd have to ship Kukuza to our next country of choice – but where? We opted to try and enter Israel directly despite the difficulties, rather than ship the bakkie to Egypt and then backtrack north into Israel and Jordan. It was all a bit nerve-racking.

After many phone calls and e-mails (a process I started midway through Greece already), I eventually tracked down the local agent of a RoRo service (roll-on/roll-off), which shipped directly into the Israeli port city of Haifa. The agent, Tiran/Turkon-Akdeniz Shipping, was not keen on accepting the Hilux as cargo, as they normally only took refrigerated fresh-produce trucks. Eventually, I convinced him that I had clearing agents arranged in Haifa.

I also confirmed that Marie could fly into Israel to meet up with Kukuza and me. With the shipping booked and paid for, I set out to have new signage applied to the bakkie, adding a big map that showed our whole route from Europe to Africa. This made things easier as we could just point at the map when people asked where we were heading. Then I had Kukuza thoroughly cleaned and readied for the voyage.

The Hilux and I boarded a ship called *Beril* on 4 February 2019, without any assurance from our two clearing agents that we would even get into Israel. Being a born and bred Zimbabwean, I just rolled with that "boer maak 'n plan" confidence and believed it would all work out in the end.

But would it?

Find out in the next issue, as the Gurneys make tracks through the Middle East.

Fast facts

The prices below are just to provide an approximate idea of Patrick and Marie's costs during their trip. Keep in mind that they travelled in 2018/19 and prices will have changed.

EDIRNE

Hotel Edirne Palace: R1 275 (three nights)
Sultan Bayezid II Complex: R85 per person entry
Duvet: R476
Buffet dinner: R85 per person

ISTANBUL

Airbnb Istanbul: R2 700 (five nights)
The Blue Mosque: Free (all mosques are free – a nice change from Romania)
Hagia Sophia: R200 per person entry
Basilica Cistern: R230 per person entry
Topkapi Palace: R190 per person entry
Galata Tower: R180 per person entry
Bosporus New Year's party: R900 per person (incl. food and drinks)

CAPPADOCIA

Flight: R850 per person (return flight from Istanbul to Cappadocia)
Sakura Cave Hotel: R7 200 (five nights, for four adults)
Driver/guide: R2 600 (two-day

service, including airport transfers)
Cooking class: R360 per person

OTHER

Ephesus: R150 per person entry
Pamukkale: R150 per person entry
Shipping the vehicle from Turkey to Israel: R17 000 (including all clearing fees)
Patrick's fare aboard the same ship: R2 250 (including meals and a truck driver's cabin big enough to sleep three)

NOTE

We have previously published the African leg of Patrick and Marie's journey – see issues #158–166 for their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. See issue #175 (France, Italy, Croatia), #176 (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria) and #177 (Greece).

In the end, they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km, before arriving back home in Johannesburg on 19 December 2019.

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Pondering the promised land

Starting in 2018, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** set out on an 18-month overland journey from France to South Africa. After exploring Turkey, they shipped their Hilux to Haifa for a two-week circuit of Israel.

Wild camping doesn't get much more isolated than the vast and desolate Judean Desert. The only recognisable human traces are Kukuza, the track and spent cartridges.





The ship was called *Beryl*. I boarded, along with 10 truck drivers, and we left Turkey for the Israeli port city of Haifa. I was on my own for this part of the trip – Marie had flown to South Africa for a quick business trip; she'd be joining me in a few days.

Beryl was on her final journey before she was to be scrapped in Bangladesh. She looked every bit the part. It was noisy and hot inside and the cramped, four-berth cabin had little airflow and a large population of mosquitoes. I snored the loudest, apparently, so the truck drivers deserted the cabin and left me to face the mozzies alone.

The voyage was supposed to take two days, but bad weather made it five before we dropped anchor just outside Haifa. Standard Israeli Customs and Immigration is preceded by an on-boat "interview", which is more of an interrogation. If you don't clear this, tough luck – you're not going anywhere.

I was woken at 3 am (a common tactic) to face three young and fiercely intimidating military officials who conducted my interview. It went something like this:

"Why are you coming to Israel? Give me your phone, unlock it!"

"What do you want to see in Israel? How long are you here?"

"What?! You have your own car?"

The questions came thick and fast, making it hard for me to gather my thoughts. It felt like a physical assault. One exhausting hour later, I texted Marie in Joburg: "I think I blew the interview; I doubt I'll get in tomorrow with the car."

On our trip through Europe and Turkey so far, we'd usually just muddled our way through border posts. But things were different in the Middle East. Reliable information was hard to get beforehand, and my confidence was low. I simply wasn't sure if I had all my ducks in a row to bring our Hilux, Kukuza, into the country.

In anticipation of this problem, I had arranged to meet two local port

agents to assist with the clearance process. After we docked, I met them both. The first agent seemed sketchy but the second was a personable 72-year-old named Yoel Gilead. I breathed a sigh of relief as Yoel requested the immigration official not to stamp my passport. We were still planning to drive through Egypt and Sudan – both of which wouldn't let us in if we had recently visited Israel. Instead, I was given an official paper with my details and a stamp.

"If you lose this, there is trouble," Yoel warned me. "When you exit Israel, you hand it back in."

During the vehicle inspection Kukuza was surrounded by 15 heavily armed soldiers, with more arriving every minute. I was ordered to unpack the entire vehicle and everything down to our mattress got scanned.

All was seemingly going well; I even managed to get a coffee. But suddenly everyone got spooked. A wild-eyed soldier marched towards me clutching a bunch of stickers. Immediately, I understood. Our pack of country flags, which we stuck on the Hilux as we went along, included many of Israel's enemies: Iran, Palestine, Egypt. . .

"Throw away the flags you don't like," I said, my heart pounding.

He scrunched them up without hesitation.

Anticipating another intense interrogation, I asked: "Who wants to stick the Israeli flag on the car?"

This diffused the tension as a couple of excited offers came forward from the crowd.

It was a stressful, seven-hour ordeal, but I managed to enter Israel with Kukuza. Our trip was on! But it would have to be short: The officials had only given us two weeks to blast through this biblical landscape.

As I drove out, handing over the gate pass, Yoel turned to me and said: "We are done, but your first taste of Israel will be with me. You are my guest for the best hummus in Haifa!"

Then he took me out to dinner.

Opposite page: The Hanging Gardens of Haifa.

Right, from the top: HaZkenim falafel takeaway in Haifa. The Church of the Multiplication in Galilee is built on the spot where Jesus performed the miracle of five loaves and two fish. Marie and Patrick on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The ancient city of Hippos still contains Greco-Roman ruins dating back to the 3rd century BC.

To Galilee for a tuna sandwich

Marie flew into Tel Aviv and caught a train north to join me at Haifa Hostel – a well-run, budget-friendly place with great staff. We spent two days exploring the city's beaches and the beautiful Hanging Gardens of Haifa, which is the major attraction.

The site is central to the Bahá'í faith and was built in 2001 atop Mount Carmel, offering incredible views of the city. A special irrigation system maintains 19 manicured gardens over cascading terraces that stretch for a kilometre. In the centre is the shrine of the Báb, who founded the Bahá'í faith with a goal to achieve a unified world order that ensures prosperity for all.

Climbing the 1 500 steps through the gardens was energy-sapping. Our guide recommended a poky takeaway joint called HaZkenim, where falafel was the main fare. We joined the queue outside and soon tucked into the tasty, crispy snack.

It was time to get moving. We drove east for 320 km (about four hours) towards the Sea of Galilee. A tarred mountain route took us through Safed, which once was the centre of Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah). Today, this Crusades-era fortress city is home to a community of sacrosanct Jewish religious scholars and bohemian artists. We browsed the impressive number of art galleries. The streets were filled with Jewish men wearing little black leather boxes, called *tefillin*, on top of their heads. Randomly, we bumped into a man called Dale who claimed to be Barbra Streisand's cousin. Dale was intrigued by our Hilux and wanted to know more about our long overland journey.

From Safed, we drove down to Tabgha on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. As a child, I was captivated by the story of Jesus feeding 5 000 people using a mere five loaves and two fish. The Church of the Multiplication, with its beautiful 5th-century mosaics, marks this spot. Galilee attracts many Christian pilgrims, as several of the miracles that Jesus performed occurred in this region.

It was strange to sit at the water's edge munching a tuna sarmie while contemplating miracles. (I tried the walking on water one, but it clearly takes practice!)

Having navigated the entire Galilean coast (passing through Tiberias along the way), it was early evening and we still hadn't found our first wild camping spot in Israel. We're always a tad nervous in a new country – not everyone approves of wild camping – but we eventually found refuge at the ancient city of Hippos. We settled down stealthily in a parking lot, trying not to attract unwanted attention. But at 5.30 am, we heard a heavy rumble. I was up in seconds, out of the rooftop tent, pretending to make coffee. Four military Hummers rolled up! I waved and smiled and thankfully they seemed uninterested.

We spent the morning exploring the ancient Greco-Roman ruins of Hippos – a small, fortified city built in the 3rd century. The city has massive red granite pillars from Egypt and a 50 km aqueduct to channel spring water into huge underground cisterns.

Later, we found out that the Hummers belonged to an army base on the hill that we'd camped below the night before! Considering the militarised country we were in, they probably had the best night vision equipment money could buy. You always think nobody is watching when you take that late-night pee!





Wine tasting in the Golan Heights

Once Syrian territory, the Golan Heights was the site of a fierce war with Israel. The latter was victorious and autocratically annexed the land in 1981. There were signs all over saying, "Danger! Mines!" and there were bunkers and abandoned tanks next to the road. We scrambled through the deserted Syrian bunkers, looking through peepholes. It was unfathomable to think that the majestic valley below was the site of a war not too long ago.

A sombre mood usually requires an elixir of sorts, so we signed up for wine tasting. We turned into Pelter Winery, a family-run business established in 2001. They produce 150 000 bottles a year. Their white varietals were great – chardonnay, riesling, gewürztraminer – but the reds a little less so.

We ordered a cheese platter and promptly made friends with a table of well-oiled twenty-somethings. The conversation flowed freely: One man called the compulsory two-year military service "a waste of time". He said, "Us young people are tired of all these wars. We need to drop all this army stuff and start speaking to our neighbours."

Indeed, every checkpoint we passed was manned by young men and women. They looked too innocent to be kitted out in flak jackets, helmets and M16 assault rifles.

That night, we were asleep in HaSolelim Forest Reserve when, at around 2am, we woke up to what sounded like hoofs but turned out to be more than 30 soldiers running past on a training exercise.

To get a taste of Israel's neighbour, Palestine, we had arranged a date with a Palestinian family whom we knew from Cape Town. We crossed over to the West Bank and things changed immediately. It felt rural and neglected. We met up with Anis Daraghma (49, the youngest son in the family) and drove up to the final checkpoint. A big sign warned: "Zone A: It is forbidden for Israeli citizens to enter".

We spent three nights with the Daraghma family in the town of Tubas, where they have been shopkeepers for generations. We were spoiled rotten with delicious food and Marie was given a few Jilbab dresses (a loose-fitting tunic). These became priceless later on our journey in Jordan, Egypt and Sudan, where dressing like the locals made a big difference in how she was received, especially as a woman.

We laughed and sometimes cried at the family's stories about the ordeals they had gone through over the years. Before we left, they loaded us up with cardamon coffee, dates and grains. We also stocked up on our new favourite sweet – home-made Palestinian chocolate, which tastes like Nutella on steroids. It's made by mixing one part carob molasses with one part date syrup, one part tahini paste, and a good dose of toasted sesame seeds.

From the top: In the Golan Heights, an old bunker and danger signs are stark reminders of the war that was fought here. Pelter Winery, Golan Heights. On a visit to Anis Daraghma on the West Bank, the Gurneys shopped and shared meals with his family.

To Banksy's Bethlehem

Travelling to Jerusalem, we took a winding desert route via Jericho and Ramallah, both in the Palestinian West Bank (170 km, five hours). The GPS struggled to find a route and kept taking us to dead ends against a section of the 700 km Israeli/West Bank barrier. Eventually, a Good Samaritan directed us to the closest, quickest checkpoint.

We had scheduled a night and two days in Jerusalem, which might seem insufficient, but it was all we could handle in the end. What a crazy, conflicted city! The Old City is split into four quarters – Muslim, Jewish, Christian and Armenian – and was frantic with tourists seeking their religious fix. We managed to squash into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, tick off the Wailing Wall, see the Dome of the Rock, and jostle along the Via Dolorosa.

When evening arrived, most of the tourists retired to hotels elsewhere, leaving us to soak up a less chaotic and more spiritual atmosphere. The Old City has buckets of charm, with narrow streets and tiny shopfronts where you can pick up anything from a toilet brush to food, clothes and souvenirs. It's this lived-in aspect that allows you to see it as much more than just a "museum town". It's extraordinary to think of all the tumultuous events that this city has experienced over the ages.



Clockwise from top left: Some of Jerusalem's attractions include: The Western Wall (Wailing Wall); the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (site of the tomb of Jesus); the Al-Aqsa Mosque; Dome of the Rock (where Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven), and the Old City.



Travelling from Jerusalem, it was a quick 45-minute drive (and one checkpoint through the security barrier) to get to Bethlehem. Budgets are always tight on a journey this long, but sometimes you must splurge. We booked into the quirky Walled Off Hotel (a play on the “Waldorf”) designed by British street artist Banksy.

The hotel is a thought-provoking artwork in itself. It claims to have “the worst view in the world” as most rooms look onto the divisive concrete wall – seen by one side as a security measure and by the other as a way of enforcing apartheid. The location of the hotel is a slap in the face for Israelis: The site is officially under Israeli military control, so it’s 100% legal for Israelis to stay there, but all the roads to reach it involve an “illegal” journey through Palestinian territory. (Israel prevents entry to its citizens, I am not sure why.)

This provocative space provides visitors with much-needed context for confronting the complicated Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Walled Off Hotel is an art gallery, museum and a political protest all rolled into one.

We stayed in the famous Pillow-fight Room where Banksy painted a mural. The artwork is so highly valued that we were charged a R10 000 security deposit upon check-in!

Our breakneck tour of Israel was heading towards its conclusion. We were desperate for some respite from tourists in congested spaces, where historical conflict imbued everything. We turned east, driving along a disused track for about 60 km, high up into the stunning Judean Desert. Here, we could breathe again. It was a place of spiritual, eerie beauty. We camped wild for two nights (one on the plateau; the other next to the ruins of Zohar Fortress) taking in the vast open space.

Next, we entered the Negev Desert in southern Israel. It covers 60% of the country and is full of amber-coloured canyons and concealed valleys. We had only two days left on our visas and we opted to spend our last night camping in the Ramon Crater Nature Reserve. This huge crater (10 km wide, 40 km long and 500 m deep) was formed by erosion over millions of years. It also contains a curious black hill in the centre, which was once an active volcano.

At the visitors’ centre, the receptionist asked whether we had 4x4 driving experience, which of course we did, so we signed up to drive the 30 km 4x4 route down to the crater floor. The descent was hair-raising but doable. After camping in the crater for the night, we took a different, more difficult route out. We had to build sections of road where the rock steps were too high for the Hilux – a good test of Marie’s sense of humour! Thankfully we spotted some Nubian ibex for cheer, and eventually, a tar road again.

This reserve, with its rugged beauty, was the perfect place to end our trip through Israel. We could easily have stayed for much longer – it’s an eye-opening destination to visit; rewarding and complex. For every picturesque photographic moment, there’s another sight that boggles the mind and breaks the heart.

Up next? The ancient city of Petra in Jordan was calling...

From the top: The Banksy-designed Walled Off Hotel on the Palestinian side of Bethlehem is quirky from the front entrance to the themed rooms – like the Pillow-fight Room depicting an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian youth – and lounge. Although Bethlehem is in Palestinian territory, it is under Israeli military control and segregated by means of this eight-metre-high barrier wall.



Clockwise from top left: The road towards the Dead Sea and Aqaba, Jordan. A steep decline (4x4 only) takes you into the Ramon Crater. The crater has a black volcano mound in its centre.

Fast facts

These prices are from 2018 and are meant to provide a rough idea of what the Gurneys spent on their trip. Prices would have gone up since then.

HAIFA
Haifa Hostel: R1 600 per night for two people.
Falafel: R120 per pita (at HaZkenim).
Entrance to Hanging Gardens of Haifa: Free.

GALILEE & GOLAN HEIGHTS
Entrance to Hippos: Free.
Pelter Winery: R65 per person for a tasting of five wines; R300 for a cheese platter for two.

JERUSALEM
Hotel HaRova: R2 200 per night for two people.

BETHLEHEM
Walled Off Hotel: R2 400 per night for two people, breakfast included.

RAMON CRATER
Entrance: R100 per person.
Camping: R300 per person per night.
4x4 trail: Free.

SHIPPING
RoRo (roll-on, roll-off) shipping for the Hilux: R8 000 (Mersin in Turkey to Haifa in Israel).
Accommodation on board: R2 250 (one person, including meals).
Customs clearing: R6 200 (Yoel Gilead, atlaslogistics.co.il)

OTHER
Cup of coffee: R45 – R55.
Simple lunch: R300 p.p.



NOTE

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This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. See issues #175 to #178 for their travels through France, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.

In the end, they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km before arriving back home in Joburg on 19 December 2019.



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Wild camping in Wadi Rum desert – a protected area of narrow gorges, towering cliffs and wind-sculpted sandstone formations.

Pathway to Petra

Starting in 2018, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** set out on an 18-month overland journey from France to South Africa. In this final chapter of their Travel Journal, they explore Jordan.



From the top: The main road into the town of Aqaba. Yamaniya Beach Promenade, in Aqaba. Ad Deir (the Monastery) in the ancient city of Petra, where camels still walk along the Colonnaded Street.

What is it about a country that gets you hooked? Is it the people, the history, the landscapes, the food – or something else that you just can't put your finger on? Jordan is on an ancient trade route connecting Egypt, to the south-west, with Damascus in Syria to the north. Beyond Jordan's towns and cities, the country's wild and rugged landscapes seem unchanged since the times when it lay at the cultural intersection of Roman emperors, Nabataean kings and Christian Crusaders. Jordan surprised us around every turn, the Bedouin hospitality made each day special, and everything simply radiated with an intoxicating atmosphere – it has that elusive X-factor that hooks you quickly, and for good.

It's also a very organised country, offering tourists a thing called a "Jordan Pass". We bought this online beforehand: It covered our visa fees, plus access to a set number of tourist attractions, including three days in Petra which is the highlight of a visit to the country.

We had three weeks to complete a circular route from Aqaba in the south, up to Petra, Amman, the Dead Sea, and finally the desert landscape of Wadi Rum.

Strategically placed on the Red Sea, Aqaba is principally a port city, but better known among tourists for its scuba-diving spots and great beaches. The Eilat/Wadi Araba border post between Israel and Jordan turned out to be a breeze. We flashed our Jordan Pass to officials and within 45 minutes our CDP (Carnet de Passage) for Kukuza, our Toyota Hilux, was stamped.

Shortly thereafter, we checked into the Bedouin Moon Village – a budget beach resort – and ordered lunch. The place was not quite as exotic as its name suggested, but we negotiated a rate to camp in their parking lot, which allowed us more budget to gorge on their yummy food. We stayed there for two nights and sampled dishes like *maqluba* (meaning "upside-down"), which is a slow-cooked dish of rice, chicken, potatoes and vegetables. "Don't forget the sesame bread," our waiter said. "You will regret it!" He was right, the combination was delicious.

Aqaba is super laid-back, with a steady flow of Israeli visitors who revel in the cheaper hotels and restaurants on the other side of the border. (Israel is hectically expensive.) Knowing that we would return here to take the ferry to Egypt, we focused on a few bits of housekeeping. We applied for our Egyptian visas and set up the shipping for the bakkie. Kukuza also got a service – I changed oil and air filters in preparation for our journey into the desert.

Petra, via the back door

The ancient trade city of Petra is just 150 km from Aqaba. We were impatient to see one of the most mind-blowing archaeological destinations on the planet, so we opted for the tarred highway rather than our usual back roads.

The site is hidden by mountains, deep in the desert. Also called the Rose City, Petra (which means "rock" in Greek) was a cosmopolitan city in its heyday – home to the Nabataeans and also Egyptians, Judeans, Persians, Greeks and Romans involved in trade at the time.

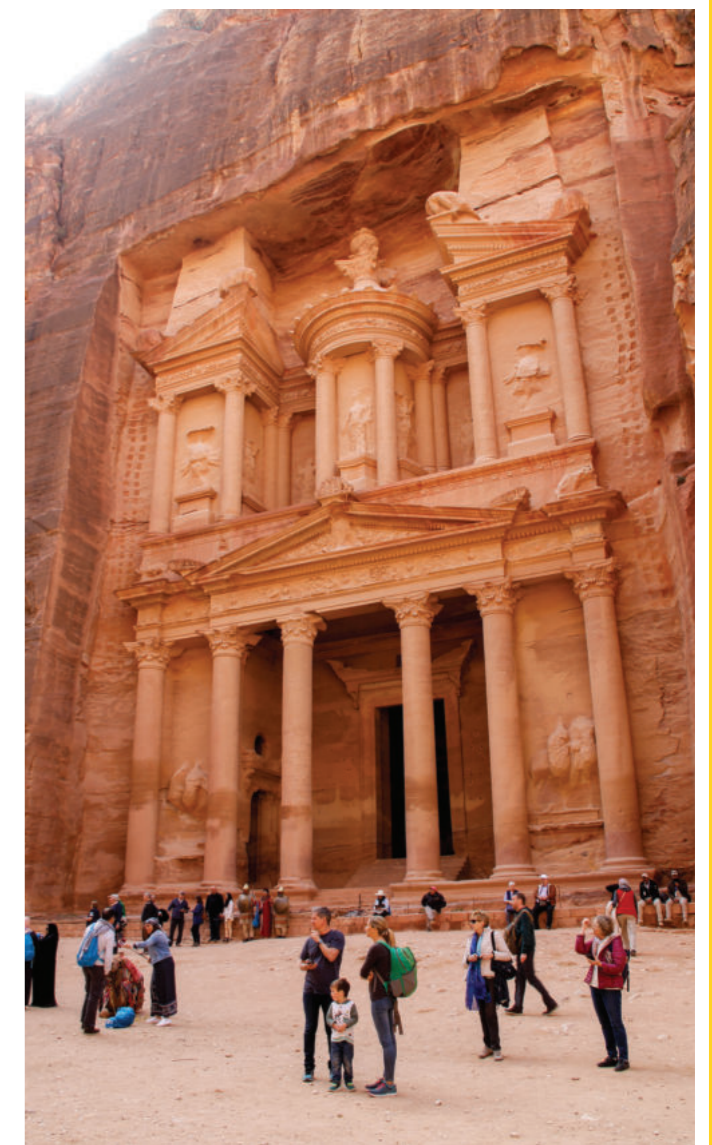
Highlights include rock-cut temples, intricately detailed tombs and an amphitheatre that could seat thousands, all built between 300 BC and 106 AD. There are pools and gardens, fed by a complex water capture and storage system that sustained up to 30 000 people at its peak. Trade goods like textiles, incense, spices, ivory, and precious minerals were brought through here.

The party ended when new maritime trade routes overtook the slower and riskier overland routes. This left Petra obsolete, deserted, and in near ruin for centuries. In the early 1800s it was "rediscovered" by a Swiss explorer named Johann Burckhardt, and it quickly captured the imagination of tourists everywhere.

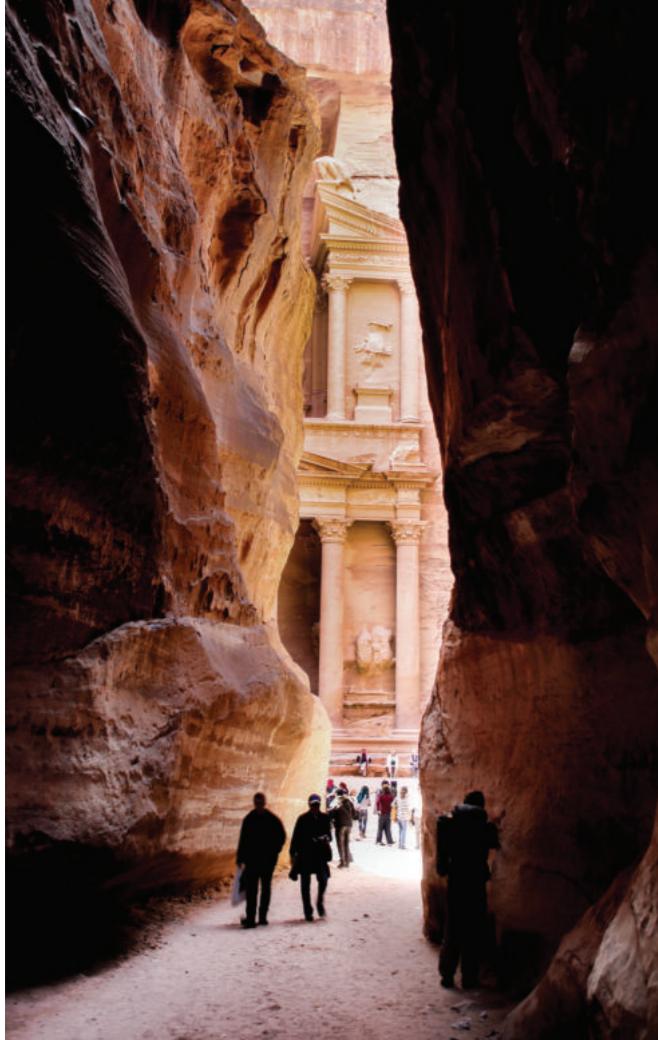
We were keen to get our cameras clicking, but first we needed a wild camp spot for our impending three-day exploration. We settled in Little Petra, an area 6 km north of the historical city, which was where all the camel caravans used to camp out. The location was beautiful, but also strategic, as it gave us easy access to Petra's "back door".

Unpacking the rooftop tent, the desert around us was alive with smoke rising from countless Bedouin tents. It was the weekend and locals were out enjoying the countryside, having picnics.

Wind and sand are a given, so the Bedouins usually create a simple kitchen area inside their tents. A rectangular metal frame (about 100 cm x 50 cm, and 10 cm deep) is placed on the floor of the tent and filled up with sand. On this raised sandy base, they light a small wood fire to boil tea and to cook basic dishes. Since wood in the desert is in such short supply, the Bedouin are very frugal, using the minimum of coals to cook their food. A regular "braai" meal might include *shrak* (flatbread), eaten with onion, tomato, cucumber and courgette; and dessert might be watermelon, figs and dates. Meat is less common and reserved for special days or guests.



From the top: The Place of Sacrifice provided a good vantage point to photograph Petra's Street of Facades. Standing in front of the impressive Treasury, it's easy to imagine the old city as a thriving place of trade.



From the top: The Siq, a dim, narrow gorge, is the main entrance into Petra. Patrick is flanked by Royal Guards of the Treasury. You can also enter Petra via a “back door” – a 12 km hike through a desert valley.

Taking the “back door” route into Petra entails a 12 km hike through mountains. After a peaceful night, we woke early. A Bedouin man pointed out a little security hut in the distance – we had to get our Jordan Passes stamped there. It was 6.30 am but already the sun was beastly hot, even though it was technically winter in Jordan.

The rocky landscape revealed little signs of life and we were alone for most of the three-hour route, which took us through deep gorges where paths hugged the mountainside. A hike to the top of the plateau rewarded us with incredible views over Wadi Araba, and we bought delicious fresh tea brewed by local Bedouin traders. It was a great way to enter Petra for the first time. It felt like we were on our own private voyage of discovery.

Setting eyes on Ad Deir (the Monastery) resting silently in the rock felt like a holy moment. Ad Deir is massive and possibly more impressive than the Treasury, which is the more recognisable site at Petra. After the long hike, we sat down to grab a bite to eat at the conveniently placed Ad Deir restaurant: a simple breakfast of hummus, tomatoes and cucumber, with Bedouin bread.

The sights just kept coming: enormous rock-cut temples and spectacular tombs. The planning, engineering and attention to detail required to carve these facades is mind-boggling, let alone hollowing out the cavities within. Petra is also one large cemetery, for behind many of the beautiful facades lie huge rooms carved directly into the rock where families entombed their loved ones.

We didn’t do the hike every day. On subsequent days, from our camping spot in Little Petra, we drove around to the main entrance and walked in along the narrow Siq – a 20 m-deep gorge that is barely 3 m wide and can get quite congested with tourist-laden donkeys and horse-drawn chariots.

Having three days in Petra afforded us time to find shady viewpoints to take it all in. We usually try to avoid the tourist hordes, but in Petra, watching the large groups walk down the Colonnaded Street helped us to imagine this trading city in its heyday. To complete the scene, Jordan tourism even pays a few locals to randomly hang around in traditional Nabataean battle outfits, which make for classic photo opportunities.

We ticked off all the best-known sights, like the Great Temple, Royal Tombs, Street of Facades, Place of Sacrifice, Theatre and of course the Treasury, which was clearly designed to impress. These guys even built a huge fountain (Nymphaeum) just for the fun of it!



Floating in jelly

We arrived in the capital, Amman, barely 24 hours after a torrential downpour caused a rare and devastating desert flood. To get into Amman, we were forced by the police to take an alternative route through the mountains, which turned out to be a great choice. The views over the Jordan Rift Valley and the Dead Sea from our wild camp spot were unforgettable.

Not much more than a village until the middle of the 20th century, Amman is now a bustling capital city with a population of four million. Although we only spent two days there, we managed to see the 8th-century Umayyad Palace, also with a very large Roman amphitheatre; and the Roman-built Temple of Hercules, where two colossal statues once stood. Only a fragment of a hand remains, but you get an idea as to how big these statues must have been.

The real treat was discovering *limonana*, a mint-lemon drink like no other, and devouring *mansaf*, roasted lamb with yoghurt sauce, widely regarded as Jordan’s national dish.

Next up was the Dead Sea, which we’d mostly skipped on the Israeli part of our trip. The Jordan Rift Valley drops to about 430 m below sea level at the Dead Sea – the lowest natural point on the surface of the earth.

It’s not a sea, but rather a very salty lake – nearly 10 times saltier than any ocean. Nothing lives in it (hence the name) – no fish, no frogs, not even weeds. Apparently, the water level is dropping at an alarming rate of one metre per year, and we were warned not to camp along the water’s edge due to the frequency of sinkholes.

The northern section of the Dead Sea, which is close to Amman, is a money-spinner. Plenty of swanky hotels hug the shoreline. We opted to stop off at Amman Beach, which is a resort-style spot with a few swimming pools. They have a day-pass package (which cost about R240 per person) that included access to change rooms and the use of their swimming pools.

A guide reminded us not to enter the water if we had any open cuts (it stings like hell) and to avoid water getting into our eyes and mouth. It was mid-afternoon and the sun was strong when we headed for a swim. For an extra R25 each, we ceremoniously lathered black mud all over our bodies (which dried to a crust in seconds) before wading into the world’s largest flotation pool. It felt odd entering the water, like swimming in jelly, and we had plenty of laughs. A few metres from the beach, we gingerly laid back (making sure to keep our faces dry) and floated on top like wine corks. It’s impossible to sink!



From top left: This enormous Roman amphitheatre in Amman dates back to when the city was known as Philadelphia. One of Amman’s recent attractions is the colourful umbrella staircases. The Gurneys found a wild-camping spot overlooking the Dead Sea, and didn’t hesitate to try the Dead Sea mud treatment.

From the top: A local guide in Wadi Rum prepares a *zarb* or Bedouin barbecue – an ancient technique where food is cooked in an underground pit. When you visit this protected area with a guide, as part of a tour group, you stay in a camp like this “martian dome” camp. After helping a local Bedouin called Hussein find his camels, Patrick and Marie were invited back to his place where Patrick also learnt the art of camel appreciation.

Opposite page: Patrick takes in the Wadi Rum landscape from a natural rock bridge.

Goat stew in Wadi Rum

After a 260 km, four-hour drive from the Dead Sea, we arrived at the super-efficient Wadi Rum Visitor Centre. We were flying by the seat of our pants. We had ogled many photos but not done a stitch of research – not even knowing if we could camp within the protected area. We soon learnt that nobody takes in their own 4x4, but rather joins a group. Luckily, we met a local Bedouin tour guide who signed our paperwork, stating that he was our guide and responsible for us during our stay. Thanks to this loophole, we could take in Kukuza and go where we pleased. Six nights of wild camping in Wadi Rum!

Tar took us up to Wadi Rum village – Toyota country! Old Land Cruisers and Hilux bakkies of all ages were everywhere. Most had been converted into tourist transportation with bench seats at the back. Over the next six days of camping, we bumped into Toyotas all over – it felt like we were part of a Toyota Desert Club!

We stocked up on water and what we could find in the tiny shops, then we headed out. Immediately, we encountered deep sand. A few tracks quickly become hundreds of tracks, all leading into the 720 km² Wadi Rum protected area. We had no idea where to go or which track to take. Google Earth became indispensable (there was plenty of signal) and helped us identify our location against the enormous mountains dotted around the red-and-yellow sandpit. It was awesome driving those first few kilometres to find a campsite – I felt like an ant on Mars!

The Bedouin men all wear eyeliner (like Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*), which complements their dark hair and the obligatory head scarf. Their friendliness and generosity were inspirational.

We hopped around the desert, sleeping in different spots over the next couple of nights. Travelling by ourselves, we became another local attraction. Every day, a Hilux or two pulled up to say hello or offer us food; even entire tour groups popped in to meet us. The freedom in Wadi Rum was refreshing. It's huge, and you can set up anywhere knowing that the tourists all go back to their respective camps.

We were also getting a little too cocky – trying out new moves in the deep sand with our heavy Hilux – and we almost rolled the vehicle while cresting a dune. We cruised around looking at attractions like the petroglyphs, various rock bridges and arches, and the house and spring named after Lawrence of Arabia.

We helped some Bedouin find lost camels at night and were invited back to their camp to drink mint tea and eat spicy goat stew cooked in a *zarb*, a traditional underground oven, served with vegetables and pita. I was gifted a traditional dagger by the head of the family, and I gave him a rechargeable torch in return. Marie was even offered a gold ring, which she respectfully turned down.

Wadi Rum is one of the most dramatic deserts we've ever seen. Deep, rugged canyons and large wadis (a wadi is essentially a dry riverbed) lead out into undulating sand dunes and towering mountains. A patchwork of red and yellow desert sand changes colour with every changing degree of the sun. Silent contemplation comes naturally in a place like this, and every night offered amazing stargazing.



All too soon, we were packing up the rooftop tent for the last time and saying goodbye to our new Bedouin friends. We got back on the road to Aqaba to catch the ferry across to Nuweiba in Egypt.

We explored the country by car, but you can do it on foot if you have the time. The Jordan Trail (675 km, 40 days) covers all the attractions, from Umm Qais in the north to Aqaba in the south. If we ever decide to walk such an extreme distance, we both decided that Jordan would be the country to do it in. Their culture is characterised by hospitality at levels we had never experienced. It was also consistent. Regardless of whether we stayed in the city or the countryside, we were treated the same way: like royalty.

Everyone greets you with the same phrase, “Welcome, welcome, thank you for coming.” What a place!



Fast facts

These prices are from 2019 and are meant to provide a rough idea of what the Gurneys spent on their trip. Prices would have gone up since then.

AQABA

Bedouin Moon Village (hotel): R480 per night for two people (camping in the parking area)

Maqluba (upside-down stew): R265 per person

Bakkie service: R288 (new oil, diesel and air filters)

PETRA

Entrance into Petra: R1 320 per person, which gives you access for three days. (Free if you have a Jordan Pass, like we did.)

Donkey ride through the Siq: R400 per person (return trip)

Horse-drawn carriage ride: R460 for two people (one way, from the entrance to the Treasury)

Toasted sandwich opposite Ad Deir (the Monastery): R216

AMMAN

Alanbat Hotel: R890 per room (two people) per night

Entrance to Umayyad Palace Citadel: Free if you have a Jordan

Pass, otherwise R66 per person



Entrance to Roman amphitheatre: Free if you have a Jordan Pass, otherwise R48 per person

Mansaf (lamb and yoghurt dish) for one: R320

DEAD SEA

Amman Dead Sea (full-day package): R240 per person

Light lunch for one: R208

WADI RUM

Entrance to Wadi Rum: Free if you have a Jordan Pass, otherwise R110 per person per day

OTHER FEES

Jordan Pass: R1 680 per person (this covered, among other sites, three days in Petra, plus an entry visa into the country)

AB Maritime ferry for our vehicle from Jordan to Egypt (3 hours): R2 880

Ferry cost (passenger): R1 040 per person



NOTE

We have previously published the African leg of Patrick and Marie's journey – see issues #158 to #166 for their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. See issues #175 to #179 for their travels

through France, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey and Israel.

In the end, they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km before arriving back home in Joburg on 19 December 2019.

MORE INFO: info@skultcha.com; skultcha.com; Facebook: skultcha Instagram: @skulcha

Into the ancient desert

On an 18-month, 40 000-kilometre journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick Gurney** and his wife **Marie** cross the border into Egypt – land of pyramids, temples, the Nile – and *baksheesh*.

We always knew that Egypt would be difficult, and that countering the culture of *baksheesh* (bribery) would be one of our daily challenges. Reading online overlander forums, we knew that the border crossing could be laborious, we'd encounter hagglers everywhere, and security might be an issue. We also heard that self-driving the Sinai Peninsula was a no-no, and that the Oasis Route (a scenic desert route in the west, which takes you from one oasis town to the next) was out of bounds – or we'd need a military convoy at best.

But somehow, things just worked out for us. We put it down to a positive attitude, and a respectful roll-of-the-dice...

We received our 30-day visas within one hour from the Egyptian consulate in Aqaba, Jordan. We put our Toyota Hilux double-cab (2001 3.0 KZTE model) onto the ferry to Nuweiba, on the east coast of the Sinai Peninsula. The ferry had comfortable reclining seats and the food and refreshments were a surprise. On arrival, all tourists were singled out and privately ushered off. So far, so good!

Our load was lightened when our beloved 10x50 binoculars were confiscated – deemed "military grade" by an inquisitive official, who even asked if I could "switch them on". I was given a receipt and told that I could have them back when I exited via the same port. (On the off-chance that we'd ever return that way.)

There were a few tense moments where we were obviously being asked for *baksheesh*, with bogus claims like, "This paperwork is incorrect" – but we simply said, "Okay, let's go back and start again." This approach worked: After 12 hours at the border post, we had our Egyptian number plates and we were off.



MARIE ON THE FERRY TO EGYPT



SCUBA-DIVERS, DAHAB

First stop, Sinai

The Sinai Desert has a rugged beauty. We visited Dahab, which is the laid-back sister town of Sharm El-Sheikh, the big Red Sea resort town. We arrived with chilly weather so there was no swimming just yet.

After Dahab, we drove to the southern tip of the Sinai, for a day trip into Ras Mohammed National Park, where we did some spectacular snorkelling. Ten metres from the beach is a “wall”, where the reef drops away into deep water – at least 40 m into the blue. We saw turtles, game fish and some hard and soft corals.

From Ras Mohammed, we drove up the west coast of Sinai towards the Suez Canal. We were interested to witness this mega engineering feat, but it was all highly secured, which meant we couldn't see a thing from the road. There are a few bridges crossing the canal, from which we hoped to snap a few photos, but thanks to our “expert” navigation skills, we managed to find the only tunnel going *under* the canal. We never even got a glimpse!

The tunnel is 1,6 km long and it was chock-full of cars, trucks and buses. It's surreal to think that an oil tanker could be sailing past above all that traffic.

On the other side of the canal, we motored onward towards Cairo, where we'd scheduled a few days to visit the sights and sort out our visas for Sudan – the next country on our itinerary.



SPHINX, GIZA



COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE, CAIRO



MUHAMMAD ALI MOSQUE, CAIRO



OLD KOMBIS IN CAIRO



ENTRANCE TO RAS MOHAMMED NATIONAL PARK

Cairo traffic

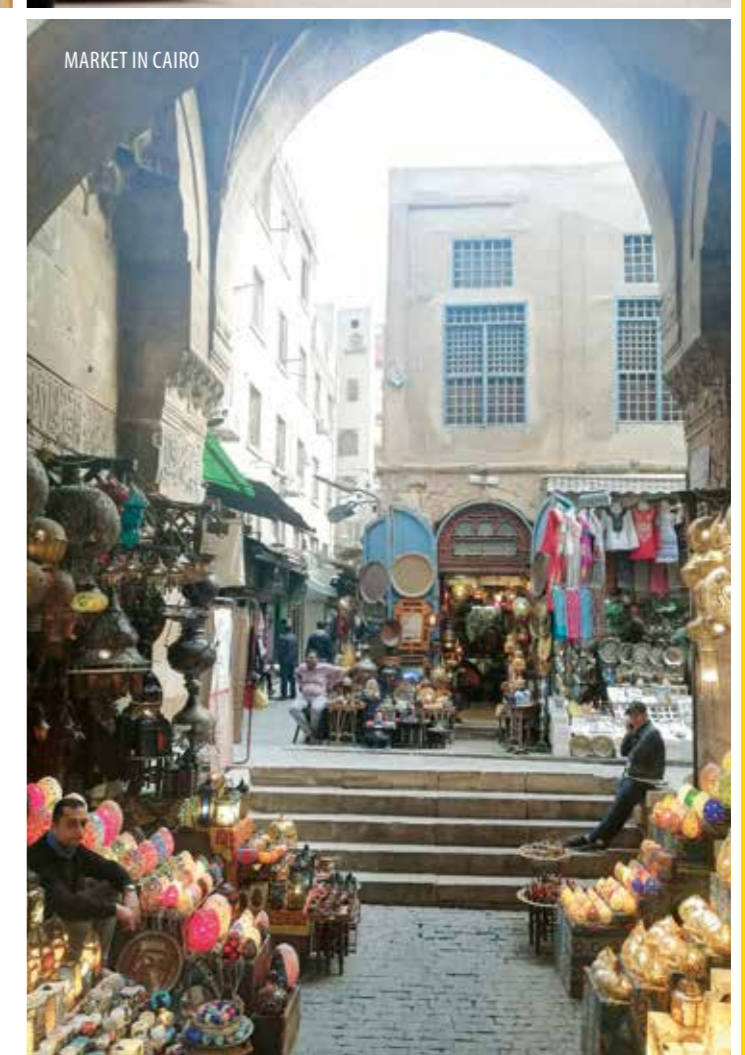
Everybody had warned us about traffic in the Egyptian capital, which 20 million people call home. We soon worked it out: Lanes mean nothing; hooting politely tells someone what you plan to do; watch out for pedestrians, who just wander into the game whenever they please; and never worry about who's behind you. If you're a risk-averse driver, rather take a taxi around the city.

Daytime driving in Cairo might seem frightening, but night driving is another story. For some reason, Egyptians don't use headlights. If you do use yours, an oncoming car will alert you by flashing their lights. Madness!

We stayed in a great little hotel just off Tahrir Square – the epicentre of the Egyptian revolution of 2011. We ate at all the local spots we could find and tried some really interesting – and terrible – dishes. Stuffed, deboned pigeon was quite tasty; Molokhia soup – a slimy concoction of jute, garlic and coriander – less so... A dessert called Om Ali was delicious – it's a bread pudding with a blend of pistachios, coconut flakes, raisins and plenty of sugar and milk.

Colonial architecture dominates dusty downtown Cairo. Although the frenetic development of the past 30 years has been unkind to the city, there's still some beauty that shines through.

We visited the grand old Cairo Museum, the Pyramids of Giza, and some of the oldest mosques and shopping districts.



MARKET IN CAIRO

Oasis-hopping

From Cairo, we headed south-west into the desert, towards Bahariya Oasis. (We didn't have time to drive the full Oasis Route, which starts further north, so we took a short cut.) Oasis towns like Bahariya are self-contained pockets of life, with the exception of cellphone reception and diesel. (Diesel is no problem for us: We have two tanks with a total capacity of 105 litres – a range of about 850 km.)

In the oasis towns, mud-brick building is still a thing, date palms are everywhere and inhabitants lead a simple life.

Between Bahariya and Farafra is the White Desert National Park, named after the striking chalk formations eroded by sand and wind.

We had no idea how to enter the park and we were afraid we'd somehow miss it. We noted a track leaving the tarmac at one point, and we followed it. About 20 km into the desert, we set up camp. Half an hour later, a park official arrived to charge entrance fees, which we were only too happy to pay because we thought we were about to be ejected for camping wild.

The scenery was breathtaking. We spent three nights camping in the middle of nowhere and had the desert all to ourselves.

Dakhla Oasis has a little village called Mut, where you'll find an ancient fortified town, mostly abandoned, full of narrow passageways. Kharga Oasis has the Temple of Hibis, which is well preserved.

Marie had to fly back to South Africa for business, so we headed to Luxor. We planned to meet up in Aswan further south, which left me on my own for a week.

Luxor has an incredible concentration of ancient temples, tombs and palaces, constructed over a span of 4 000 years. Knowing that I would probably only see the Valley of the Kings once in my life, I bought tickets for every conceivable attraction. The basic entrance fee allows you to see three tombs, but you can buy extra tickets to see special tombs like Tutankhamun's. Most of the tombs are spectacular (Tutankhamun's less so, actually) – make sure you purchase the photo ticket, which allows you to take photos inside the tombs. It's also worth hiring a really good guide.

During my time alone, I sought out unique interactions with local mud-brick makers, mattress makers and potters. Some interactions were touch-and-go: One night, while trying to find a quiet camping spot, I ended up taking a road into the hills, only to find a team of five Sudanese gold miners who were very happy to see me... It was dark and I couldn't turn around. We sat and had Nubian coffee (made with ginger – delicious) and I cooked them dinner. I asked if I could set up camp and they said, "No problem, no police come here, we shoot police." This was, uhm, reassuring.

Much later, a massive argument ensued: One of the miners didn't want me to stay, but he later settled down. When I heard another two vehicles arriving at 3.30 am, I took out Marie's Taser and almost shocked myself in the process. In the miners' defence, they did come running to my tent shouting, "Hassan, Hassan!" (my adopted Arabic name), to find out what had made the terrible electric noise. Nevertheless, the next morning I was out of there as quickly as possible.



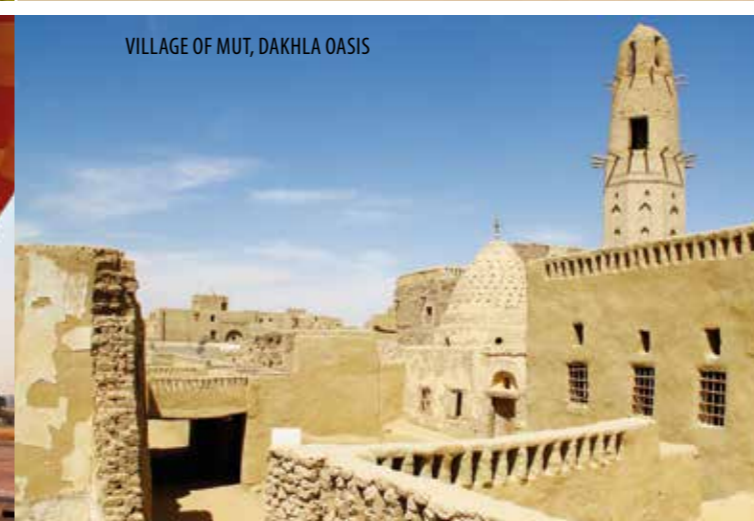
VILLAGE OF MUT



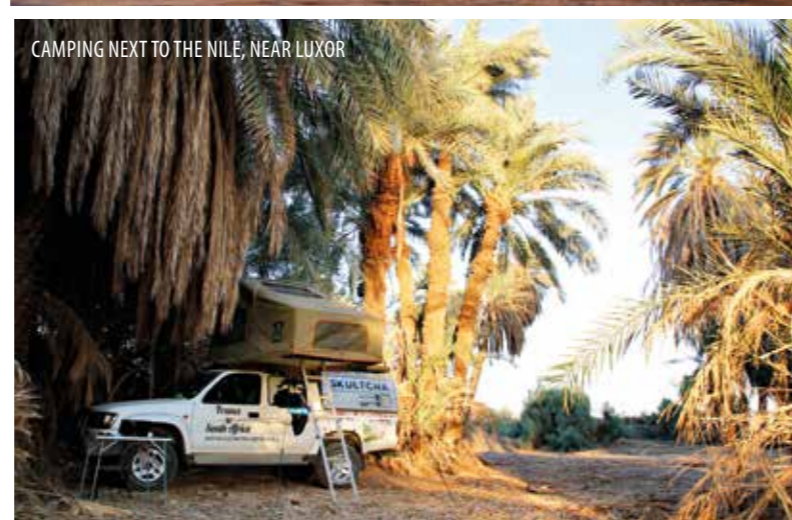
WHITE DESERT NATIONAL PARK



HOT AIR BALLOONS, LUXOR



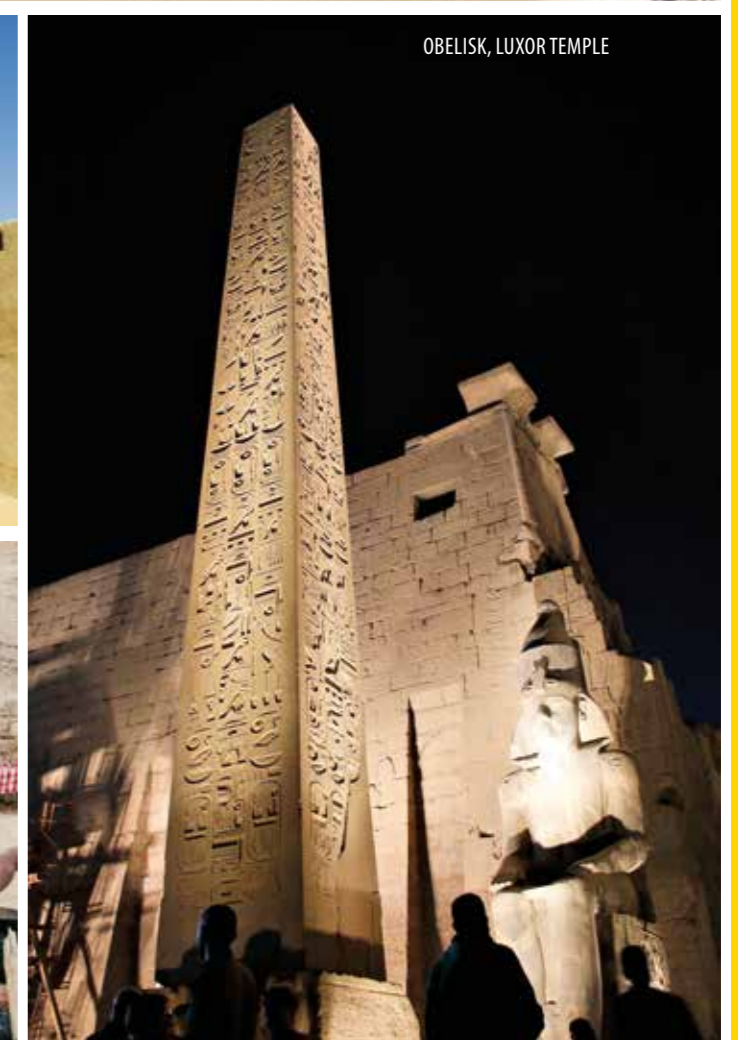
VILLAGE OF MUT, DAKHLA OASIS



CAMPING NEXT TO THE NILE, NEAR LUXOR



SUDANESE GOLD MINERS



OBELISK, LUXOR TEMPLE



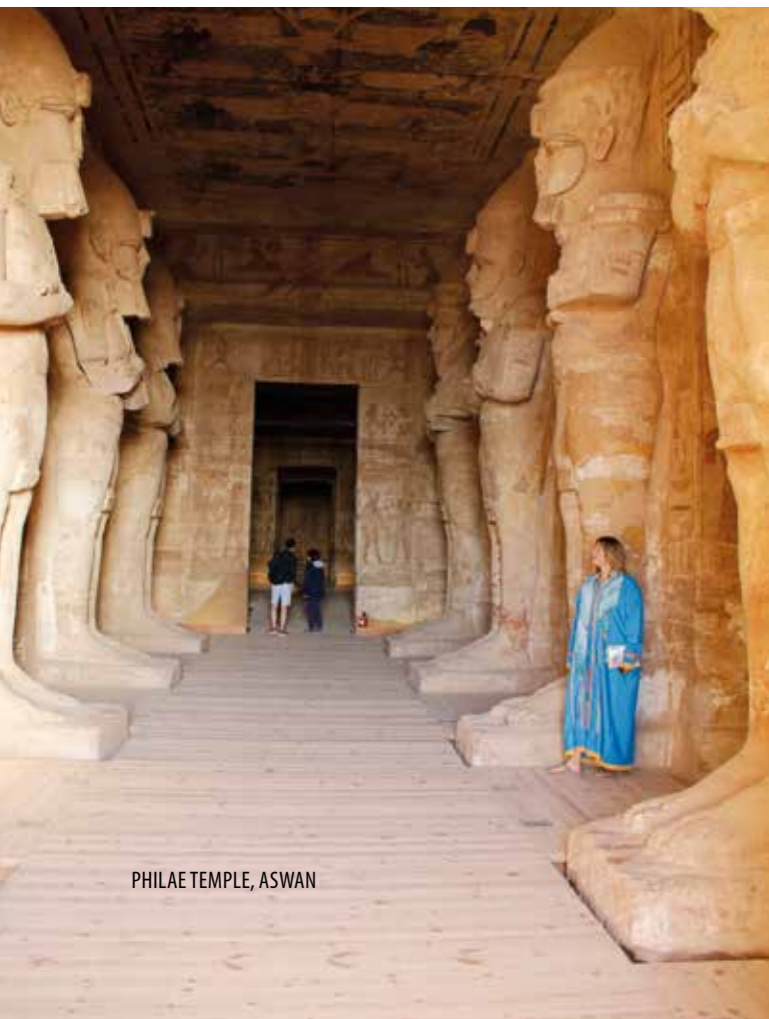
FELUCCA ON THE NILE



PART OF THE PHILAE TEMPLE, ASWAN



ABU SIMBEL



PHILAE TEMPLE, ASWAN

Further south

I met Marie in Aswan. It was fascinating to see the Nubian-influenced architecture as we moved south. In Aswan, we visited the Philae temple on an island in the Aswan Low Dam, and the unfinished obelisk, which is just outside the city. We sailed for four hours on the Nile, on a felucca all to ourselves.

Abu Simbel was our last stop in Egypt. When they built Lake Nasser (the Aswan Dam) in the 1950s and '60s, entire temples had to be relocated from the Nile Valley to higher ground. This task was as mammoth as building the Giza Pyramids from scratch.

We camped in the parking lot of the temple complex, along with three packs of dogs, and we were visited early each morning by the coach drivers ferrying their tourists. On our final morning in Egypt, we celebrated Marie's birthday – us and all the bus drivers – singing "Happy Birthday" in Arabic. Later, however, we realised that we'd jumped the gun: Marie's birthday was actually only the next day!

I guess that's what happens when you've spent nine months on the road.

IS IT SAFE?

Because there have been attacks on tourists in the recent past, the Egyptian police are serious about their job. This means constant roadblock checks, where your vehicle licence and passport will be scrutinised and vehicle searched.

We only had to travel with a police escort three times. It's a bit irritating because they don't allow you to stop where you please to take photos.

You can request to sign a disclaimer that waives your right to an escort. This is not standard practice at every roadblock, so ask.

We bought local SIM cards and gave these numbers out to police at each roadblock, only to be called at the strangest hours as the officials tried to track our movements through Egypt. All told, we felt safe everywhere – except for the night that Patrick spent with the Sudanese miners...

CAMPING TIPS

Wild camping in Egypt is not easy. No-go military areas are everywhere, and then you have the Antiquities Authority – the members of which think you're a team of tomb robbers if you venture anywhere within a 10 km radius of an archaeological site.

Because of this, sneaking off the road to find a spot for the night is tricky. There's not much to hide behind either, and there are hectic desert winds and deep sand. As a result, there are only a few quiet spots to camp in Egypt, mainly in the Nile Valley.

PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

They set off from Valence in France – Marie's home town – on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving to Johannesburg where they live. They'd been on the road for nine months already by the time they reached Egypt, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

They decided to do this journey to re-think their definition of culture; they were looking for inspiration from humanity to guide their future decisions – in their personal lives and careers. (Marie consults for the IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature – and Patrick works in marketing.)

MORE INFO: E-mail info@skultcha.com if you have questions about their trip, or visit skultcha.com
Facebook: [skultcha](https://www.facebook.com/skultcha)
Instagram: [@skulcha](https://www.instagram.com/skulcha) (spelled slightly differently)



TRAVEL JOURNAL



NEXT MONTH: Patrick and Marie tackle Sudan.



MARIE AND PATRICK GURNEY



FELUCCA ON THE NILE



CAMPING WILD IN THE WHITE DESERT

Hot, hotter, Sudan!

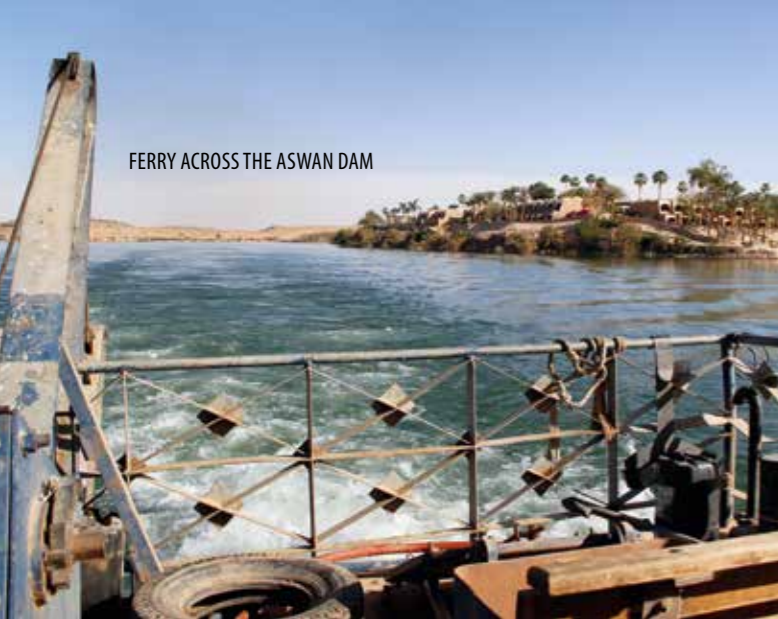
On an 18-month, 50 000 km journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** crossed the border into Sudan...

WORDS **PATRICK GURNEY**
PICTURES **PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY**

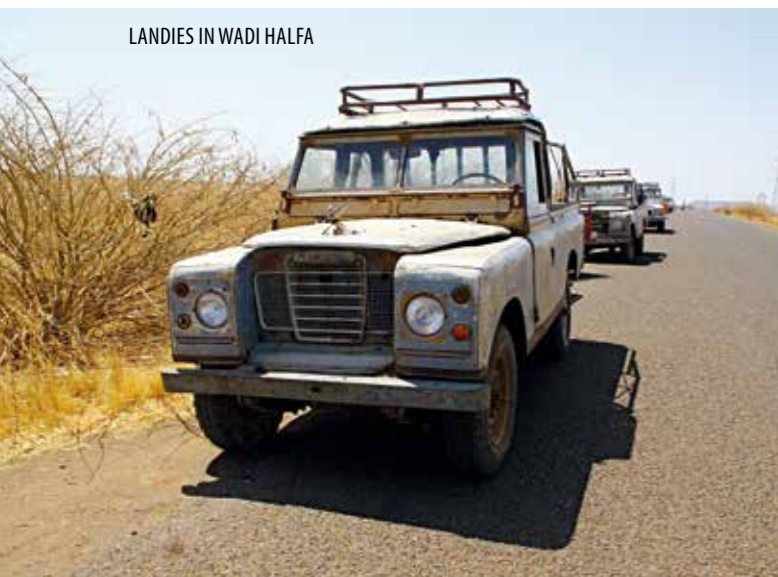
We had heard rumours that the border between Egypt and Sudan would be closed due to protests in Khartoum, but we set off anyway from Abu Simbel in Egypt, hoping things would work out. In Abu Simbel, we arranged a fixer to help us through the customs clearing process.

We crossed from Egypt to Sudan using the two-hour ferry across the Aswan Dam. It was pleasant to be on the water, looking back at the desert. We disembarked on the other side and drove our Toyota Hilux double-cab for another 35 km into the desert, to the border post, which is basically in the middle of nowhere.

All went smoothly. The customs officials looked for alcohol – Sudan has a zero-tolerance policy, being a Muslim state – but we had systematically polished off all our mini bottles so we had nothing to fear. The officials were actually way more concerned with 1 200 head of Sudanese cattle (60 trucks!) being exported into Egypt. We cleared both sides and were into Sudan within six hours. Brilliant!



FERRY ACROSS THE ASWAN DAM



LANDIES IN WADI HALFA



CAMPING NEXT TO THE NILE RIVER

The wild north

Our first stop in Sudan was Wadi Halfa, a dusty border town and home to a huge family of ageing Series III Land Rovers. Our first job was to get local SIM cards, eat lunch and register our visas with the police.

We were introduced to the national dish of *foul* (mainly beans), which was delicious the first couple of times we ate it, but quickly became boring. Food shopping in Sudan can be expensive, unless you're happy to survive on onions, tomatoes, cucumbers and sweet green melons. Tinned items like tuna are pricey – about R40 for a very small tin.

We set out to find a camping spot on the shore of Lake Nubia (the name for Aswan Dam in Sudan). In the process, we managed to get stuck in deep sand, but doing so perfectly levelled the Hilux – and our rooftop tent – so that was our campsite sorted! We tucked into sunset snacks and decided to sort out the stuck car the following day.

We used Google Maps extensively on our journey, but Sudan has somehow blocked this app from being able to navigate a route, so we used Maps.me, which was brilliant. Maps.me also has an offline mode and you don't need cellphone reception, provided you've downloaded the country map.

As in Egypt, the Nile River is a lifeline for much of Sudan. People are heavily reliant on this artery of water. There turned out to be one exception: Where there is gold to be mined, people will live in the harshest conditions to extract it. This is true of the Northern State of Sudan, where illegal gold mining is rife. At one point we ran low on diesel and found a pump at a semi-permanent mining camp. The fuel was a lot more expensive than elsewhere, but we were happy to pay as our options were limited.

Traditional tourist camping doesn't really exist in Sudan. We camped wild everywhere. We prefer the solitude and the sense of adventure that comes with doing so. Wild camping always brings a few onlookers, but the Sudanese people we encountered were respectful and generally kept their distance.

Because of the heat (we were there in May 2019; most days were 45°C) we had to restructure our daily routine. If we wanted to complete any activities, like going for a walk, we had to do so before 10am. After that, we found shade to rest in until 5.30 pm. Even the wind was hot: It felt like the oven door was left open.

Bottled water was difficult to find, but the Sudanese have come up with a far better solution. Every few kilometres along the main tar road, in every little village, we found trees or shade structures under which stood large, earthenware pots filled with naturally cooled water. This local water-supply system offers free water to the community – and to travellers like us. We regularly filled our water tank, adding a few purification drops just to be safe.



SAT ISLAND

The Kingdom of Kush

After a night in Wadi Halfa, we headed south for 200 km to a tiny village called Farka, on the eastern bank of the Nile. The Nubian architecture we saw along the way is so beautifully simple in its execution: sun-dried mud bricks, plastered with a mixture of mud and straw. The structures keep their occupants cool, even in the 45°C heat.

Having found a good spot to camp, we settled in for three nights. We took out the hammocks and made a little "home", soaking up the wildlife: mostly birds, but also crocodiles (we never saw one in Egypt), and even a snake.

I bought a sword at a village market – a Nubian-forged blade with a leather sheath – perfect for the office wall back home in Joburg. We ate and drank with various families in Farka, taking crash courses in Nubian bread-making and coffee-roasting.

After our short break, we carried on south towards the town of Abri, where we loaded the Hilux onto a ferry and popped across the Nile for a night on Sai Island. The island is home to thousands of tombs and a fortified city that was originally built between 1500 – 1000 BC by the Egyptians. (Back then, Egypt and Sudan were part of the same pharaonic sphere of influence.)

The following morning, we crossed back to the eastern side of the Nile and drove a few kilometres further south to the Temple of Soleb. This sandstone temple was built during the reign of King Amenhotep III, who was the ruler of Nubia at the time. Soleb is on the western bank of the Nile – after some difficulty, we arranged with a local villager to take us across. Still, we had to walk far through fields and palm plantations until we found it.

Some 120 km south, we entered a village called Kerma, and explored the Kingdom of Kush, an important trading centre during Egypt's Middle Kingdom. Kerma is reputed to have been inhabited non-stop for 9000 years and counting. It has two monumental mud-brick temples, known as *deffufa*, which are some of the oldest and largest mud-brick buildings in Africa. We also visited the famous Black Pharaoh statues in the museum at Kerma. (This was the name for pharaohs of Nubian origin.)



NUBIAN ARCHITECTURE



TEMPLE OF SOLEB

Pyramids and a petrified forest

There are more than 200 ancient Nubian pyramids in Sudan's Eastern Desert. These are smaller than their famous Egyptian cousins, with narrow bases and steep sides. We slept in the town of Karima, about 240 km south-east of Kerma, which is located next to Jebel Barkal mountain where we saw five pyramids. The Temple of Mut is at the same site, and we visited its tomb section for just a few extra bucks. Entrance fees in Sudan were much cheaper than in Egypt.

A few kilometres south of Karima, our GPS indicated a petrified forest. There was no signboard, just a barely visible dirt track. We turned off and drove about 10 km into the desert. Slowly, the fossilised tree trunks started to emerge from the sand. Huge trunks were scattered as far as the eye could see. Marie just had to have a meditation session there; she has meditated in several special places along our route.

El-Kurru's Nubian royal cemetery was our next stop. It contains a fascinating grouping of tombs, some of which can be visited – if you can find the guy with the darn keys! Marie was certainly not impressed, sitting in a tiny piece of shade while I spent an hour trying to find the chap in the nearby village.

Finally, it was time for Meroë, Sudan's most famous historical site. We headed down a disused track towards what seemed to be an entrance office. One man on a camel, one lady selling tickets, that was that. No other tourists!

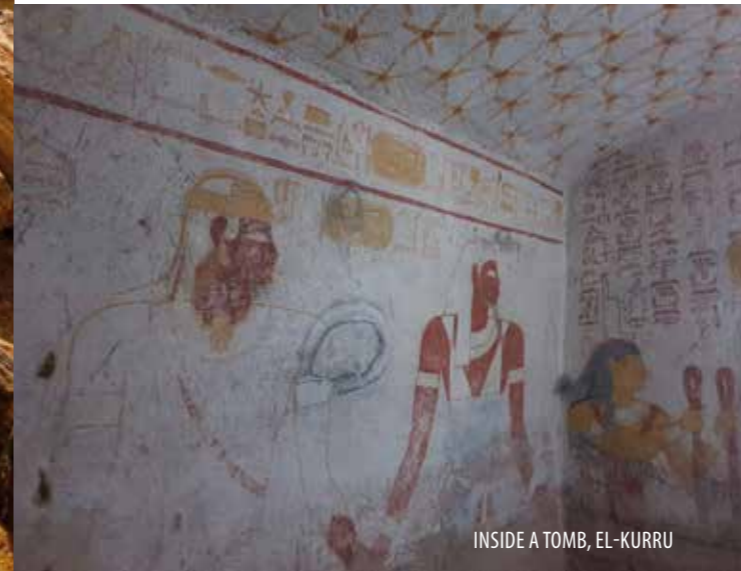
It was late afternoon, so we decided to visit early the next day. We paid our entrance fee so long and set up camp one dune away from the pyramids. The following day was a breathtaking foray among more than 30 pyramids. Some have been partially restored but others are disappearing into the desert.



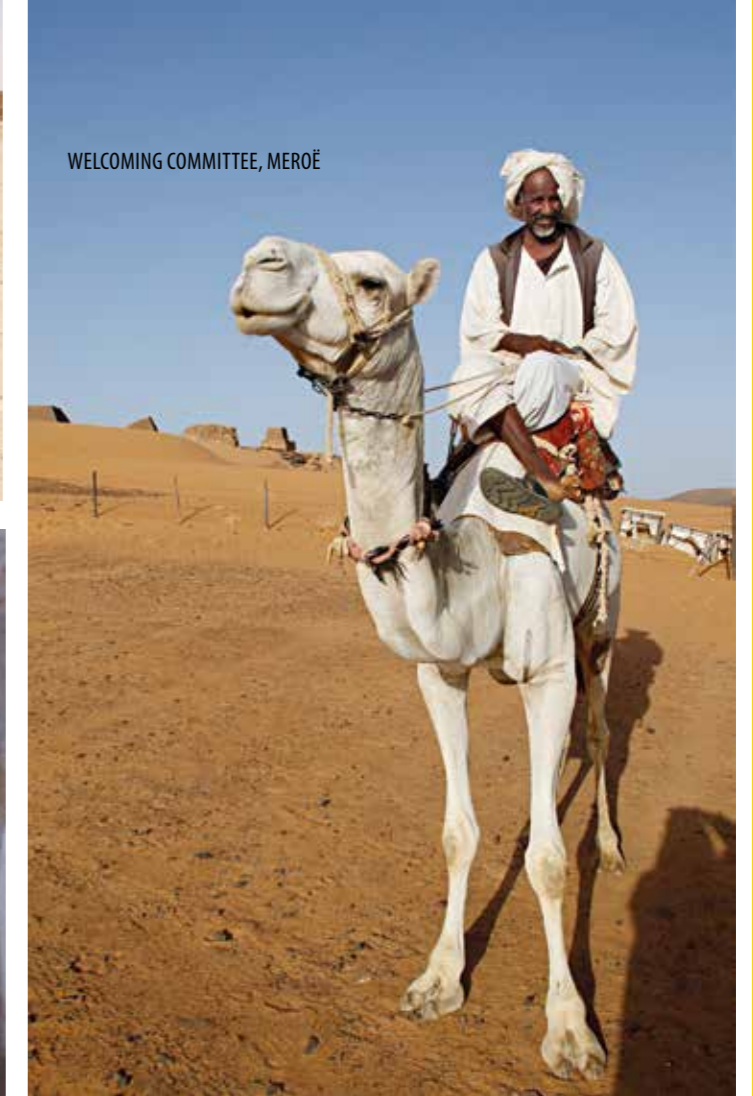
PETRIFIED FOREST



EL-KURRU



INSIDE A TOMB, EL-KURRU



WELCOMING COMMITTEE, MEROË



MEROË



CAMPING NEAR MEROË



KHARTOUM

Khartoum time

Khartoum is the capital of Sudan, at the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile. As a result, it's really two cities: The section west of the Nile is known as Omdurman; Khartoum itself is between the Blue and White Nile.

Arriving in Khartoum, it felt even hotter than the rest of Sudan. We always research weather patterns in advance and we had expected this, which is why we pre-booked an Airbnb apartment with aircon. The apartment was on the Khartoum side of the Nile and we spent four days escaping the worst of the heat.

Things were politically "hot", too. Pro-democracy protesters were everywhere, as was the army, but the atmosphere was more excited than anxious. (This changed after we left Sudan: In June 2019, a paramilitary unit killed dozens of innocent people during an attack.)

Khartoum's traffic made Cairo's busiest day seem like naptime. There are only a few bridges crossing the rivers, which cause terrible bottlenecks. We wanted to see the biggest camel market in Africa, in Omdurman, where camels are apparently bought and sold in their hundreds, but we got horribly stuck in a traffic jam and never got there. It took us two and a half hours to move 1,5 km.

Back in Omdurman later that afternoon, we attended a Sufi ceremony at the Hamid el-Nil Mosque, which takes place at dusk every Friday. Most of the Sufis wear colourful patchwork robes, dancing to the beat of drums, twirling and stamping their feet until they go into a trance.

It was the start of Ramadan, and we were invited by a local family to the "first breakfast" – a meal enjoyed at around 6.30 pm to celebrate the first day of fasting. We were separated, women on one side and men on the other. We ate a delicious traditional soup and drank *karkade*, a drink made from pink hibiscus flowers.

We also visited the confluence of the White Nile and Blue Nile, and spent time in coffee shops where we drank fresh Sudanese guava juice. After picking up supplies, we gave the Hilux a wash, trying to get rid of the dust we'd collected over the past 2 000 km from Aswan.

In general, we found Sudan to be a cracking place to travel through. It's far from the decaying war zone that the media portrays (recent abuses of the government notwithstanding). We met the nicest people. If someone was eating, they almost always beckoned us over and offered us to join them.

Due to the heat, however, we were keen to get out of Khartoum and make our way to the cool highlands of Ethiopia. Heading towards the border, we wanted to visit Dinder National Park, but we couldn't find the entrance, so we camped wild 20 km from the border post, at Matema.

That night, sleeping in our hammocks, a huge sandstorm ripped through the desert and we said our final goodbyes to Sudan.



NEAR KHARTOUM



OZONE COFFEE SHOP, KHARTOUM

WHAT WE LEARNT

Sudan is very, very hot.

We always felt safe and the people we met were friendly. It's better to camp next to the Nile – when you venture further away, sandflies become a problem.

Your credit card will not work – take cash (US\$).

Wear modest clothing.

WHAT WE LIKED

We got invited into people's homes all the time.

Sudanese culture is generally respectful.

There was freshly baked pita bread and the sweetest melons in almost every village.

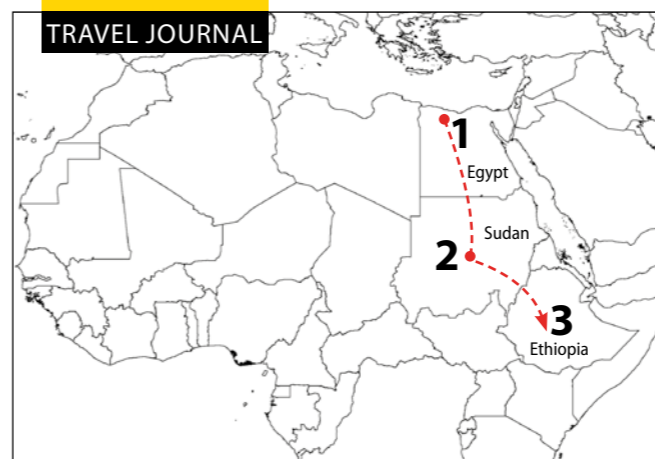
PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

The Gurneys set off from Valence in France (Marie's home town) on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving back to their home in Johannesburg over 18 months. By the time they reached Sudan, they'd been on the road for 11 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt.

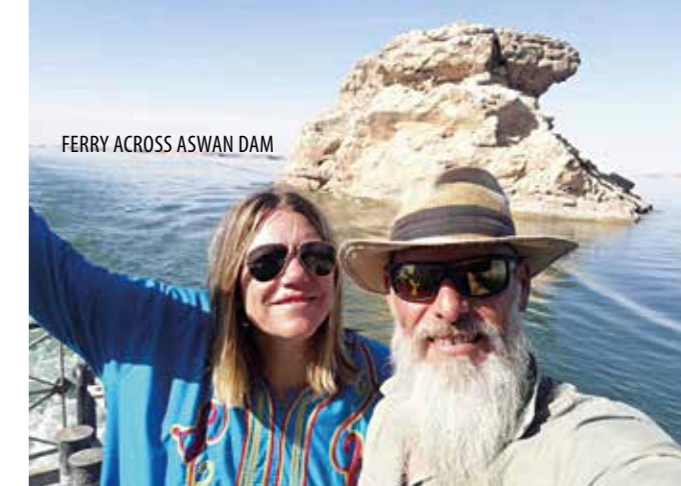
Marie is a sustainability consultant specialising in biodiversity management, and Patrick works in marketing.

They undertook this journey to re-think their definition of culture, looking for inspiration from humanity to guide their future personal and career decisions.

MORE INFO: You can e-mail them at info@skultcha.com if you have questions about their trip, or visit [skultcha.com](https://www.skultcha.com). Facebook [skultcha](https://www.facebook.com/skultcha); Instagram [@skulcha](https://www.instagram.com/skulcha)



Next month: Patrick and Marie explore Ethiopia. Read about the Egypt leg in go! #158.



FERRY ACROSS ASWAN DAM



CAMPING WILD, NILE RIVER



RAMADAN MEAL, KHARTOUM

Land of many faces

On an 18-month, 50 000 km road trip from France to South Africa, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** crossed the border into culturally and scenically diverse Ethiopia.

WORDS **PATRICK GURNEY**
PICTURES **PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY**

Approaching the Ethiopian border post, we were excited to see green vegetation after four months of deserts in Jordan, Egypt and Sudan. We arrived at Gallabat, a sleepy border village with plenty of trucks, which we bypassed to get to the immigration office. The crossing was smooth, only taking two hours. We were in Ethiopia at last – one of our much-anticipated trip highlights.

From the border, we took a 350 km route towards Lake Tana. The road was sometimes tar, sometimes gravel, and it set the tone for the driving during the rest of our time in Ethiopia. In general, the roads were terrible. Because of this, we grossly underestimated our travel time and had to camp by the roadside when darkness caught up with us.

The next day, we drove to Bahir Dar at the southern end of Lake Tana. From there, we visited several Ethiopian Orthodox monasteries in the area, we visited the nearby Blue Nile Falls, and we took time out in restaurants to gorge ourselves on the tasty local cuisine.

We visited the Ura Kidane Mihret monastery and a lesser-known one nearby. Both have brightly painted interiors depicting scenes associated with the Orthodox religion.

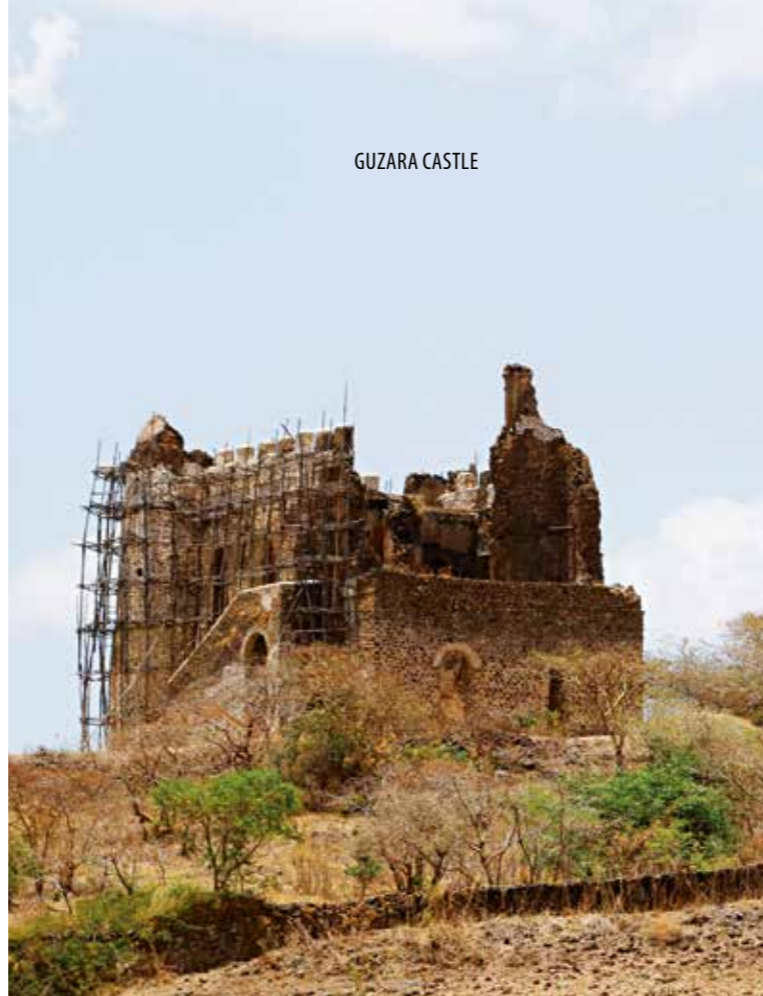
Near midnight, as we lay in our rooftop tent just outside the Ura Kidane Mihret monastery, we were woken by a group of monks singing. The sound was angelical to start with, but after four hours we felt a bit differently...

The following day we pitched camp close to the Blue Nile Falls. We spent a day hiking through villages and we crossed a Portuguese bridge built in 1626, and a more modern suspension bridge, to see the 45 m-high waterfall. Unfortunately, the waterfall's historical 400 m width has been diminished to less than 10 m due to a hydroelectric plant that was built upstream in 2003.

TRADITIONAL FARMING,
NEAR BAHIR DAR



GUZARA CASTLE



INSIDE A MONASTERY NEAR
URA KIDANE MIHRET



Chilled monkeys

From Bahir Dar, we turned north to Gonder, an area best known for its magnificent 17th-century castles and palaces. En route, we visited Guzara Castle (120 km from Bahir Dar), a partly ruined but still impressive building dating back to the 1570s. We asked the site manager if we could camp at the castle. “No problem,” he said. “But you need a guard because it’s not safe.” We ended up paying R200 for two guards who arrived with AK47s. They chatted all night and henceforth, we vowed to only ever hire one guard at a time. . .

We spent two days visiting all of Gonder’s sights, including the Fasil Ghebbi royal enclosure in the heart of the city (a castle with a moat around it), and the picturesque Bath of Emperor Fasilidas, 2 km away.

After a few days in the city, we were keen to get back into nature and meet the famous gelada baboons (apparently they’re actually Old World monkeys) found in the Simien Mountains National Park north-east of Gonder. The 165 km journey took us four hours and it was rather testing, but well worth it in the end.

The geladas were so remarkably chilled compared to our baboons in South Africa. We watched them forage in the short highland grass, and we regularly plonked ourselves in the middle of a 50-plus-member troop, coming within 2 m of the monkeys.

We hoped to find some proper wild camping opportunities in the Simien Mountains, but we were disappointed. Next to the main dirt road is a noisy community-run campsite with poor facilities, and again we had to pay for a guard. He sat 10 m from our tent all day long, brandishing his AK47 for happy snaps. Not ideal.

To get some time alone, we went for short hikes in the mountains. On one such hike, we even managed to spot a rare Ethiopian wolf.

From the Simien Mountains, we headed north to Axum. This town had its heyday from around 100 AD to 700 AD, when it was the centre of the most powerful state between the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia. It wasn’t incredible for us, however, perhaps due to our increasing frustration of not being able to camp wild. Camping in a hotel parking lot just isn’t the same.

We visited various historical sites: obelisks, tombs and other monuments like Queen Sheba’s swimming pool, and Dungur, which is rumoured to have been Sheba’s palace compound. All these sites seemed vulnerable due to a lack of conservation and unregulated tourism. The giant stelae (obelisks) were impressive. The tallest of them (33 m) was broken, and the pieces lay where they had fallen centuries ago.

From Axum, we travelled further north, almost to the border of Eritrea, to find the so-called “hanging” churches or monasteries, perched atop high mountains. Only men are allowed at Debre Damo, so Marie waited in the Hilux while I fretted about getting to the top. I had to scale a 15 m sheer cliff using only a thick cowhide rope – nerve-racking!

Of all the hanging churches, we liked Abuna Yemata the most (about 120 km south of Debre Damo). The climb is insane, but the reward is a tiny chapel that has been hollowed out from the rock about 200 m above the surrounding landscape. Constructed in the 5th century, it has been relatively unsullied by tourists; the frescoes are vivid and the views are amazing. We spent three nights in the region and even managed to camp wild for two nights, which boosted our morale.

One of the best things about wild camping in Ethiopia is that you almost always hear hyenas. It brings an edge and excitement to any evening. We were told that Ethiopians like hyenas because they play an important role in disposing of carcasses, which helps manage hygiene issues.

MOUNTAIN PASS NEAR AXUM





VIEW FROM ABUNA YEMATA

The realities

The moment we entered Ethiopia, it was clear that tourists – especially white tourists, referred to as *faranji* – were associated with money. Everyone asked us for money, all day long, every day. It was frustrating and prevented us from having an authentic cultural experience.

During the first three days travelling through rural areas, we got the feeling that something wasn't right. After a year on the road, you develop ways to "feel" a country and determine its "vibe". It has to do with the way a stranger responds when you greet him or her, how you're treated at a security check, or how a simple transaction like buying bread is executed.

People in Ethiopia were not friendly, especially compared to Sudan where we'd just come from. The security checks at each village were aggressive; there was no "Welcome" or "Can we help you?" Hardly anyone waved back at us, and smiles were in short supply. In Bahir Dar, we started asking questions to try and understand what we were missing. It turns out that Ethiopia has huge tribal conflict, and the scale of human displacement is greater than Syria. I'd read news reports about Ethiopia supposedly being Africa's fastest growing economy, but nothing we saw substantiated this. People lived in terrible conditions. Subsistence farmers still worked the land with traditional implements and out-of-date techniques, which seemed unsustainable. The impact of unregulated farming and charcoal harvesting on the environment was scary to witness. We saw massive deforestation, erosion and silted-up rivers.

Hot and salty

The Danakil Depression is one of the most inhospitable places on earth. To get there wasn't easy – it's an expedition rather than a tour. From the town of Mek'ele, we joined a tour company convoy for US\$200 due to security issues. We visited in winter, but the night-time temperature was still 45°C, making sleep almost impossible.

Having chosen the self-drive option, we had to take our precious Hilux through salt flats that were filled to a generous depth of 10–20 cm with highly corrosive salt water, thanks to recent rain. I wasn't happy, and neither were the two other self-driving overlanders on the tour. The following day, Marie and I managed to score a ride in one of the tour vehicles instead, leaving the Hilux behind in place called Maglalla.

Danakil is probably the oldest continually worked salt mine in the world. The Afar miners expertly hack into a solid, 10 cm-thick layer of salt to carve out tablets. This must be one of the most harrowing jobs anywhere, considering how hot it gets. Hundreds of camels lie in the sun awaiting their load of 20+ salt tablets, which you find in almost all of Ethiopia's informal markets.



DANAKIL DEPRESSION



DEBRE DAMO



CAMPING NEAR ABUNA YEMATA



PATRICK AND MARIE GURNEY IN THE DANAKIL DEPRESSION



HOUSE OF ABBOT LIBANOS, LALIBELA

Lalibela and Lucy

We drove dirt roads from Mek'ele towards Lalibela via Sekota, taking a few mountain passes. It took us 11 hours to travel 280 km. It seemed as if all of Ethiopia was one continuous mountain pass! Nowhere else on our journey had we driven so many wiggly roads.

Arriving in Lalibela was a shock: Sanitation seemed to be problematic; food scraps and animal faeces were everywhere; the roads were a muddy mess after recent rains; and accommodation options were slim but expensive for what you got.

We hired a guide for a day, who took us to some of Lalibela's more popular churches, like Bet Medhane Alem, Bet Mercurios and Bet Giyorgis, a 15 m-high church cut in the perfectly proportioned shape of a cross.

Despite the mess and the disorder, there was a real spiritual feeling at some churches: You could feel the reverence, the age and the strength of the stone. We purchased the customary candle offerings and handed these over to the priests. We were lucky to visit during the celebrated day of Saint George. The pilgrimage was on top form, with pilgrims singing outside the churches at 7 am. It was humbling.

Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, was all over the place. Mud-brick, tin-roofed houses sat alongside huge, western-style hotels and communist-era administrative buildings.

We had a few Ethiopian contacts who took us around. We visited some of the city museums, including Haile Selassie's house, and we said hello to Lucy, the famous fossil skeleton of an *Australopithecus afarensis*, which was discovered in Ethiopia in 1974.

We ate out often: The highlight was a buffet lunch at the newly opened Hyatt Hotel, which included complementary wine. Our batteries were recharged and we were ready for the next leg. It's amazing what a glass of good chenin blanc can do!

Beers in the bush

There are 80 ethnic tribes living in Ethiopia, eight of which live in the Omo Valley. It took us four days to drive the 600 km from Addis to Jinka, in the southern part of the valley. Due to tribes now charging for visits (R200 to enter a village; R400 to take photos), we needed to be selective. We decided on the Mursi (top right), Bana and Hamar tribes.

The landscape changed dramatically. The green mountain slopes disappeared, revealing open, scrubby bush with lots of sand and some of the biggest wild fig trees we'd ever seen.

People from various tribes congregate in Jinka on market day to sell and trade goods, from plastic sandals to vegetables, raw honey and cattle. We sat at a local coffee house and watched people arriving for the market.

All the tribes are protective and proud of their heritage and dress, and they celebrate their identity and cultural traditions. Considering how pervasive western influence is, even in smaller commercial towns, this is quite an impressive feat.

We camped for two days in the Mago National Park to visit the Mursi tribe, then we went further south to a town called Tumi, where the Bana and Hamar tribes are dominant. We found a guide who took us to a monthly drinking session out in the bush. About 60 people gather for three to four days, staying in makeshift shelters and enjoying the local brew while gossiping – the guide called it the local "Facebook group". The Hamar women decorate themselves with cowrie shells, glass and metal beads, and wear beaded goat skin shawls and skirts (bottom right). The beer (*tella*) had a slightly sour, tangy flavour and you drink it out of big calabash gourds. They also churn and store butter in them (middle right). I was more taken with the local version of ouzo – an aniseed-flavoured white spirit – which was super tasty. But beware the heartburn later!

Ethiopia is a unique country with huge tourism potential. Despite spending two months in the country and driving nearly 5 000 km (our average in other countries was 2 000 km), there was still at least a third of the country we never got to see. What a place!



PRIEST, LALIBELA



BET GIYORGIS



PILGRIM, LALIBELA

PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

Marie comes from Valence in France. They departed from there on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving back to their home in Johannesburg over the course of 18 months. By the time they reached Ethiopia, they had already been on the road for a year, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Sudan.

The aim of their journey is to re-think their definition of culture, and to find inspiration from humanity to guide their future work and personal choices. Marie is a sustainability consultant and Patrick works in marketing.

MORE INFO: You can e-mail them at info@skultcha.com if you have questions about their trip, or visit skultcha.com. Facebook "skultcha"; Instagram @skulcha



Next month: Patrick and Marie explore Kenya (Part 4).
Read about Egypt (Part 1) in go! #158 and Sudan (Part 2) in #159.

Hakuna matata, it's Kenya!

On an 18-month, 50 000 km-long journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** arrive in Kenya, just in time for the great wildebeest migration in the Masai Mara.

WORDS **PATRICK GURNEY** PICTURES **PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY**

Having driven about 5 000 km through Ethiopia, along some of the worst roads of our trip so far, we were dusty and tired. We were looking forward to Kenya for two reasons: a luxury six-night break on Lamu Island, and watching frolicking wildebeest while sipping a G&T. The great migration was in full swing.

First things first, though: another border. We crossed from Ethiopia into Kenya at Moyale, and the Ethiopian side was a total non-event, even though we only got there at 6 pm. "You're my first vehicle this week!" the immigration official told us.

Unfortunately, on the Kenyan side, we were informed that the immigration office had closed. "Hakuna matata!" said a security guard, indicating a spot where we could set up camp for the night within the Kenyan border grounds. The following day the paperwork took 10 minutes and we were off.



NOMADIC TRIBE'S HUTS, SAMBURU REGION



TAWNY EAGLE



SAMBURU PEOPLE

Vampire tree dassies

The 250 km drive from Moyale to the town of Marsabit (on a fantastic tar road) took us through Kenya's immense northern semi-desert. We saw no people and no animals – it was just us and the vast, volcanic rock-strewn landscape, with a few trees to break the monotony.

Three hours later, we drove into Marsabit and stopped at a grocery store. Like two ill-mannered toddlers, Marie and I ran around squealing with delight at all the fridges containing yoghurt, cheese, wine and many other items we had simply forgotten about during the past two months in Ethiopia. We purchased a heap of goodies to re-stock the Hilux pantry.

Keen to test wild-camping conditions in Kenya, we camped in a secluded spot just outside Marsabit a few hundred metres off the main road. The next morning we encountered our first elephant.

Another surprise was the raw beauty of the Samburu, the next region we crossed. We spent two nights camping wild next to a dry riverbed. The area boasts some of Kenya's largest parks and conservancies, but we unfortunately didn't have time to visit them – we had friends waiting in Nairobi.

We spent a week in Nairobi and did plenty of catching up. The city and suburbs are full of large retailers, with new hipster food joints popping up all over the place. Nairobi has crazy traffic, mainly due to an ageing road network. New road construction creates havoc – an average 20 km trip across Nairobi can take up to three hours! We camped in our friends' backyard, and we also spent a few nights in the well-known overlander campsite called JJ's (Jungle Junction). There's an on-site workshop, so it's a great place to do some vehicle maintenance. Our front shock absorbers had clocked over to 80000 km in Ethiopia, so we installed new ones.

One resident of Nairobi needs a special mention: the tree hyrax – a boom dassie! This cute, furry animal emits a terrifying, vampire-like scream at night. It's the most horrifying sound in Kenya – not recommended for children!

Before the tree dassie drove us mad, we jumped on a short-haul flight to the coast for a bit of sand, sea and our own private chef.



NAIROBI TRAFFIC



LAMU CHANNEL



LAMU

Lazy Lamu

With only one road on the island, and reportedly only one car, little has changed on Lamu since the 18th century. This tiny island is stuck in a relaxed time warp – even the estimated 4000 donkeys hanging around in doorways and alleys looked medicated by the fresh Indian Ocean air.

We wanted to experience both sides of the Lamu Channel, so our six-night stay was divided between two different Airbnb bungalows. The first bungalow was on Manda Island, and it had a real Robinson Crusoe feel, with a palm-fringed roof and a view towards Shela Beach, about 700 m across the channel on Lamu Island. The bungalow came with a private chef – all he needed was a budget and he'd conjure up all sorts of amazing meals: pizza, interesting coconut salads, prawn curry with naan bread... It made for deliciously simple living.

Our next bungalow was on Shela Beach, on Lamu. First we lunched at the nearby Peponi Hotel, then we walked down the alleyways past art galleries and tiny coffee shops, to our very own Swahili-styled four-storey holiday mansion. It also came with a chef!

Our only activity was to visit the local museum, which was surprisingly well curated. Other than that, we happily sat on our rooftop terrace for three days catching up with the rest of the world via the Internet.



STREET SCENE, LAMU



DONKEYS THRIVE ON LAMU



AIRBNB ON MANDA ISLAND



CAMP CARNELLEY'S, LAKE NAIVASHA



KAKAMEGA FOREST



LUNCH TIME AT LAKE NAIVASHA



KISUMU YACHT CLUB

Thousands of flamingos, and a minor mishap

After flying back to Nairobi, we headed north-west on a 450 km, 12-hour journey towards Kakamega Forest National Park, taking in Lake Naivasha, Lake Elementaita and Lake Victoria along the way.

Driving to Naivasha, we passed pockets of zebras and we stopped to buy some rather odd Russian-looking sheepskin hats. (The hats inspired us to start planning our next adventure – the Silk Route...) We took in the views of the Great Rift Valley and saw many flower farms – Kenya is a major exporter of cut flowers to Europe.

Lake Naivasha has an average depth of only 6 m, and it's a haven for birds. We stayed at Camp Carnelley's, a well-run operation with a campsite, chalets and a huge restaurant that makes epic pizzas. We shared the campsite with pods of hippos, which munched on the lawn each night. A bit too relaxed after our two-night stay, I managed to forget my hiking boots under the Hilux; luckily we came past the same way 10 days later, so we could pick them up.

Lake Elementaita was full of flamingos – we guessed there must have been at least 50 000, as well as huge flocks of great white pelicans.

In Kisumu, on the banks of Lake Victoria, we planned to meet up with more friends. While driving down tiny dusty roads through a dense mishmash of houses – just five minutes from our destination for the day – we heard a terrible crashing sound. We hadn't noticed a low-hanging electrical cable, which had snagged on and damaged a big storage box on our rear roof rack.

A group of angry onlookers soon gathered. What I hadn't noticed at first glance was that a wooden electrical pole had also come down, and with it the electricity supply to half the suburb. We argued that the cable was actually a good 3 m lower than where it should have been (based on the other poles), but eventually we parted with US\$100 to avert a crisis.

Once our nerves had settled, we could actually enjoy Kisumu. We lunched at the Yacht Club and camped in a friend's yard, staying up late each night sharing stories about our road trip. (Read *Xanthe Hunt's beautiful column about Kisumu on p 144 – Ed.*)

Next stop was Kakamega, and we had two reasons to visit: My mother Shirley had asked us to try and snap a few photos of the old mission hospital where she was born in 1935; and we also wanted to visit the ancient Kakamega Forest.

Kakamega was once a small town but now it's a sprawling mass. Sadly, we couldn't find the specific mission hospital, but we did manage to camp for two nights in Kakamega.

The forest is a remnant of the once enormous Guineo-Congolian rainforest that stretched across Central Africa. It's listed as one of the 10 most important old-growth forests in the world and is home to a reported 350 species of butterflies.

We based ourselves in the public campsite and went for morning hikes. We saw waterfalls and lots of primates: black-and-white colobuses and red-tailed monkeys. Each night as we fell asleep, we savoured the sounds of the forest, but there was a nagging reminder that wildebeest were on the move and we should be, too.

The migration was calling.



AMBOSELI NATIONAL PARK, WITH KILIMANJARO IN THE BACKGROUND



KAKAMEGA FOREST



GREAT MIGRATION, MASAI MARA



BLUE WILDEBEEST CROSS THE MARA RIVER



MASAI MARA

Wildebeest for days

From Kakamega Forest, we took a five-night stab at witnessing the wildebeest migration in the Masai Mara Triangle National Reserve. The 300 km southward journey through rural Kenya took us six hours. We were happy to have the new shock absorbers on the Hilux since the roads varied from shoddy tar to medium corrugations.

We were still getting used to the Kenyan savannah. You can see for kilometres! It removes all the “hide-and-seek” we’re used to in South Africa’s more densely vegetated parks and reserves.

Driving around the Masai Mara, we met up with a TV crew who told us that our timing was perfect – apparently they’d been there for a month already, but the wildebeest had only just started crossing the Mara River. Lucky us!

We witnessed a few crossings – smaller groups of about 200 animals. What was even more interesting was witnessing a few male wildebeest come down to the water’s edge to actively guide the herds across at selected points. We had never heard about this before, and it happened twice at different locations.

We camped for five nights inside the park at a total daily cost of US\$206 for both of us and the car. The campsite had no facilities, but it was centrally located within the park and staying there entitled us to a slightly reduced daily entrance fee per person. We met another South African couple – they had homemade boerewors!

South Africans will often debate whether it’s worth the cost of visiting the parks in East Africa if we have similar wildlife at home. It’s a valid argument, but much like you can’t experience the Sardine Run anywhere else but in SA, you can’t experience a migration like the one in the Masai anywhere else. It’s about paying money to see a truly unique spectacle. The first two hours in the reserve gave us a wildebeest crossing, Rothschild’s giraffes and a pride of lions!

From the Masai, we drove 230 km back up to Naivasha to collect my hiking boots. We had a 40th birthday celebration to attend in Nairobi, so it was worth the trip. For the party, we were treated to a traditional *karoga* at the well-known Mint Shack Restaurant in the capital. *Karoga* is the Kenyan word for “stir” – a cooking style that was started hundreds of years ago in Kenya by Indian migrants. You order your ingredients from the kitchen and cook your own Indian food, with chapattis, rotis and naan bread supplied by the kitchen.

From Nairobi, we drove a 260 km dirt-road route south towards the Iremito Gate into Amboseli National Park. While supposedly a “premium park”, of the four lodges we saw, two were dilapidated and had been closed for years. This left an unsightly scar on the landscape. The roads were terrible, so we only stayed one night.

From Amboseli, we drove to the Namanga border post with Tanzania. This road was also poor, like the others, and we were ecstatic when it finally turned to tar a few kilometres before the border.

We had been in Kenya for a month and driven about 2 500 km – 1 500 km on tar and the rest on dirt. Tanzania, here we come!



MASAI



MASAI

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

There are medical risks: Sleeping on a 5 cm-thick mattress for 400+ nights, and resting your arm on the car windowsill while driving 37 000 km takes its toll. We both developed the same condition, which we’ve dubbed “Overlander Arm” – a shoulder rotator-cuff injury which, apparently, is caused by a torn muscle and tendon. We both had a few physio sessions in Nairobi, but we still have another 15 000 km to go until we reach home in South Africa.

There are mental risks, too: On a trip as long as ours, you can easily lose your sense of humour over the smallest things. For example, I have been known to bellow: “Why are the spoons with the knives and forks?!”

Marie is a real trooper. I’m not sure many partners would handle the daily routine we follow and still manage a smile or a sarcastic (but loving) chirp in the morning.

Mental strength is certainly a key requirement when you’re on the road for this long.



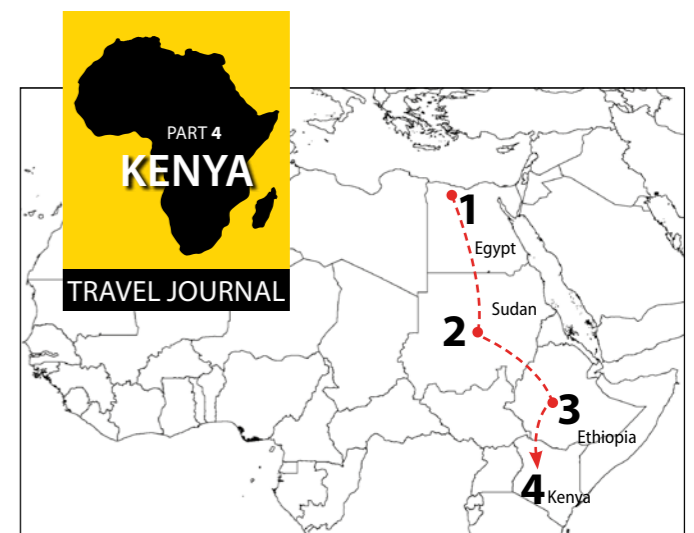
Patrick and Marie with the staff at Manda Island, Lamu

reached Kenya they had been on the road for 13 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia.

MEET PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

Marie comes from Valence in France. She and Patrick set off from there on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving back to their home in Johannesburg. By the time they

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



Next month: The Gurneys explore Tanzania.

See issue #158 for Part 1 of their Travel Journal through Egypt, #159 for Part 2 (Sudan) and #160 for Part 3 (Ethiopia).

Getting muddy in Uganda

After 16 months on the road between France and South Africa, the intrepid Gurneys spend a month in beguiling Uganda.

BY PATRICK, MARIE & CALLUM GURNEY

Uganda is big enough to get lost in, yet small enough to get around. It offers a variety of habitats: mountains, lakes, waterfalls, wetlands and savannah. We spent a month getting to know this surprising country.

We collected our son Callum (18) from the airport in Kigali, Rwanda, and drove north to Uganda. The tiny Cyanika border post was really efficient despite the mandatory Ebola checks: Your body temperature is measured, and you have to wash your hands and disinfect your shoes.

Soon we were in Uganda and heading to our first destination: Mgahinga Gorilla National Park.



MGAHINGA GORILLA NATIONAL PARK

Primates and fungi

Mgahinga Gorilla National Park is part of a transfrontier park with neighbouring conservation areas in Rwanda and the DRC. Unlike the more famous Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, which has 12 habituated groups of mountain gorillas, there is only one group at Mgahinga that tourists can visit. We chose Mgahinga for two reasons: The trekking is easier due to flatter, more open terrain, and there are fewer tourists.

The road to Mgahinga was rather pitted with holes, making it a longer drive than anticipated. After three hours (covering 100 km) we finally arrived at park HQ and set up camp. No camping for Callum – we got him a room.

The following day at 7.30 am, we were briefed and set off in a group of six tourists, with an entourage of guides and trackers nearly double that number.

After about half an hour of walking, we found the habituated group of 10 gorillas and we sat with them for just over an hour while they foraged, groomed and played. They were much bigger than I had expected – the head honcho silverback had an enormous, one-metre shoulder width! With bodies of pure muscle, they don't really know their own strength. Callum, being a big lad, easily withstood a playful bump by a male gorilla, but a much lighter woman in our group was flung to the ground when bumped into. The male responsible was called Mafia, and our guide told us that during the habituation period (which took three years – during this time only the guides visit the gorillas) he tossed guides all over the place.

The other star of the show was a Jackson's three-horned chameleon – it truly looks like a miniature dinosaur! We snapped a few photos and headed back to camp for lunch.

After the terrible road coming into Uganda, I quickly checked the roof-rack brackets – one had broken on the roads in Tanzania. To my horror, I saw that three brackets had failed with only one good bracket left! How the roof rack had stayed on was anyone's guess.

I took a motorbike taxi into the nearest town, 12 km away, and found a bush mechanic – or a "fundi" as any trade specialist is called here – who managed to fabricate four brackets out of old angle iron. Back at camp, we fitted the brackets and they've since lasted some 2 500 km on awful roads.

We drove from Mgahinga to Bwindi, passing through mountain villages and tea plantations, on an endlessly winding dirt road. It was only 50 km but took almost three hours.

Bwindi Impenetrable Forest... The name says it all! One of Africa's more ancient habitats is home to the largest population (about 400) of the world's mountain gorillas. There are also 350 bird species, 11 other primate species, elusive forest elephants, golden cats, wild hogs...

However, Callum was especially interested in the smaller things like insects, fungi and plant life. The guides were speechless – their training had never focused on these "less important" elements, and they weren't equipped to answer most of our questions. They were just as amazed as we were by everything we decided to look at.

We went on two nature walks (US\$70/R1 025 per person) in Bwindi. We stayed just outside the Rushaga Gate in the south, at Ichumbi Gorilla Lodge. The lodge was a welcome luxury after camping, but it wasn't cheap.

While we were there, we learnt about the plight of the Batwa people – a small, slender people who hunted and gathered in the forest. In the 1990s, the Ugandan government evicted all the Batwa from declared reserves. Today, only a few Batwa still live in Ugandan forests, and most live on the periphery of their ancestral lands. Uganda recognises the Batwa's plight and pays certain proceeds from park entrance fees towards Batwa-related projects, but they have found it difficult to integrate in Uganda's larger community and now deal with depression, alcohol abuse, even the danger of tribal extinction.

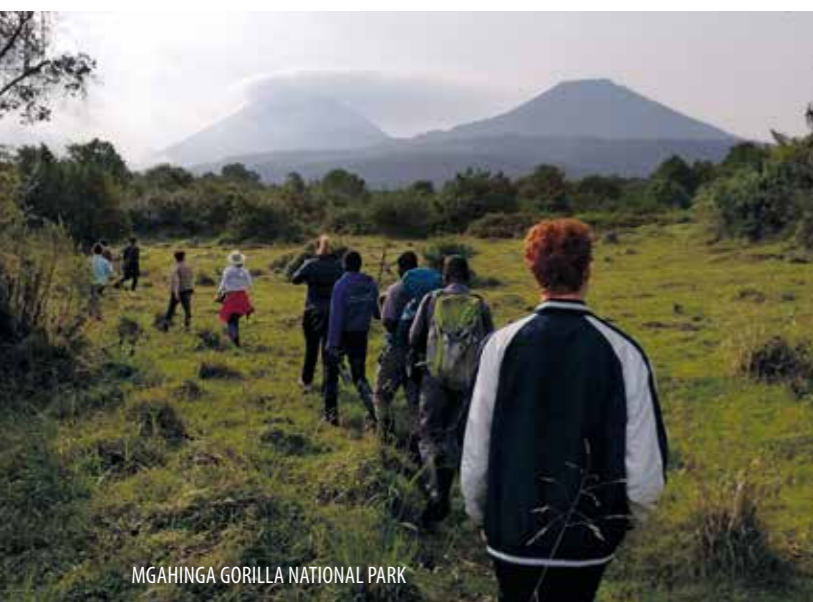
After our visit to Bwindi, we quickly returned to Kigali in Rwanda because Callum had to fly back to the UK where he attends Bristol University. With our son safely on his flight, we turned around and headed back into Uganda – or so we thought...



PATRICK FIXES THE ROOF-RACK BRACKETS



MOUNTAIN GORILLAS, MGAHINGA



MGAHINGA GORILLA NATIONAL PARK



JACKSON'S THREE-HORNED CHAMELEON, MGAHINGA



PATRICK HELPS CALLUM GET A CLOSE-UP PHOTO, BWINDI



BWINDI IMPENETRABLE NATIONAL PARK



ARMED SCOUT, BWINDI



FUNGI, BWINDI



FUNGI, BWINDI



KIBALE NATIONAL PARK

Rain, or chimp pee?

We drove 230 km (four hours) and passed through Queen Elizabeth National Park. We attempted to find a wild campsite inside the park, but this was aborted due to the sticky black soil. We got horribly stuck, but luckily some people were around to help push and pull. Getting stuck was going to become a regular theme in Uganda.

We camped just outside the park and travelled 100 km north the following morning, to Kibale National Park. Our plan was to spend a few nights at a half-built community camp – we were happy to be their first clients. We had booked a night walk, but the rain was too heavy.

On our way to the camping spot at Kibale, we got stuck again. It was 8 pm and we were not in the mood – we spent an uncomfortable night in the Hilux. There was a silver lining though: A forest elephant came to visit during the night.

Chimp tracking is big business in Uganda, especially in Kibale. It cost US\$150 per person (R2 200; this rate includes the park entrance fee). After we were briefed at the park office, the tourists were split into two groups of about seven each. We were put with the group of younger people, which meant we'd walk more quickly.

We all jumped into vehicles and headed into the forest to the start point of the hike. The chimps were on a rather brisk afternoon walk of their own and not interested in us. They moved really fast!

We had moments of silence watching their every move – I had a staring contest with the alpha male. More than once, the guide had to warn a client to get out of the way or be urinated on from up high in the canopy, where the chimps were looking for wild figs.

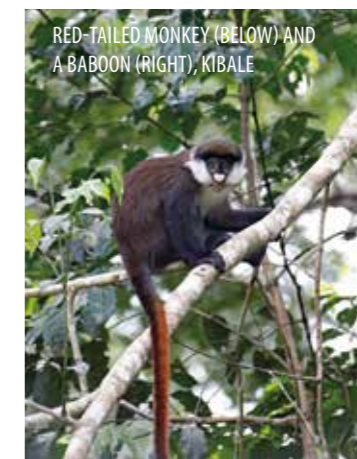
Having been forewarned about Kampala's traffic gridlock, we planned only a cameo appearance. We stayed at Red Chilli Hideaway, a backpacker lodge just outside the chaotic city centre. The lodge has a free city shuttle that we took twice for shopping and sightseeing. What a surprise! Kampala is a beautiful mess of street vendors and really well-appointed large shopping centres. Some of the coffee shops and restaurants rival those of Cape Town and Johannesburg in terms of offering, decor and service.

We shopped at Shoprite, had lunch at Meza, a local shawarma joint, then crossed the road to have coffee and dessert in the swanky Cafesserie. We also visited the National Museum. It was dusty and totally under-resourced, but we enjoyed an interesting black-and-white photographic exhibition about Idi Amin.

Getting out of Kampala again took us two hours – on a Sunday morning!



CHIMPANZEE, KIBALE NATIONAL PARK



RED-TAILED MONKEY (BELOW) AND A BABOON (RIGHT), KIBALE



THE CUSTOMS FIASCO (A SHORT PLAY)

SCENE 1: Pouring with rain, Patrick and Marie arrive at the busy Rwandan Gatuna border post. There is one little building with an even smaller covered area where 30+ people are huddled to escape the downpour. It is almost impossible to stay dry.

Rwandan Immigration Official (RIO): You need to pay US\$30 per person to exit Rwanda.

Marie: What?

RIO: Your EAC visa has expired. When you drove from Kenya to Tanzania, you left the East African Community.

Marie: What?!

RIO: Your EAC visa was voided

when you entered Tanzania.

Marie: But the visa is valid for 90 days and includes Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya.

RIO: It is now voided, and you must pay again.

SCENE 2: Patrick stands back while Marie tackles the RIO with successive verbal body blows. The crowd gathers as the two heavyweights battle it out. During the final round, Patrick steps in – it's a tag-team effort. Both leave the ring battered and bruised.

The official was correct and we were wrong. We hadn't realised that our EAC visa only allows travel in

a specific direction. In other words, from Kenya, we should have gone to Uganda and then Rwanda – not into Tanzania, a non-EAC member state, like we'd done. We had voided our visa, but previous officials hadn't picked it up.

The arguing continued and eventually the Rwandan immigration official confiscated our passports. Frantic calls were made to both the South African and French embassies. The SA embassy told us to just pay and get out. I went back to pay, but now the officer refused. "You are in the country illegally," he said. "The passports will be sent to Kigali."

We dreaded the thought of doing the 150 km (5 – 10 hours) round trip to sort out the mess. The French embassy made a few calls and came back to us to say that the RIO was prepared to release the passports and allow us to pay the US\$30 (R440) per person charge. Relieved, we paid and got out as fast we could.

We still had to go through the Ugandan side of the border post, where we would potentially face the same issue, but thankfully the Ugandan officials let us in without a hitch.

After four hours of body blows in the rain, we were finally on our way!





LOOKING FOR A SHOEBILL



SHOEBILL



A TOWER OF ROTHSCHILD'S GIRAFFES, MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK

Shoebill, you say?

After a 170 km (four-hour) drive north from Kampala, we camped at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary. The alarm went off at 6.30 am and we had just enough time for a quick coffee and a slice of toast before being allocated gumboots and a guide. No, we were not going to see rhinos, we were here for something even rarer: shoebills! This ancient-looking bird, with the weirdest bill, has a wingspan of more than two metres.

Our guide jumped into our Hilux and we drove a few kilometres into a marshy area. We were lucky – the guide told us they normally see one or two birds, but we had five different sightings.

Shoebills are shy. The first two attempts at getting closer were not successful. Without a 500 mm lens, we never stood a chance of getting that shot that most birders dream of. We reverted to binoculars to watch the enigmatic birds hunt for lungfish – and even baby crocs – in the early morning sun. At only US\$30 per person (R440) this was money well spent.

The next day, we followed a back road for 200 km to the southern tip of Murchison Falls National Park, which took us five hours. The day thereafter, we went to see the waterfall (US\$40 per person entry fee, plus US\$50 for the car; R1 900 total). The gorge violently pushes the water onwards and then bursts through a chasm – six metres wide – to form the raging Murchison Falls.

After soaking up the sights for two hours, we caught the ferry across the Victoria Nile River (the White Nile) and entered the national park. Our wild-camp spot (US\$50 per person; R730) on the edge of Lake Albert was amazing – we spent one night there. From our camp, we saw a huge group (80+) of Rothschild's giraffes, we had visiting elephants, and lions roared just outside our tent. It was incredible, and afterwards we were really sorry that we didn't stay in the park for longer.



MARIE ON THE LUGOGO SWAMP, WHERE THE SHOEBILLS ARE FOUND



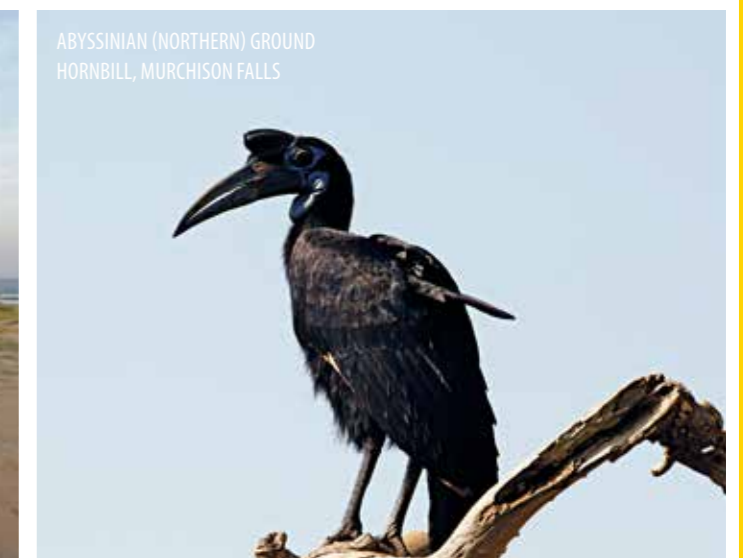
MARIE AT MURCHISON FALLS



LELWEL HARTEBEEST, MURCHISON FALLS



WILD CAMPING, MURCHISON FALLS



ABYSSINIAN (NORTHERN) GROUND HORNBILL, MURCHISON FALLS



LION, KIDEPO VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

Kidepo to Kumi to Kenya

Kidepo Valley National Park constantly came up when we asked Ugandans what we should see in their country. They all mentioned its beauty and remote location – and that it's best avoided during the rainy season...

Kidepo is in the far north of the country, on the border with South Sudan. It took us 10 hours to drive only 390 km from Murchison Falls. The route included an overnight stop in the town of Kitgum.

Kidepo is totally wild, with only a basic road network and facilities. There are two campsites, and we made one of them our home for three nights (US\$40 per person entry, US\$50 for the car, US\$30 per person camping; R2 780 total for the two of us, per day).

It's special to be in nature – in a wilderness like this – when it rains, but driving on Kidepo's slippery roads made it even more exhilarating. We were 3 km out from the campsite, and this time we really got horribly stuck in thick clay. Out came the trusty panga, which we used to cut dead roadside branches to put under the wheels. Doing so, we managed to free the Hilux. The experience was enough to limit our game drives to two outings, but we still had one of our best lion sightings on the journey – not to mention a cute baby tortoise.

We were now headed back towards Kenya, passing through Uganda's nomadic warrior region called Karamoja. It was a scene straight out of Dr Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* since the local tribesmen all wear outlandish headgear.

Despite the comedic appearance of the residents, it's a dangerous area to pass through. People told us that you can exchange a cow for an AK-47! There have been several disarmament agreements since the mid-2000s and the situation is improving, but still, we never opted to wild camp and kept heading south along the Ngora Road, covering 340 km in eight hours.

Out of nowhere, at a village called Kumi, we saw a sign saying "Nyero Rock Painting Site". We were heading for the Kenya border, but we wouldn't make it there before dark, so we needed a place to sleep. We took the turn-off.

The site at Nyero dates from the Stone Age and is one of Uganda's oldest and most important rock art sites, first documented in 1913. We had found it purely by luck. We hired a guide who took us clambering up and around a large outcrop of granite inselbergs to explore the three main panels, depicting people, animals, canoes and rather strange circles.

As dusk descended, we took our gin and tonics up one of the larger inselbergs to witness a magnificent sunset.

From here, we were technically on our homeward route, which would see us blasting through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe to get back in time for Christmas in South Africa.

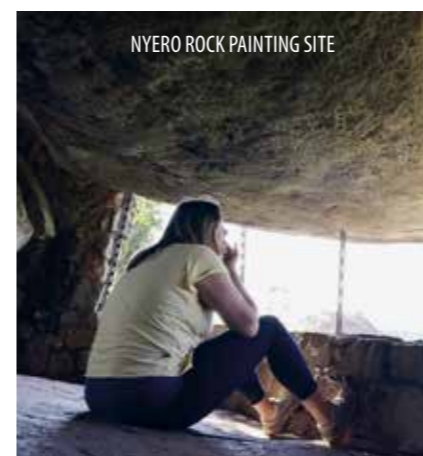
Sitting on that outcrop with our G&Ts, we could feel that the end was near, and that time was running out on our epic journey.



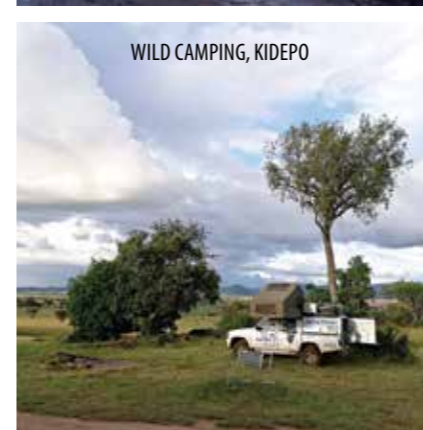
A KARAMOJA TRIBESMAN WITH CHARACTERISTIC QUIRKY HAT



KIDEPO VALLEY NATIONAL PARK



NYERO ROCK PAINTING SITE

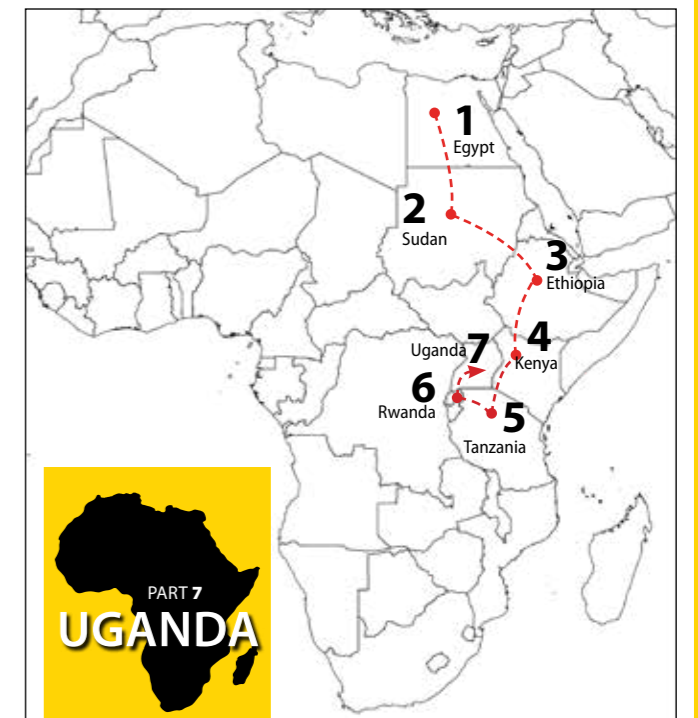


WILD CAMPING, KIDEPO

THE GURNEYS' GREAT JOURNEY

Patrick and Marie set off from Valence in France (Marie's home town) on 3 June 2018 with the aim of driving all the way back to their home in Johannesburg in 18 months. By the time they reached Uganda, they had been on the road for 16 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda.

MORE INFO: Contact the Gurneys by e-mail info@skultcha.com, or visit skultcha.com. Find them on Facebook (search "skultcha") and on Instagram @skulcha.



TRAVEL JOURNAL

NEXT MONTH: *The final instalment!* For parts 1 – 6 of the Gurneys' Travel Journal, see issue #158 (Egypt), #159 (Sudan), #160 (Ethiopia), #161 (Kenya), #162 (Tanzania) and #163 (Rwanda).



TRAVEL JOURNAL

Second gear through Rwanda

On an 18-month, 50 000 km journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** explore Rwanda, the Land of a Thousand Hills.

Rwanda might be small, but it holds its own when it comes to sensational scenery. A little tired from all the game viewing in the dusty parks of Tanzania and Kenya, we were keen for some greenery in Rwanda.

We crossed from Tanzania via the Rusumo border post. All went smoothly with our EAC (East African Community) visa in hand, which we had bought when we arrived in Kenya. The EAC allows you to hop easily between Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.

South Africans will know of the Valley of a Thousand Hills in KZN, but Rwanda goes one step further: It claims to be the *Land* of a Thousand Hills. Driving the first 70 km to Kibungo, which took three hours, we experienced this first-hand. Rwanda is a sprawling mass of hills. Our Hilux would struggle through the next three weeks in second or third gear, as we heaved our three-tonne weight around the country on a constant journey from valley to crest.



FIRED BRICKS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE



THIS WOODEN PUSHBIKE IS A KID'S PLAYTHING, BUT BIGGER VERSIONS ARE USED TO TRANSPORT HEAVY CARGO.



WILD CAMPING IN A STONE QUARRY

Plastic-free pleasure

I could sense a different feeling when we crossed the border into Rwanda. Rural households and villages had immaculately manicured gardens in their front yards. People seemed proud of their country.

Only a little bigger than the Kruger National Park, Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa: 12 million people in 26 798 km². Maybe being so small makes it easier to manage, and for the government to get citizens to comply with laws.

In 2008, the government declared Rwanda a plastic-bag-free zone. This was part of a broader national campaign to keep the country clean. Civic duty here is astounding: Every last Saturday morning of the month, locals come together to participate in *Umuganda*, which roughly translates as “coming together in common purpose”. It’s a day of community service, mandatory for all Rwandans between the ages of 18 and 65. From 8 am to 11 am, they clean streets, help neighbours or just meet to discuss important matters.

We saw this practice in action. A whole community came together to clear and prepare a neighbour’s farm for planting. There must have been more than 50 people and they finished the job in two hours. *Umuganda* is a practice that the whole world could learn from.

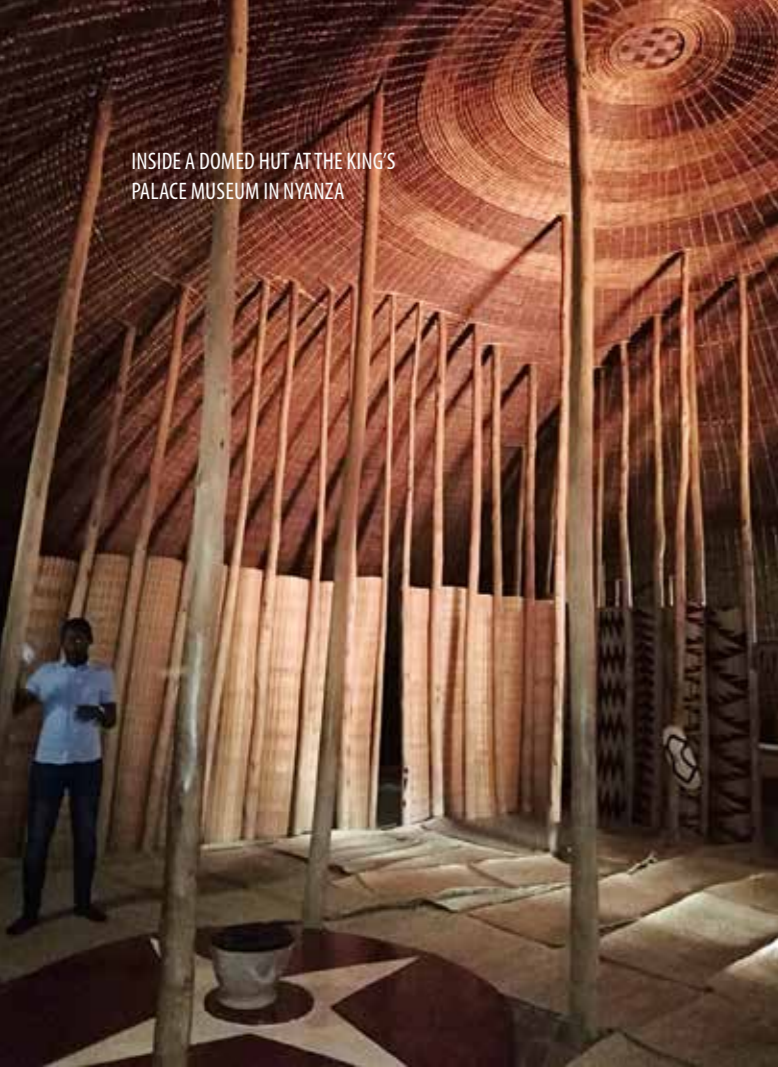
We cut across the country towards Nyungwe National Park, which is in the far south-west corner of Rwanda. The 10-hour (250 km) journey was split over three days. Tanzania had drained our budget, so it was back to wild camping. Twice we camped in disused stone quarries – the best option in such a densely populated country.

On our second day, we were introduced to Rwanda’s treacherous clay soil roads. It had rained lightly and as we descended towards a low-level river crossing, we could already feel the Hilux sliding. Climbing the 100 m incline on the other side was impossible. We waited for an hour and a half for the road to dry out and then proceeded.

Rwandans are super helpful and hospitable. They assisted us to get out of the slippery section without asking for a dime. The route (mainly dirt) was a great introduction to rural Rwanda. On our third day in the country, we came to a conclusion: All Rwandans are banana farmers and brick-makers. Most households had a small plot of land on which plantains flourished, and a smouldering pile of recently fired bricks at the ready. I’m sure most villages could collectively build the Taj Mahal in a month if they had to!



PLANTAIN, A TYPE OF BANANA THAT'S HIGH IN STARCH AND LOW IN SUGAR, IS A STAPLE FOOD IN RWANDA



INSIDE A DOMED HUT AT THE KING'S PALACE MUSEUM IN NYANZA

Into the forest

Nyanza was our first cultural stop. Nyanza has long been the heart of Rwanda, home to what was once the oldest African monarchy (established in 1081). At the King's Palace Museum, a guide showed us inside huge, beehive-like, domed huts – expertly crafted reconstructions of the traditional royal residences. We met the royal herders and saw the famous long-horned cattle, known as Inyambo (a type of Ankole cattle). It's a beautiful creature, with a regal elegance you don't usually expect from a cow. They're part of the royal heritage and still play a role in important ceremonies.

Rwanda ceased to be a monarchy in 1962, when it gained independence from Belgium. The last king, Kigeli V Ndahindurwa, fled Rwanda in 1960 and died penniless in America in 2016.

The Ethnographic Museum just outside the town of Butare was a great surprise. It's excellently curated and well lit, and its seven galleries are home to one of Africa's finest ethnographic collections. It gave us a rich insight into Rwandan agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, weaving, pottery and woodwork.

From Butare we headed west, towards Nyungwe National Park. Our destination was the Uwinka Visitor Centre where we planned to camp for two nights. The final 30 km section of winding forest road was stunning. The banana groves made way to reveal huge trees, ferns down in the valleys and mist rising from ridges. A prehistoric feeling took over.

We drove past many armed guards, eventually counting 40, stationed every 500m by the roadside. "Slight overkill for chimpanzee security, don't you think?" asked Marie. Later we found out that because Nyungwe Forest borders Burundi, these guards were ostensibly acting as a human border fence.

At Uwinka, we paid US\$60 for two nights of camping. We quickly learnt why a rainforest has that name – it rained a lot! We ate sandwiches, drank a quick coffee and made a dash for the tent.

The following morning, we did the Igishigishigi Trail, which includes a canopy walk. If you're afraid of heights, forget it! The 2.4 km trail takes about an hour and a half to complete. The scenery is amazing, especially the canopy section where you stand 70 m above the forest floor at the highest point. We saw black-and-white colobus monkeys and colourful turacos. Nyungwe is home to the endemic Rwenzori turaco, and the great blue turaco. Both have distinctive calls, which makes it easier to find them in the dense forest canopy.

Nyungwe could have kept us busy for weeks – there are 130 km of hiking trails, 120 species of butterflies, 275 species of birds and 13 species of primates to look for – but sadly we had to get going. We drove out on the western side of the park and before we could properly say goodbye to the forest, it ended abruptly in massive, manicured tea plantations. It's crazy to think that the industry that once threatened the forest has now created an effective barrier to further human encroachment.

Our ultimate destination was the capital, Kigali, but first we spent time in the holiday resort town of Kibuye. It's on the shore of Lake Kivu and it's as picturesque as it gets, with sparkling blue water and lush green hills. The road there is 120 km long and it's so twisty that it almost made Marie ill with motion sickness. We spent two nights camping at Bethany Hotel, catching up with the usual overlanding chores.

Rested, it was time to tackle the next 130 km, three-hour journey to Kigali.



A TRADITIONAL FOOD PREPARATION DEMONSTRATION, KING'S PALACE MUSEUM



PATRICK WITH A ROYAL HERDER AND HIS INYAMBO COW



NYUNGWE NATIONAL PARK



CANOPY WALK, NYUNGWE NATIONAL PARK



L'HOEST'S MONKEY, NYUNGWE



TEA PLANTATION ON THE EDGE OF NYUNGWE FOREST



GENOCIDE MEMORIAL, KIGALI



MURAMBI GENOCIDE MEMORIAL CENTRE

People healing people

Our visit coincided with the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda, one of the darkest chapters in human history. Between April and July 1994, more than 800 000 people – overwhelmingly Tutsi, but also moderate Hutu, Twa and others who opposed the genocide – were systematically killed.

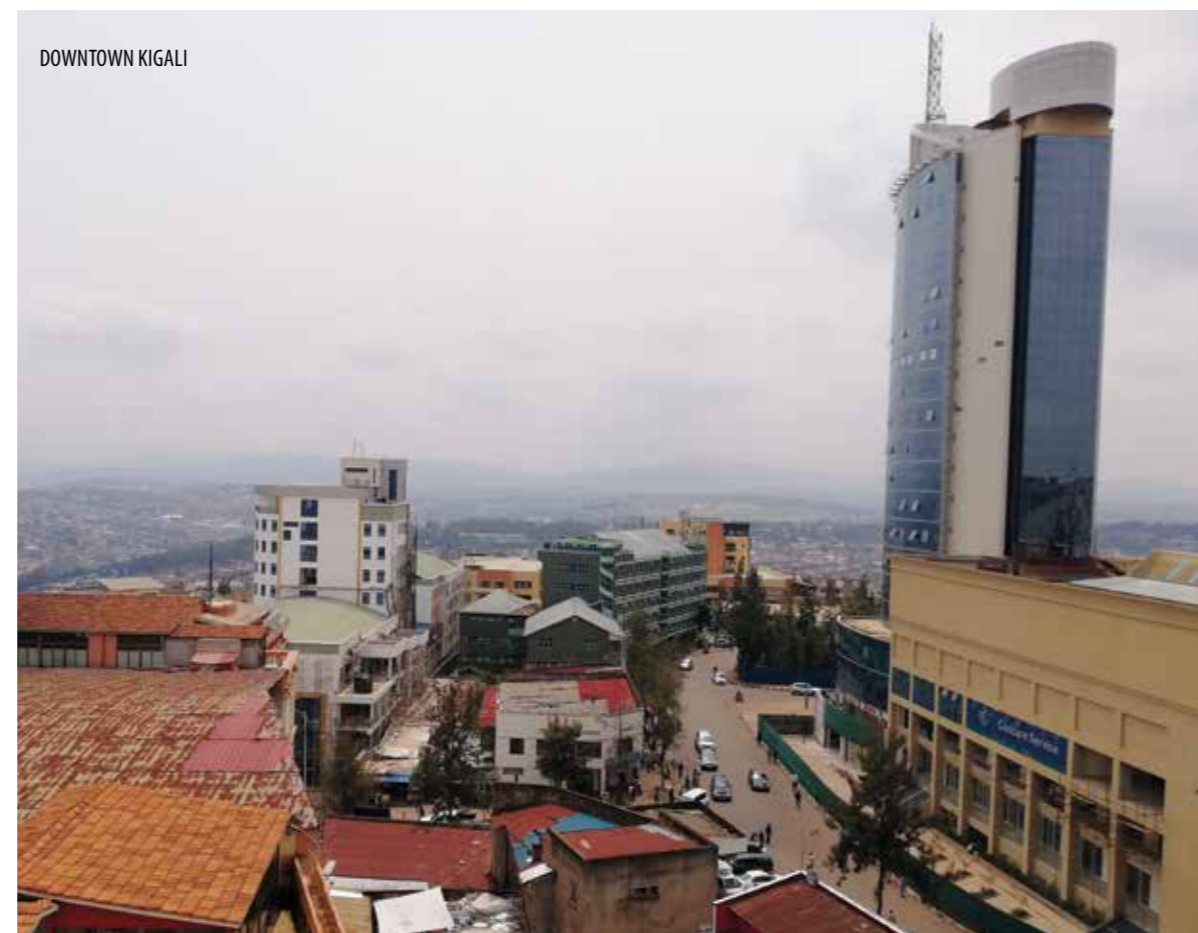
Everywhere we went, we saw advertisements and banners proclaiming “Kwibuka 25”, which urged citizens to “remember, unite and renew”. It served as a reminder that every village was affected by the genocide. It’s difficult to comprehend the level of trauma experienced by this tiny nation. A UNICEF trauma survey found that 80% of Rwandan children experienced a death in their family in 1994; 70% witnessed someone being killed or injured; 90% believed that they themselves would die.

The Genocide Memorial in Kigali is a must-visit, so as to better understand the genocide and its effects. The exhibition starts with an emotional 30-minute video, during which survivors tell their stories. Both Marie and I needed tissues...

The main exhibition took us a few harrowing hours to get through. It’s comprehensive and shows the historical and socio-economic background of the Hutu and Tutsi, and how propaganda and psychological games were used to motivate ordinary people to kill their neighbours. We learnt how distrust between Hutu and Tutsi was fostered through a traditional class system, which was then exacerbated through ethnic classification by the Belgian colonial rulers.

It was sad to learn how the international community turned a blind eye towards the events in 1994 – disturbing how humanity can turn against itself so violently.

During our travels through Rwanda, we could still sense some distrust among people. Even though Rwandans say all is okay now and band about the term *ubumuntu* (which means “humanity”, similar to “ubuntu” in South Africa) it’s clear that emotions are still raw when you speak to a survivor. It will take generations for these emotions to settle.



DOWNTOWN KIGALI

There are genocide memorials all over the country, but besides the big one in Kigali, the only other one we visited was the Murambi Genocide Memorial Centre en route from Butare to Nyungwe Forest. It was also a harrowing experience. Quite honestly, there’s only so much you can take.

Kigali was great to visit – it felt like central Africa’s stress-free zone. It’s clean, the vibe is calm, and the city is beautiful with a mix of old and modern buildings. Hooting was almost non-existent. There was none of the frenzy we’d become accustomed to in other big capitals during our trip. We checked into a hotel to get a break from camping, which also allowed us to explore the city without the fuss of driving. Motorbike taxis called *boda-bodas* are the best way to get around and only cost R20 for up to 5 km.

We visited the Inema Arts Centre, a little oasis for up-and-coming artists. There was some interesting art (with crazy prices) including a famous gorilla made from computer circuit boards. We also explored Caplaki Craft Village, which has about 70 stalls – and nobody hassles you!

Elsewhere in the city, we sipped Rwandan coffee in trendy, Fairtrade coffee shops, and we lunched at the German Butchery, feasting on specialty sausages, pork escalope and local Mützig beer.

A lot of tourists visit Rwanda just to see the mountain gorillas in Volcanoes National Park (in the north-west of the country) and they miss many of the other sights. Rwanda was easy to explore by car. Our route took us through some epic landscapes, and warm smiles greeted us around every corner.

Our time in Rwanda was up. We had a date with the gorillas and chimpanzees in Uganda, Rwanda’s northern neighbour (Mgahinga Gorilla National Park is a cross-border extension of Rwanda’s Volcanoes National Park) and we had to get a move on. Our son Callum (18) had just flown in to join us for the next part of the adventure, so we picked him up from the airport and headed off to Uganda for a primate extravaganza.

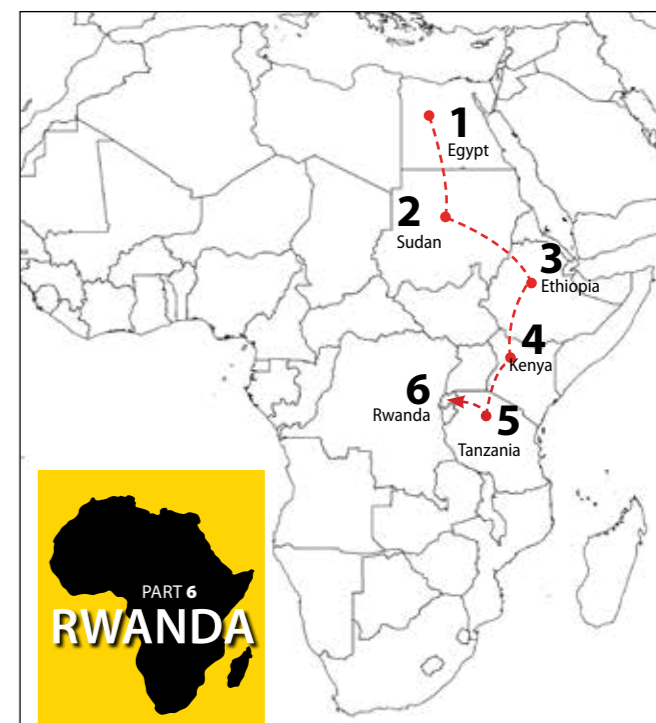


A MEAL AT INZOZI NZIZA RESTAURANT, BUTARE

PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

They departed Valence in France (where Marie hails from) on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving to their home in Johannesburg over 18 months. By the time they reached Rwanda, they had been on the road for 15 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania.

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TRAVEL JOURNAL

NEXT MONTH: Patrick and Marie explore Uganda (Part 7).
Previous stories: Egypt (Part 1, go! #158), Sudan (Part 2, go! #159), Ethiopia (Part 3, go! #160), Kenya (Part 4, go! #161) and Tanzania (Part 5, go! #162).

The land of the Land Cruiser

On an 18-month, 50 000km journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** cross the border into Tanzania.

The Swahili word *safari* simply means “journey”. Ours had been an epic one so far, and now we were in Tanzania, which occupied a prime spot on the itinerary.

Like most nature lovers, we’ve always drooled over the amazing wildlife photographs in all the glossy travel magazines. We needed to decide what we really wanted to see, and how to plan our route. Tanzania isn’t small. We couldn’t manage all of it, so we aimed for the big-ticket parks in the north of the country: Lake Manyara, Ngorongoro Conservancy, Tarangire and Serengeti, with a short stopover at Lake Natron.

Africa’s “Garden of Eden” promised a busy schedule of scenery and animals – we were ready!



BOARDWALK, LAKE MANYARA NATIONAL PARK



NGORONGORO CRATER



NGORONGORO CRATER PICNIC AREA



PATRICK, MARIE AND THEIR VISITORS



LAKE MANYARA NATIONAL PARK



MIGOMBANI CAMPSITE

Troopy tracks

The Namaga border post between Kenya and Tanzania was a breeze – customs officials weren't even interested in looking at the vehicle. We drove directly to Arusha airport (100 km) where we met Marie's cousin Aksel Kibarer and his family – they'd jetted in from France to join us on a short safari. They have two kids, Elio (7) and Thelma (10) – camping in the bush was a novel concept!

We hired them a Toyota Land Cruiser 70 series, also known as a Troopy, from Arusha Car Rental. It came equipped with two rooftop tents, a fridge and gas hob, plus some other camping kit. We overnighted in Arusha, checked all the gear and left for Lake Manyara National Park the next day. We opted to stay outside the park at Migombani Campsite, which cost US\$15 (R220) per person per night. The campsite was high on a hill overlooking Lake Manyara, and there was a massive pool next to an even more impressive baobab. We met the first group of many overlanding South Africans there.

Migombani caters specifically to overlanders and organized tour groups. The showers were fantastic and the food was good, but it was more the sense of space – the rolling green lawns and the amazing view. We loved it so much that we stayed three nights, taking day trips into Manyara and also using it as a base to visit nearby Ngorongoro.

Back to Lake Manyara. This unique 300 km² national park, with its central soda lake fed by hot springs, has lush forests of fig, mahogany and thorn trees. We saw most of it in one day, including the lake boardwalk, which gave us an up-close-and-personal look at

waterbirds and a few buffalo grazing along the shore. We saw all the usual suspects and we got lucky when we turned a corner and came upon a lioness in a tree! Manyara is famous for these so-called "tree-climbing lions".

We lunched on the side of the lake, watched by a curious gaggle of giraffe. Before we exited the park, we decided to take a trip to a hippo pool, where these enormous beasts emerged with hairdos of bright green hyacinth each time they came up for a breath.

Back at camp that evening, we discussed our trip to the Ngorongoro Crater the following day. The entrance fee for a foreign vehicle is exorbitant (US\$190; R2 800), so at 5.30 the next morning we all piled into the Troopy, which was locally registered and therefore only cost Tz30 000 (R200).

Cresting the rim of the crater is difficult to put into words. All thoughts of entrance fees melt away as you hastily pose for a selfie at what is one of Africa's most awesome viewpoints. The two-million-year-old caldera forms an unbroken, 600 m-high rim. Between 1899 and 1916, two Germans – the Siedentopf brothers – farmed inside the fertile crater. I read that they hunted wildebeest by the hundreds, canning the tongues for German connoisseurs.

In 1928 the crater was declared a reserve, and in 1959 it became an official conservation area. We saw lion, buffalo, elephant, loads of birds – and almost as many Land Cruisers. We picnicked at one of the two allocated spots, which we shared with more than 80 Land Cruisers and their clients! The queue for the toilets was something else...



THOMSON'S GAZELLE, NGORONGORO CRATER



TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK



TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK



TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK

Tamarind snacks and tsetse flies

We were still looking for that real “wild” feeling, without bumping into a Land Cruiser every 10 minutes. In Tarangire National Park, we booked a “special campsite” called Korongo, which cost US\$50 (R740) per person per night, as opposed to US\$30 (R450) at a public campsite.

“Where is the toilet? Is this the right place?” Aksel’s children asked. You forget that overseas visitors expect more for the money they’re paying. But we were in the true wilderness at last. To take the edge off the French family’s anxiety about safety with all the wild animals around, we’d hired a park ranger for the first night. Children can move far and fast when you leave them alone for a few seconds; it’s better to be safe than sorry.

I had always wondered where baboons go at night. In Tarangire I found out. Tanzania has the most chilled-out olive baboons, not the pesky chacmas we have in South Africa. Our camping spot had been thoughtfully positioned next to a deep, dry riverbed, with tamarind trees along the edge. The baboons had made one large tree their home.

We all shared a late-afternoon snack together: Pringles chips and beer for the humans, and tamarind seed pods for the baboons. That evening, we put up the fairy lights and enjoyed a magical time with the sounds of chattering baboons and lions calling in the distance.

Our game drive the following morning took us past a small sign with an arrow pointing down a dirt track, which read: “The Greatest View”. We couldn’t resist, and whoever made the sign wasn’t joking. Down the track, we found Tarangire Safari Lodge and the breathtaking panorama that the lodge presides over. We met the son of the owners, Brenden Simonson, who was fixing a Landy in the parking lot.

“Help yourself to as much tea and coffee as you like,” he said.

We chatted for a while about how his family had come to own such a beautiful piece of Africa. He also showed us his father’s home-made “Swamp Crawler” – a crazy vehicle with a mixture of Land Rover, Unimog and Lexus parts. Apparently, a few years back, he used it to rescue Kingsley Holgate from the sticky Tarangire mud.

Camping next to the baboon lair was unique. Each evening they’d come home to demolish more tamarind pods and roost. Sleep didn’t come easy to us on our second night, however: There was an ongoing argument in the tree and the screaming continued until 1 am. The only thing that stopped me from lobbing a rock into the boughs was the high probability of further commotion, and no sleep until dawn.

Speaking of commotion, tsetse flies were out in full force during our visit, and Marie was their target. We were perplexed as to why they’d chosen her. After noticing numerous tsetse fly traps around the park (pieces of cloth strung between trees), we made a discovery – she was a walking fly trap due to the colour of her clothes! The flies seem to be attracted to dark colours like navy and black. Those of us wearing lighter shades were less affected.

Tarangire is one of Tanzania’s hidden jewels. Its vegetation is a remarkable mix of palms, baobabs, plains and swamps, and it teems with wildlife. The roads are excellent compared to the other more popular parks, which makes game viewing a treat. We even had a herd of 150 buffalo trample past our campsite one morning.

Then it was time to say goodbye to Aksel and his family who were off to Zanzibar for seven days. As they left, Aksel said: “I have new respect for the organisation and work it takes to be on the road.”

Algae-dyed flamingos

We had two options to get from Tarangire to the Serengeti: An expensive but shorter route through the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, which would have cost US\$140 (R2000) for us and the Hilux, or a cheaper but longer route via Lake Natron in the north. We’d read that Lake Natron was full of flamingos and seldom visited – so the decision was an easy one.

Our idea of soaking in the lake was crushed by a ranger. “No, no, leave the soaking to the flamingos!” he warned. “It’s dangerous!” Indeed, evaporation leaves behind “natron” (sodium carbonate decahydrate), which is highly alkaline (pH 9-12) and can harm human skin. Algae blooms give the lake a pinkish hue. This also explains the colour of the flamingos – they eat heaps of algae. Apparently, 75% of the world’s remaining lesser flamingos are born at Lake Natron. We were keen to witness this natural marvel.

A note at this stage: When an experienced Tanzanian ranger tells you that a road is “quite good, it’s only two and a half hours”, take his advice with a pinch of salt. The four-and-a-half-hour, 120 km journey took us through a scorching, rocky semi-desert with sporadic sections of fine, powdery dust. We had a tail wind blowing faster than we were travelling – opening a window for fresh air took expert timing. We got it wrong a few times, with horrendous results. Granted, the scenery was spectacular.

We were charged US\$35 (R514) per person entrance fee at Engaresero Gate to enter the general area around Lake Natron. We overnights at a community-run camp called Maasai Giraffe Eco Lodge, which was about a kilometre from the lake. To escape the wind, which was still belting through the valley, we grabbed our sleeping bags and slept in the Welcome Hut instead.

The next day brought more wind and the flamingos were in short supply. We could only view the lake from a distance anyway, because each time you step out of the community camp on an “activity”, it costs US\$20 (R300) per person. It was a little ridiculous, but this was Tanzania and everything has a fee. All in all, it was a tough but interesting detour.



EN ROUTE TO LAKE NATRON



MAASAI GIRAFFE ECO LODGE



LAKE NATRON



SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK



SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK



ROAD GRADER, SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK

The Serengeti's washboard roads

From Lake Natron, we drove for four hours to Klein's Gate on the north-eastern edge of Serengeti National Park. We paid our fees of US\$260 (R3 850) for us and the Hilux, for two nights of camping within the park.

The first night we stayed at Lobo Public Campsite, which is in the Lobo Valley and considered to have the best big-cat viewing in the park. We duly saw a pride of lions. We shared the campsite with a group of 30+ Italians and three large buffalo. That evening, I was amazed by the nonchalant attitude of the driver-guide of the Italians, as he allowed his clients to shine high-powered torches at the buffalo and pose for selfies from 20 m away. Not something I would do...

We had been forewarned that Seronera Public Campsite in the south-east of the park was big and busy, and the roads around there were terrible. We looked at our map and decided to exit via the Ndabaka Gate in the west instead, where there's a smaller public campsite. Ndabaka is close to Lake Victoria – from there we planned to head to Rwanda.

Getting to Ndabaka before dark meant a mammoth eight-hour, 220 km drive on poor roads. It took us much longer than expected and we ran out of daylight. I don't condone illegal wild camping in a national park, but we were stuck and we had to make a plan. We eventually found a disused road that led to what seemed to be a sand-collection point next to a riverbed. We parked the Hilux out of view, ate sandwiches for dinner and crept quietly up to our rooftop tent to sleep.

The following morning, driving out, we heard a knocking sound coming from the rear of the Hilux. The infamous corrugated roads of the Serengeti had lived up to their reputation: We'd broken a roof-rack bracket. We strapped it down in an attempt to support the remaining three brackets by minimizing movement.

With five minutes to spare on our entrance permit, we exited the Serengeti and were happy to be back on tar. (You're charged per 24-hour period you spend in the park; if you overstay, you have to pay another full-day rate.) The roads might be terrible but the Serengeti is still worth visiting. We were only there for two nights; in hindsight we should rather have stayed for five, which would have meant we didn't have to rush.

We camped at Fukufuku Campsite, 20 minutes from Ndabaka Gate – a super, clean little spot. That night, at about 2.30 am, we were woken by torchlight and shouting. In Tanzania (much like Kenya) all the parks are unfenced, and the community has a system of herding wayward animals back into the park. This time it was a huge herd of elephants.

Tanzania is wild and expensive, but there's so much to see. It's a place where you can buy freshly cut sugar cane cubes and little bags of the most delicious roasted peanuts, right from your vehicle window. It's a place where the day starts with warm vetkoek and coffee. It's a place where people wave and smile at you as you drive by.

But it's also a place where you can break roof racks and suspension!

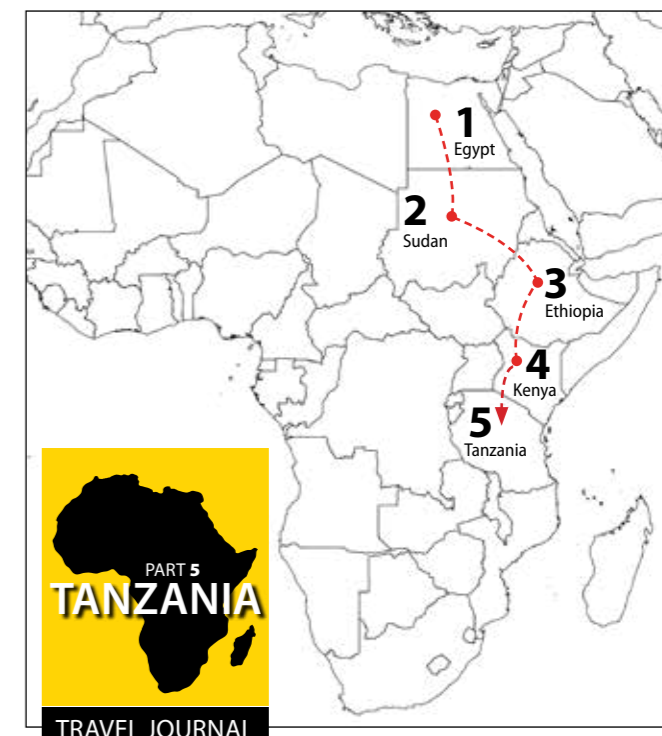
From Fukufuku, we drove towards the lakeside city of Mwanza and took a ferry across Lake Victoria to the Rusumo border post with Rwanda. Another country beckoned!



FERRY AT MWANZA



FERRY ACROSS LAKE VICTORIA



PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

Marie hails from Valence in France and that's where the Gurneys set off from on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving all the way back to their home in Johannesburg over the course of 18 months.

By the time they reached Tanzania, they'd been on the road for 14 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey,

Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya.

MORE INFO

E-mail them if you have questions about their trip info@skultcha.com, or visit skultcha.com. You can also follow them on Facebook (Skultcha) or on Instagram (@skulcha) – note the different spelling.

Next month: Patrick and Marie explore Rwanda (Part 6).

See issue #158 for Part 1 about their travels through Egypt, #159 for Part 2 (Sudan), #160 for Part 3 (Ethiopia) and #161 for Part 4 (Kenya).



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.

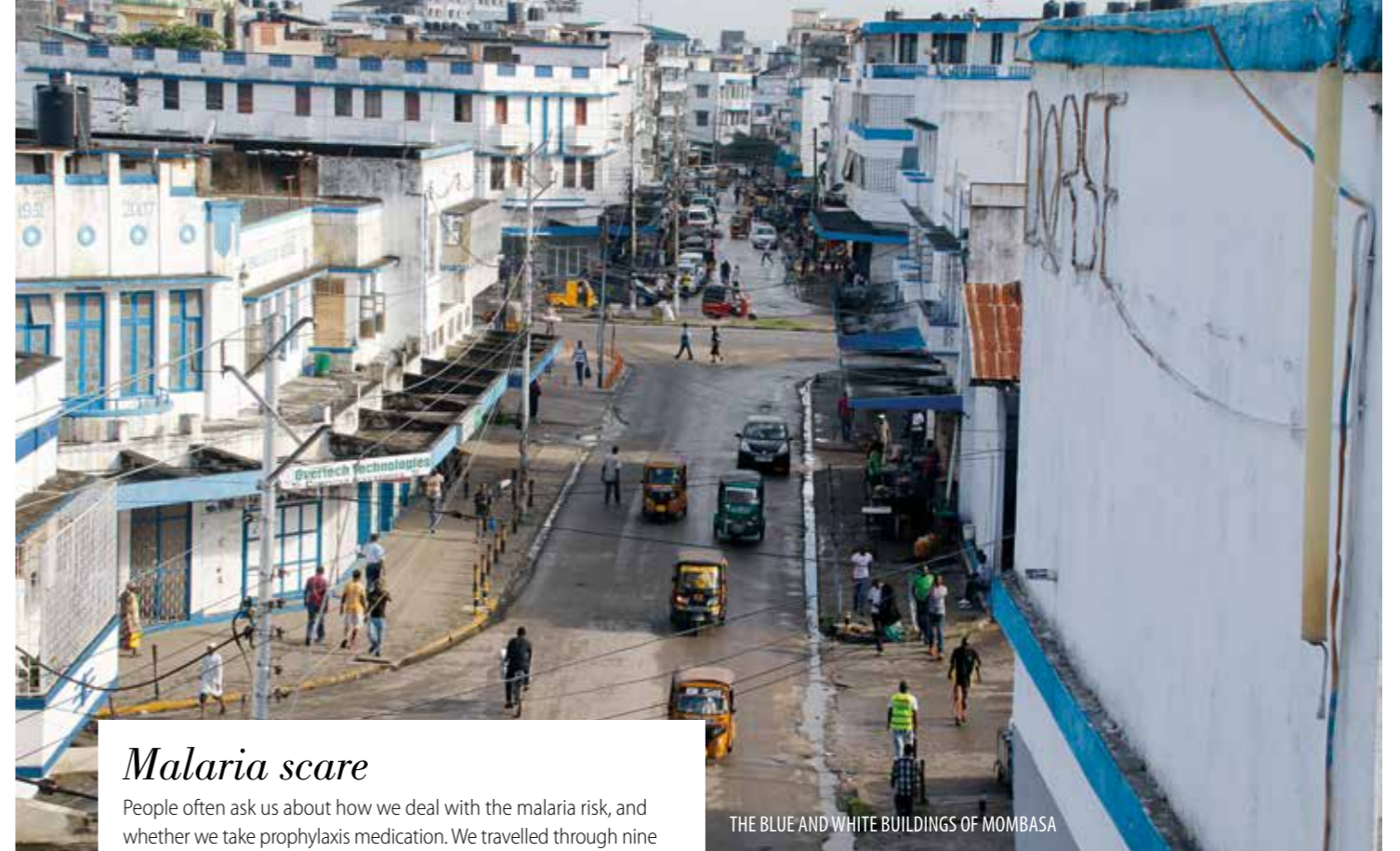
We visited Tsavo West first, entering through Chyulu Gate. The dramatic scenery caught us by surprise: rivers, thick bush, mountains and even lava flows (the largest is the Shetani Lava Flow, covering 50 km²). We also climbed the Chaimu volcanic crater, up a tough, treacherous scree path of porous volcanic 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



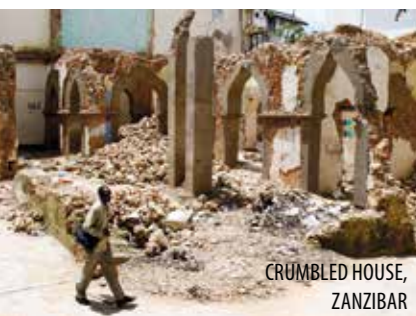
NUNGWI MAIN BEACH, ZANZIBAR



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 Correntes (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.



KILWA BEACH LODGE



RUINS OF THE GREAT MOSQUE, KILWA KISIWANI



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.

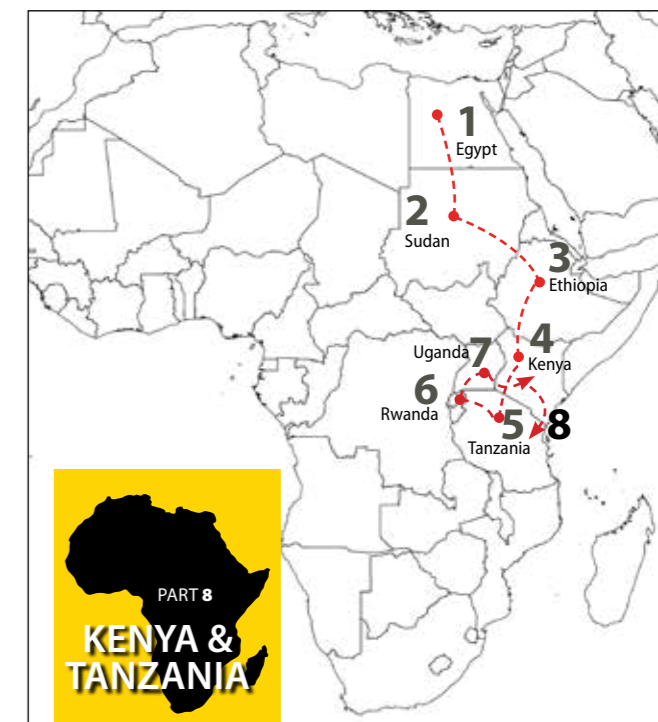
I packed up the Hilux and made my way through Selous, driving north-west through the park and exiting at the Matambwe Gate. It was a gruelling five-hour journey to cover just 80 km and I still had another 155 km (four hours) to Morogoro, where I planned to spend the night. Relentless rain on the clay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



TRAVEL JOURNAL

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).*



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 km². (Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, by comparison, covers 50 000 km².) 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?

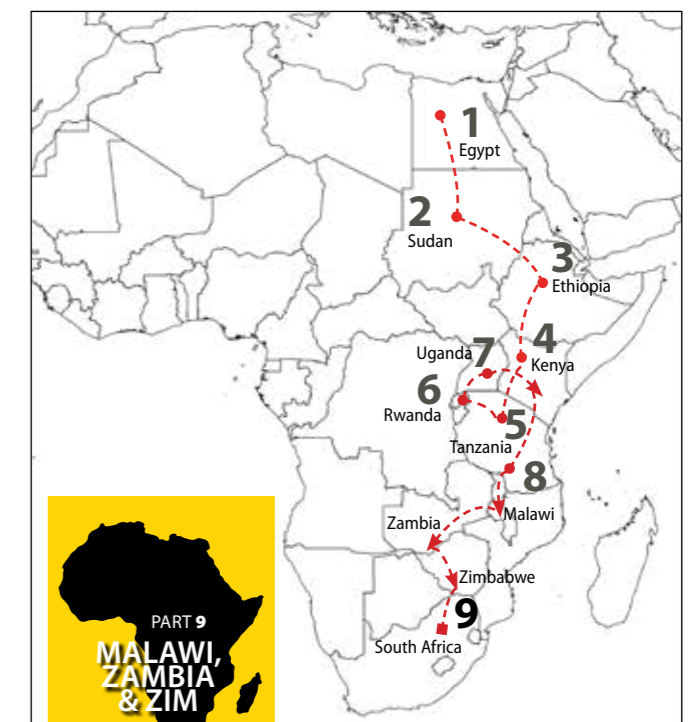
Travel slowly so you can soak up more. Camp wild when you can – it brings you closer to people and allows you to feel the soul of a country. Listen to your car: Take heed of funny noises and fix it before it gets serious. You don't have to pack a tonne of gear and food either – buy what you need along 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



TRAVEL JOURNAL

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