This book deals with our round the world trip 2014-18. I printed only 200 copies, they sold to my friends and I will not be printing any more. My website was taken down because I have no phone to check on me, there is no way to advertise and sell my books, I may as well release this one to the public domain.

You are free to download this book and spread it to your friends,

Good luck.

Other books by Kris Larsen:

-Monsoon Dervish
(45 000 miles on a Chinese junk without an engine)

-With Mermaid up a Moonberry tree
(Five years on a beach in the Philippines)

-Bicycle Dreaming
(Riding a recumbent bicycle in Australian desert)

-Out of Census (two volumes)
(Half way round the world without a passport)

Dedication

For my love, who never complained once.

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Prolog

I am growing old. I am turning 60 in a few days. Being old means half a time you feel like shit, but you have no idea why. Was it too much of something? Or not enough? In the past few years I've been watching my peers, guys my age, wrestling with heart attacks, diabetics, allergies, emphysema and every form of cancer imaginable, not always successfully. It would be a supreme arrogance to presume that I alone will be spared. I still had five years left till my old age pension but then they raised the threshold by two more years and I decided to go sailing. I am going now, before I am too old to lift my own anchor, too weak to drag that dirty big rag to the top of the mast, before I lose my periodical zest to hop on a bicycle and ride out into desert for the simple joy of riding in a desert night.
Gentlemen sail down wind. Sailing around the world it means heading west, down the Trade Winds, unless you want to freeze your arse off in the high latitudes of the Southern Ocean. How do you sail around the world? Have a last drink in your bar, lift the anchor, and sail off into the sunset. Keep sailing off into the sunset. If you do it long enough, you are bound to arrive back to the place where you started, more or less. Circumnavigation completed.
The best time to go is now. I've been working for a living for too many years and I am tired of working. Humans are the only animals who work for a living, all the other creatures live for a living. I am going now, to live for a living, like all the other sensible critters in the world.
And I went. My love flew out and joined me for the South American part of the journey. We had fun together for a couple of years. Now, back home on a mooring in Darwin, I am typing another book, hoping it will inspire other people to get up, pull out that coconut and do it.

There nearly wasn't this book. I've been scribbling in a desultory fashion as the events unfolded, but my heart wasn't in it. One of my readers commented that lately I turned into a tourist, and he was right. I wasn't doing anything exceptional, nothing to brag about. I have discovered nothing, I have pioneered nothing, I only repeated what has been done scores of times before me.
Mid way around, in Rio Dulce, Guatemala, I met an elderly Frenchman, Paul. A short nuggety guy with full head of snow white hair and trimmed white beard, just this side of 70. Retired computer expert with French government, and a mad rock climber. In his middle age he met with a horrific accident, falling down a face of a mountain. Rescuers weren't at first sure if it's worth scraping him off the rocks and winching him up into the helicopter, he was so badly hurt. In hospital he convinced the surgeons not to cut off his shattered legs, but rebuild them with metal pins, bolts, braces and all the modern technology. Doctors shook their heads, they though it waste of time, the guy will never walk again, he will spend the rest of his life in a wheel chair. He does not need mangled legs barely holding together with pins.
Paul proved the doctors wrong. Once he got out of their clutches, he learned to walk again, hefted a small backpack and walked on foot clear around the world. It took six years and a lot of pain in his hybrid legs, an inspiring story if there ever was one.
Paul is one of the smartest people I have met, a home grown philosopher with very definite views backed by experience and a lot of thinking. He is full of energy, optimism and drive; it's invigorating just to sit down and talk to him. After half an hour with him you are itching to get up and do it yourself. Curiously, after all his travels he still speaks only French.
I went to see him several times in the boat yard where he was preparing his vessel for a sail to Antarctic. His stories were amazing and I asked if he wrote about it. He was adamant: "No." He was not a good enough writer himself, and he wasn't gonna let some hack butcher his story. Most adventure travel books are ghost written by hired hands, even the famous bestsellers I read as a kid. Sailors surrender their logbooks to a publisher who has a man to turn them into what public wants to read, clean, safe, with a slant that is popular at the moment. And then the editor will trim it down even further.
Hired scrivener could not get across what Paul would want to say, and anyway, most people do not read books to find new ideas, they read them to confirm what they already thought before they picked up the book. You'd have to be a damn articulate writer to introduce something different into their lives. Paul though it would be waste of his time. What he did he did for the experience of it, and you cannot directly share an experience. You can try to describe it, but you can't pass it on, the experience itself is personal, it remains yours only.
I agreed with Paul on every point. What little direct feedback I get from my readers always surprise me, what people find in my books that I did not put in there and what they miss that I tried to get across. What I wanted to say about sailing I have said in my first book, "Monsoon dervish". I had nothing more to add. If you have nothing to say, keep your trap shut.
To produce a book takes a lot of work, I count on two years from the time I start writing until the day we have a book launch in Wood Street. With my biological clock ticking I am growing careful with the way I

waste my time. Do I really want to spend two years of my life working on something that will miss the point? Not really. After the last afternoon with Paul I laid this manuscript aside. I had better things to do. I had a life to live.

Six weeks into crossing of North Atlantic I woke up at four in the morning, good two hours before the first light. In the middle of winter the full darkness took 14 hours out of every 24. I spent a lot of time in cold darkness on that passage. I tried to sleep through it, but you can sleep only so many hours a day. I have slept enough for that night. I had a good electric light over the chart table, but I wasn't sure how much I could use it. Wintry sun that did not warm, when it showed from behind the grey bank of cloud at all, it climbed a third of the way up the sky, then changed its mind and dropped down into the sea again in the mid afternoon. At noon my sextant said it was only 34 degrees above the horizon. With the boat leaning away from it, close hauled, I had no idea how much power my solar panel was feeding into the battery, so I was careful.
Grey ocean was breathing cold, it was too cold to spend a long time sitting in the hatch, staring at the waves, which is my favourite pastime afloat. Wrapped in four layers of warm rags, beanie pulled over my ears, fingerless gloves on, I gave it half on hour and I was back inside, boiling a warm cuppa. Now that we got away from the North American continent with its shifting fronts, depressions, nasty Northers and what not, weather settled in. We were ghosting along the southern edge of the big Azores high and wind direction changed only slowly. "Kehaar" was steering herself with tiller lashed, without a wind vane, close hauled in light winds. We had little to do. I had time on my hands. Plenty of time. My love flew home from Mexico and I was taking "Kehaar" home on my own. Darwin was 15 000 miles away.
That morning at four I had a dingo's breakfast (you have a piss and look around), then I boiled a pot of Chiapas coffee from freshly ground beans. I sat down behind my chart table with a steaming mug, switched on the lamp and I picked up the manuscript after a six months' break. With my laptop un-dead I was writing in longhand, ballpen on paper. I may not bother with publishing this book, but I will finish it. To complete a job that I started and maybe pay a tribute to inspiring men and women I have met, sailors like Paul who will never write their stories. It would be shame if they died with them.

"Kehaar"

.About two years into the trip, in Colombia, it occurred to me that many of my readers will know nothing about me or about my boat, and that a few paragraphs of explanation may help. If you have read "Monsoon Dervish", you can safely skip the next vignette where I will briefly introduce myself and the main protagonist of this story, "Kehaar".

I named my boat "Kehaar" after a seagull character in "Watership Down", a fiction book about rabbits by Richard Adams. Kehaar of the story was one of the big fellahs, a Black-back Seagull, one reason that hull of my boat is painted black. The other reason is, I always wanted a black boat.
"Kehaar" is not your ordinary white plastic tub with a blue trim along the gunwale. She was referred to as a submarine, Sherman tank or "that heap of steel junk". She is all of that, for she is steel, flush deck from gunwale to gunwale, no side decks, no cockpit, no engine, no electronics, a single Chinese junk sail on a free standing mast. A lot of thinking went into her, the main guide being the Occams' Razor which I interpret in my own way: before you torture your brain figuring out how to arrange this or that on your boat, ask yourself first: do I need it at all? I started with a basic idea: purpose of the boat is to keep the water outside. So there are no through-hulls on "Kehaar", nothing to leak. No toilet, no prop shaft, no transducers, no engine cooling pipes. I think it's a silly idea, first build a watertight steel hull, then cut holes in it below the water line.
I don't pretend that I understand anything about boat design, so the hull below the waterline is from the plans by John Pugh, his 32-foot "Moonwind". Actually she first came out at about 33 feet, but when her nose rusted away and I realised I do not need a sharp point at the end of the deck, I chopped off about 18" from the front and welded it flat, to get a wider step to work my anchors. So she must be a touch over 31 feet. I am not sure, I have never measured her. I moved the rudder out from under the boat and hung it on the transom. That way it's easier to work on it, I did away with a hole through the hull and it added directional stability to the boat. At the launch in Tasmania she was 5 and half ton. Today she will be closer to 7.
Boat is a statement. It shows who you are, what you believe in, what your priorities are. I will not go into arguments about windward ability of a Chinese junk rig (remember? Gentlemen sail down wind). I have

met a lot of junk men, and not one of them would go back to their previous rigs. I designed mine from Blondie Hassler's ideas. My mast is standing free, no stays or shrouds. Huge 470 square feet sail is meant for very light winds of Equatorial belt. It is easily reefed at any point of sailing, seven aluminium battens distributing the load. Free standing timber mast survived without damage a number of knockdowns and one complete roll over, 360°, in an 80-knot typhoon south of Taiwan. Original timber mast rotted away, now I have a 40-foot galvanised steel lamp post stepped on the keel. So far the new mast took only one serious knockdown, off the Cape of Good Hope.
I built "Kehaar" without an engine and so far I have sailed in and out of every port and anchorage that I ever wanted to get in. Without a cockpit and no engine I gained an 8-feet by 8-feet bed in the rear of the cabin. I haven't had a single complain about my bed.
There are no guard rails or stanchions along the deck, a lesson on false security I learned a hard way on my previous vessel. All the ropes from the sail lead to the circular hatch from which the boat is operated. Tiller reaches to the hatch as well, but in the open sea a simple windvane mounted on the main rudder steers the boat on all points. The main hatch is protected by a rotating spray hood which keeps the watchman out of weather, body inside, only a pair of eyes peeping over the rim.
For this trip I bolted on near the hatch an antique two speed sheet winch to help the old body dragging the ropes taught. I also welded up a direct-drive manual anchor winch out of scrap stainless steel and an old gipsy with a nigger-head. I believe in heavy anchors and plenty of chain, but it's me who has to lift them up. Neither winch lasted all the way round.
Arrangement inside the cabin is simple. Entire boat forms one continuous living space, with 6'8" headroom. There are no bulkheads, no partitions, no rooms. Walls inside are bare steel painted white, no insulation, no lining. In emergency and during maintenance I can get at any part of the hull from the inside. Not having side decks nor cockpit, living room is larger than on most 40-footers. Spiralling steps below the main hatch serve as a seat during the watch. Behind the stairs is the big bed, under the bed storage space. On the left from the stairs is a full sized chart table with a comfortable seat where I live most of the time. On the starboard side a large galley with gimbaled kerosene stove, original Swedish "Primus". Lots of bookshelves and open storage areas. I have no built-in tanks, 500 litres of water is divided between one 200-l plastic drum sitting on the keel, tied to the mast, and jerry cans of varying capacity. Staple food is kept in half a dozen 100-l plastic drums with watertight lids. Cans and anchor chain live under the floor. I built the joinery over 20 years, from secondhand timbers collected on four continents. A lot of wood surface is covered in carvings.
For two decades I burnt candles for lighting. When my love decided to come along with me to South America, I welded up a wide bench seat at the transom, and on top of it I installed one solar panel. Sealed gel battery runs a couple of LED lights inside and a computer, directly DC to DC, without an inverter. That's about as far as my electrical ability goes. I will not have anything on my boat that I do not understand or cannot repair without outside assistance.
I navigate by sextant, on second hand paper charts. I am lucky, for I enjoy traditional system of navigation and I understand the celestial mechanics behind it. My chronometer comes from Woolworth and has no brand name, a cheap Chinese digital wrist watch that's loosing 3 seconds a week, rain or shine. I check it periodically against GMT in local Internet cafes or by a little short wave radio I have.

I guess that describes "Kehaar" enough to give you an idea. I built her in six months, and sailed her all over the place on a minimum budget with minimum of maintenance that I learned on commercial work boats. She does not looks like a yacht. She is a solid rough downwind goose built to take any weather. Her resale value is zero, but she is all that I want from a boat.
Now the skipper:
I am an ethnic Russian, a 6-foot-5-inches, patriarchal beard, receding hair line, inclination to alcohol, a picture-book stereotype. Until the age of 21 I didn't speak a word of English, and it still shows. I grew up in Prag under communism. During the declining years of Brezhnev's rule, at the age of 22, I sneaked under the Iron Curtain and escaped to the West. Every government I turned to wanted to send me back where I came from, nobody wanted yet another long haired bearded hippie. Nobody would give me any papers. I was no good to anyone. Refusing to accept the decision of the Free World, I went underground and emerged a decade later in Tasmania, Australia. I wrote about this stage of my life in "Out of census".
As a self-employed carpenter, builder and a shearer I was doing fine in Tassie, until the day my wife sold our farm and the house I built on it, and sent me a $1000 cheque for my efforts. I thought, choke on it, and I walked away from my respectable life to built myself "Kehaar" on a budget that bordered on non-existent. Crossing the Bass Strait in the winter, Shell auto-atlas of Australia as my navigation aid, I headed

for the tropics. Strategy of keeping Australia on my left brought me to Darwin, NT, which became my new home.
"Monsoon Dervish" was the first book that I wrote. It deals with building of "Kehaar", our trip north, along the Barrier Reef and across the Indian Ocean, three years as an independent trader in Madagascar and East Africa, then three more years in the Far East, Japan, Korea, Philippines. It ends the day I met the love of my life who was then a manager of a small marina in Palawan, Philippines. Typhoon wiped out their flimsy marina and we lived for the next five years on the beach in Palawan. "With Mermaid up a Moonberry tree" has the details. Sick of being poor I finally packed our circus into "Kehaar" and we came back to Darwin.
Swinging hammer on the waterfront for living I ended up with a 57-foot decommissioned prawn trawler as a home, one more steel boat to keep afloat. A few seasonal trips to the Archipelago, and by the time this book starts with another crossing of Indian Ocean, I was pushing 60, and "Kehaar" was 22 years old, with 60 000 miles under her keel, almost all of it single handed. We were ageing disgracefully, just the way I promised myself I will, many decades ago.

Chapter one: Longrass in Africa

The world of "Monsoon dervish" has changed in the 20 years since I last set out across the Indian Ocean. Electronic gadgets took completely over the mind of an average sailor, replacing what little common sense seamanship he may have had. Large areas previously closed opened to cruising. Equally large areas became too dangerous to contemplate. Vietnam, China and Cambodia saw the first intrepid yachtsmen navigating virgin shores. Red Sea, Arabian Gulf and East Africa were strangled by Somali pirates.
Nature was changing as well. South Atlantic in Brazil experienced its first ever tropical cyclone. Warming Arctic allows navigation of NW Passage. Some of the Pacific atolls ran out of water as their aquifers were inundated by rising ocean. Collapsing fish stocks spell aquatic desert in many coastal and most pelagic fisheries. Enormous accumulation of synthetic garbage was confirmed in centres of all five oceanic current systems, killing birds and fish that mistake it for food.
Changes that sound abstract when you hear of them as a 90-second emotion-stirring news clip, but several of them had a direct impact on our trip.

As I was nearing Madagascar again, racing in front of strong SE Trades, I had some doubts if I choose the right route. The entire Western half of Indian Ocean was overshadowed by the fear of Somali pirates. Anything north of Madagascar and west of India, all the way to Persian Gulf and Suez. When I say pirates I do not mean cute Disney technicolour bullshit, I talk about murdering thugs. Guided by computerised intelligence network based in Dubai, Somalis were hungry, desperate, armed with AK-42, rocket launchers, GPS, radars and sat-phones, drifting in their fast assault skiffs all over the ocean, not enough fuel to get back home, kidnapping for ransom any vessel in sight, ruthlessly killing any crew that resisted. Unlike medieval pirates and the contemporary robbers in the Far East, Somali's are not interested in the cargo that the ships are carrying. Their target is human. They imprison the crew and demand ransom. They ask for millions of dollars and they get it. If not, they kill the hostages.
Over the years they learned to keep some of the smaller stolen cargo vessels and use them as mother ships, allowing them to stay out at sea indefinitely, using the original crews as a human shield.. More than one yachtsman was taken off their boat and spent months sweating in Somalia before their ransom was paid, more than one ended in Davy Jones locker, with a bullet in their head, sometimes the entire geriatric crew. Seychelles, Red Sea and East Africa ceased to be cruising destinations. Yet details about particular cases were often ambiguous, contradictory and some of it did not agree with what I personally know about the area.
IMO, International Maritime Organisation, who tried to coordinate a response, drew an arbitrary line at 10° South, making it sound like outside it you were safe from pirate attacks. Yet I heard about a strange case in 2010 when a yacht was boarded and taken after leaving Mtwara in southern Tanzania, at 10°30′ S, just across the Ruvuma river from Mozambique. They were heading south, for Richard's Bay. Story appeared on many yachting forums in many garbled versions, and it did not make sense to me. The geography did not hang together. Also it was odd that such a conservative body as IMO would miss that case in their assessment of the risk. According to them 10°30′ S was safe.
I spent three years in Madagascar in the 1990ies and I knew that winter in southern Madagascar means serious adverse weather coming from the Cape. I intended to round the island in the north, then slip down the Mozambique Channel. My turning point, Cap d'Ambre, the northernmost tip of Madagascar, lies around

12°S, and the proximity to the Mtwara case made me nervous. For the past two years no yachts were captured, but only because no yacht ventured out there. So I was told in Australia.

I was looking forwards to rounding Cap d'Ambre. After five weeks of brutal rolling in a strong current I was battered black and blue from being thrown around the cabin like a loose bolt in a drawer. In the Indian Ocean Trade Winds are seasonally reinforced by the monsoon, and in the winter, which the sailing season, it really blows, day and night.
I was looking forwards to calmer waters in the lee of Madagascar, uninterrupted good night's sleep. So far we had a phenomenal run in the beefed up Trades, steady 20-30 knots, often gusting to more. We covered the first 4000 miles from Darwin in 30 days, current giving us 20-40 miles free ride a day. On this passage we stayed around 13° south and conditions were very different from our first crossing at 20°S. The swell never stretched to majestic oceanic pattern as it does further south, crests half a mile apart, clean surfing in between. Stronger current at 13°S hickups every time it climbs some undersea ridge, every time there is a sea mount to skirt or shallow bank to clear. Swell ties itself in knots like water castles. You reef further to spare the pitching mast as you slalom between impossible blue shapes, heading whichever way current throws you, yet the next day sextant says 148 miles noon to noon, thank you. Singlehanding a 30-foot cruiser I do not ask to go any faster.
In the wild rolling of the boat my activities were limited. Besides cooking and basic maintenance, all I could do was read and write. And my favourite job on board – sit in the round hatch, rocking on the rim with the roll of the boat, staring into the sea, not a thought in my mind, very much like meditating. Weather permitting, I can do it for hours, gaining a great pleasure from it. The first week afloat I do little else, retiring inside only when the weather cuts up and seas start breaking across the deck too often. I find it peaceful, healing, fulfilling. The main reason I do coffee on a passage is to coerce me into some useful activity at all. Without coffee I would just sit in the hatch and look at water the whole day, day after day. Nothing wrong with sitting in the hatch, staring into indigo blue of the sea shapes. I do a lot of it even after I had a cup of coffee, but I am Kris, I have always so many absorbing projects on a go, it would be shame to throw into the sea two months of absolute solitude. So I write a lot. I write from the undisturbed detachment of solitude what I can't write back home in Darwin, immersed in a frantic daily life there.

This particular crossing was sobering and sad. There were no shadows to share it with, no neon streaks darting past my rudder, no squabbles over the kitchen sink left overs, no tiny monsters rising from the deep to check us out. You know how on a passage you collect a whole motley menagerie of followers behind the boat, doradoes, yellowfin, travelly, an odd remora to take care of the business, a few colourful oddities, fishes of every shape and shade. Well, in 2014 Indian Ocean is dead. I looked from the transom every day, and there was no one there. Across 5000 miles of the open sea a desert. I may see a solitary flying fish darting away now and then, but never in a school. Birds are even rarer. They have nothing to feed on. I did find some inch-long juvenile flying fish in the mornings, on the foredeck, so they are coming back, but it will be slow recovery. The wide ocean has been plundered clean. Closer to land, where various governments can enforce their economic zones, situation is better. I saw flocks of frigates, tropic birds and boobies when I passed close to Christmas Island, and again south of Cocos-Keeling. Even depleted waters of Indonesia and Philippines now seemed like teeming with fish, when compared to the open ocean. It's horrid. And I saw it all happen in my own short lifetime.
In the late 70ies I crossed this ocean for the first time, and we were feasting on flying fish every morning, ten or twelve big fat ones landing on deck every night. We hooked some as live bait to pull in one dorado after another. In the 90ies, on my first crossing to Madagascar, I noticed a severe depletion of the sea, but still I collected a following of smart wary fish who came with me all the way to Mauritius. Twenty years later there was absolutely nothing left, my wake was dark blue and smooth. You hear about collapse of pilchard fishery in Peru, cod in Newfoundland, orange roughy in New Zealand, but it's only when you sail week after week over dead ocean that you realise what we've done, how bad the catastrophe really is. Six months later I saw the exactly same thing in the tropical Atlantic. Indigo blue desert. No fish, no birds, no dolphins, no life of any kind. I used to write in my log book every time I caught a fish. It wasn't very often. Now I write excitedly when I merely see a fish. It is even less often.
Destruction of Somali fishery was the direct cause that spawned the current wave of piracy. Civil war split their country into warring fiefdoms, central government collapsed, state ceased to function, there was no one to patrol rich coastal fishing grounds. Foreign factory ships swooped in, after they trawled the rest of the ocean dead. Taiwan, China, Russia, Korea, Japan, dredging Somali waters mercilessly, all the way to the beach. There was no authority to restrain them. Local fishermen picked up guns lying around from the

civil war, and retaliated, defending their fish stocks. Some of the early pirate bands even called themselves "Coast Guard", or its Somali equivalent. Plunderers stood offshore. Somalis followed them. Trawlers were boarded, confiscated and towed to Somalia at a gun point. Eventually they were freed upon payment of large ransom, and a template to print money was discovered. Some poaching Thai trawlers were converted to pirate mother ships, the original crew pressed to operate the vessels.

36 days out of Darwin, I made a landfall on northern coast of Madagascar, 4850 miles from Dinah Beach. That made it 134 miles a day, on average, right across the entire Indian Ocean. In my first days from Dinah Beach I though there was something wrong with my new sextant, our progress sounded improbably fast, but in the long run even the crude kitchen clock navigation confirmed it. I was moving my ship clock an hour every week, which makes it 900 miles a week. One week I broke my all-time record, sailing 1045 miles in seven days, on a 30-footer. How did that happen? I guess I am 20 years older and 50 000 miles more experienced, both in planning and in execution. Maybe I was just lucky with weather.
I sighted the land in the evening, low hills of NW Madagascar ahead, about 15 miles away. I turned right for a short 60-mile run to the top of the island, the notorious Cap d'Ambre. I remember French always raving about the gales around Cap d'Ambre, but my own previous experience was all right. There was a bit of yippeeing and air punching, happy that my navigation proved correct, we crossed the ocean in a fantastic time, and all that, when suddenly I got hit by violent wind out of clear sky and in a matter of minutes we were in one of the Cap d'Ambre gales. Night had fallen, ink dark. Near the shore the mighty currents coming from the open ocean have nowhere further to run and they swirl in diabolical patterns. One minute I was driven onshore at three knots, next minute the dim light of a little local lighthouse slipped away like on roller skates. Cross swell that those conflicting currents stacked up was maddening. In darkness one huge wave broke over the boat and crushed Jeremy, my self steering wind vane. It snapped it clear off. I salvaged all the bits, and the rest of the night I sat in the hatch, hand steering, clawing my way off the lee shore, moon shining bright, land hidden by thick weather.
In the morning there was no sign of land, wind backed to SE but not abating. It was blowing so hard that I could carry no sail downwind, any bit of canvas overpowered the steering. With lowered bundle of spars I could just keep the boat on course, running before it under a bare pole. To help me steering, I lashed the tiller fast to the rail. Then this massive wave slammed into the boat from a side and smashed my steering. I was left holding a tiller in my hand. Normally, when my rudder is hit really hard, tiller breaks. It broke so many times in the past that I got tired of replacing it and I built a really strong laminated hardwood one. This new tiller was too strong to break, I had it lashed fast to keep direction, so instead of the tiller now the entire rudder head broke. Imagine power of the wave – the ¾inch stainless steel bolt that held the tiller snapped like a matchstick, two steel cheeks on top of the rudder stock twisted, quarter inch thick black steel plate torn off or mangled. Gale was not abating, wind howling, lee shore unknown distance, no steering.
I crawled aft along the deck with a length of stainless steel chain and wrapped it around the bald rudder head. Twisted cheeks hanging from the rudder stock gave enough purchase to get a tight grip. Then I ran two ends of the chain along the deck to the winch, like a quadrant. With a bit of rope it steered surprisingly well. Couple of hours later I snapped a sextant shot through the clouds: currents were carrying us fast, north, around the top. By noon we were clear of Le Grand Terre and with the winch I turned the boat, heading west.
That night we slipped into the lee of Madagascar and the weather mellowed immediately. By morning we were becalmed, with seas dropping and the life returning to normal. I weighted my options and quickly decided against pulling in Madagascar. I know the island well. To get anywhere useful would take me about the same amount of time as crossing the Channel to Africa, which was my original plan. Drifting around the north entrance to Mozambique Channel in slight seas, doing maybe 30, 40 miles a day, I was enjoying the break in the weather immensely, meandering between the offshore reefs, my intimate friends from previous visits.
"Kehaar" is one of those rare boats that can be trimmed to steer herself dead down wind, without an auto pilot, especially in light winds. Mast is stepped so far forwards that sail squared out is pulling the boat, instead of pushing her. The trick is to carry the right amount of sail; too much and she will claw into the wind, not enough and she will run off and gybe. In light breeze up to 10 knots the full rag, 420 square feet, is just perfect, with tiller lashed. In tropics near Equator you do a lot of ghosting with winds below 10 knots. In stronger winds, with reefed sail, she will yaw around the course, but as long as the wind stays reasonably steady, she will come back to course.
This time I was not stopping in Madagascar at all. A few years back in Darwin I heard that German Mike

from "Douala", a mate of mine, was beheaded in the cabin of his boat in Nosy Be. Alex was at first accused of his murder and he spent 5 months in jail in Nosy Be, before a hired Swiss DNA team cleared him of involvement. Stories like that were the main reason I have left my beloved Madagascar, two decades ago. I saw it was a dead end, literally. If I stayed in Madagascar, and continued as a small time trader and smuggler operating alone, I knew I'd end up with my throat cut. I have been warned by locals in no uncertain terms. That's why I dropped the game and moved to the Far East, to try something different. Mike stayed, though, till his end. (I ran into Alex's brother three years later in Panama, and his version of Mike's demise was even more macabre.)

From Cap d'Ambre it took us nine balmy days of ghosting to reach North Mozambique coast. In Pemba I got shafted to the tune of $200 for a two-day stop over. I spent next four days pestering the Immigration before I wheedled my passport back, then they asked for another $80 to stamp me out. It showed me how soft and obedient I became in Darwin. I could have easily slipped in and out of the large Pemba harbour without bothering with the clearance, as I would have done in the past, in our days as a trader. It does not pay to play straight in Africa. I'll have to toughen up a bit if I am to have a good time in Africa.
Port of Pemba, not to be confused with the island of Pemba further north, was our first stop since Darwin, 5500 miles back. I anchored about three miles from town, deep in the bay, in flat water near the beach. After six weeks of constant howling wind, whistling at the ends of my hollow spars, crashing seas, creaking rigging, infernal noise inside the cabin, with all my travelling circus thrown from wall to wall inside the cupboards and shelves as the boat rolled from gunwale to gunwale, after six weeks of unrelenting noise I was suddenly enveloped in roaring silence. It was so quiet that it hurt my ears. Silence was so noisy in my head that I could not think. It was physically painful. I've never had that experience before.
Then came all the hassle of functioning in human society. Find some clothes. Footwear. Padlocks to shut the boat. Money. Paperwork. On a long offshore passage I slip into a strange mental state of equilibrium, a quiet unassuming peace. Life on board becomes simple and unencumbered by things not necessary, and arriving into the first port I resent the daily life intruding on my solitude. A couple of times it happened to me a that I actually sailed past the first destination, because I did not want to break my state of "baraka". Alas, we can't circle the globe for ever, we have to face the world at some point. It can be a drag, though. Before I rowed ashore I didn't even check if I let out enough anchor chain. Obviously I did not. In the afternoon a stiff SE breeze picked up and from the hill in town I saw my boat drifting across the bay as I was enjoying a cup of excellent coffee. Mad scramble to find transport back to the beach, long row to catch "Kehaar" before she damaged flash motor boats moored in front of town, then rest of the day tacking back to the same anchorage.
Waiting four days for Immigration to issue me with a two-day temporary entry I did a lot of walking around town. Mozambique is as poor as any sub-Saharan country, but I saw no beggars, no squatters sleeping on the streets. Cops do not carry guns, only short wooden sticks. To think of it, I haven't seen any guns at all. Military keeps to the barracks, even though the intermittent fighting between political factions flares up now and then. By the time I reached South Africa, news reported another civil war in central Mozambique. Water is a problem, though. Every time a main water pipe burst, people dig up the leaky section and use the hole in the ground as a temporary well, filling their buckets and jerry cans with murky water, and cart it on their heads home.
Reason I came to Pemba were Makonde carvers, in my opinion the best wood carving done in Africa. Twenty years ago I saw some fantastic stuff along the coast, in Mtwara and Isla de Mozamique, but I had no money then to buy any of it. This time I had the money but I was too late. There is very little ebony left, every piece sold to a foreigner has to be approved by Government, old carvers are dying, and the young ones are not interested in working. I did see some spectacular pieces, in private collections of resident whites, but nothing that I could get hold of myself. Makonde people themselves told me that, yes, up country, around their capital of Maeda, I will find good stuff, but after my experience with bureaucracy in Pemba I did not bother.

Pemba was humming with oil and gas exploration fever. A whole new port is being built in the southern lobe of the bay, to service the industry. Drilling rigs themselves are further north, off Palma and around the mouth of Ruvuma River. They are guarded by their own security of hired mercenaries, by South African Navy and by the International pirate task force. All that makes Mozambique Channel safe from pirates, Madagascar, Mayotte, Comoros and entire coast of Mozambique. Further north action fell off as well. I talked to the guys who were three years ago flying to Somalia every week to retrieve the crews after the ransom was paid. Now they were going once in three months. Piracy is being contained and seas are

returning to normal. Attempts to patch up a government in Somalia had nothing to do with it, guys said. Only the brute force worked.
Grisly stories I heard from people directly involved do not make it into mainstream media, nor onto Internet forums. True war stories of atrocities and murder on all sides, nothing that a white man would want to hear while he is having his breakfast. When Somalis executed two American yachtsmen at their base because the negotiations were dragging too slowly for their liking, Yanks sent in attack helicopters to bomb the pirate home town of about 1200 people. What the US Marines found were charred ruins, smoke rising from the rubble, dead and dying bodies lying everywhere, no sign of life. The day before Chinese Navy sent their own force to retaliate, for their own reasons. Without telling anyone they bombed with napalm the pirate home ground, not bothering to discriminate their targets, killing everything that moved. Survivors spread the word, and the nearby coastal populations are now wary of supporting pirates. A French yacht was attacked at high seas, a young couple with a baby. They managed to send out a Mayday call by radio. French Navy located the pirate mothership, bombed it from the air, sank it and left the floating survivors drown. Attack skiffs of pirates that got away were left to float in the ocean without support, to die from thirst. I can carry on and on, but some stories I heard are too gory to repeat.

The last morning before I left Pemba I ran into a guy I met 20 years ago; Andre, South African shark fisherman. I wrote a chapter "Shark fins" about him in Monsoon Dervish. Small world and ephemeral links that endure. We went down to the beach for a yarn, sitting down on an upturned dug out canoe in the shade of a kungu tree. Andre was still scheming, still running foul of crooks legal and illegal. Two years ago he had to leave Seychelles, when the threat of piracy wiped out the fishing charters. Now he was building a commercial marina in Palma, to cater for the oil rig business.
I asked him about Somali pirates. – "Three years ago skiffs with dead Somalis sometimes washed up ashore even here in Mozambique, but no more." – Out of fuel, out of water, they died on their mission and current swept them south. Skiffs that were running out of fuel were also the only ones to attack yachts. They would commandeer a yacht just to get back home.
And the Mtwara case? Andre had his own version of the story and his tale made it even less comprehensible. I couldn't figure out what they were doing in Mtwara in the first place, a large nothing of a town near the border with Mozambique. I went been there myself, once, as a trader; it's not a place a yachtsman would choose to visit.
Sailing further south I met more people who personally knew the skipper and the crew of that particular pirated boat. I recorded more versions in my diary, but unfortunately I could not talk to the skipper himself nor to his crew. He died of cancer last year, and his crew were doing time in jail for unrelated matter. I didn't make sense of it until five months later, talking to Plastic, a delivery master from Richards Bay. He knew the people well, and he finally straightened the confusing tangle for me. The attack was every bit as brutal as the stories said, but the boat was not in Mtwara at all. They were leaving Mtwapa, a small creek with a yacht club a few miles north of Mombasa, in Kenya. Instantly the details fell into place, and the tale became clear. Mtwapa is a place popular with African cruising yachtsmen, but otherwise it's a completely unknown suburb of Mombasa. Some ignorant cruising forum coordinator in America who never heard of obscure Mtwapa Creek took it for a typo and changed the name to Mtwara, a big town which you can find in every atlas. And every other website blindly copied the mistake, even though there is 400 nautical miles between the two places. If I had known that the hijack originated in Mtwapa, at 4°South, I would have never been concerned. So much for Internet sources.

In Mozambique I could do little to repair my smashed steering. In Pemba I replaced the broken bolt in the tiller with a massive dyne-bolt I bought in a hardware and I was confident my chain and quadrant arrangement operated by a sheet winch will hold until we reach South Africa.
In the last week of Ramaddan I left Pemba bound south. Ghosting at night past the sprawling Muslim slums, Africa breathed its magic on me. Sailing barely quarter of a mile from the beach, in darkness I could smell the smoke from cooking fires curling over the water, I could see all the details in the settlements without being seen myself. Tiny shacks illuminated by dim bare bulbs, Koran recitals broadcast over cracked amplifiers, muezzin competing from different mosques, faithful filling their bellies and lighting fags. Most of them fast the whole day in a quiet dignity, even waiters serving in café that I was frequenting. Two silent dhows were tacking close to the beach, heavily loaded with mangrove poles. I was quietly tacking alongside them. We slipped past dark shadows of towering baobabs growing on the north headland, out into the open sea.
In the past I have crossed the Mozambique Channel seven times, so I knew the trip down was going to be

difficult, but in the beginning I failed to get into the right frame of mind. In the few days in Pemba I relaxed too much. Looking on the chart I calculated it was going to be about 1100 or 1200 miles, and compared to the crossing of Indian Ocean it looked a trifle, while it really equals a trip from Darwin to the Philippines, only against the prevailing winds. It took a despairing week on a lee shore of Gulf of Beira before I regained the right mental attitude. Very light headwinds alternated with short gales, then more light headwinds, drifting in calms, then bashing against SE.
Large part of my progress was thanks to the current running with us. Even that was ephemeral. Mozambique Current is a river in the sea, about 80 to 100 miles wide, running at about one knot south, following closely the African coast. A narrow ribbon of fierce central current meandering around the middle, about 15 miles wide, hissing, spitting, bounding, wavelets one foot high breaking on themselves in a two knot wind. Running at 3-4 knots it is easily recognised just by looking at the surface of the sea, but in fluky breezes it is very hard to follow. It does not stay with 100-fathom line as the books would have you believe, it snakes around in whirls and eddies. I crossed it twice, but tacking into light headwind I soon lost it again.

Just to make sure my life didn't get boring, my compass has gone crazy. When the sun sets in the east, you know that you have a problem. I tapped the compass. No response. I dug up my two little Micky Mouse hand held compasses, laid them on the table, and they each said something completely different again. I took them on deck and I got yet two more headings. Now, that's interesting. A local magnetic anomaly?
"Kehaar" has no cockpit, and there is nowhere to mount a compass safely outside, so I set it on my chart table, inside the cabin. Living inside a steel boat, it always had a large deviation, but it was operational. Now it gradually went off the rails. I've been checking it against Southern Cross and it was showing two very different headings for south, depending on what tack we were sailing on. I crawled under the table, behind the compass, all over the place, looking for stray wires with DC current, bits of steel that weren't there before, anything that would influence compass. I found nothing. Fortunately it was near full Moon, with a clear sky, and I've been navigating by Sun, Moon and Southern Cross, anyway.
I took the short wave radio receiver I use to catch a time signal and laid it next to the compass. I was sure there were magnets in the speakers. A few passes with the radio got the compass card spinning, and when I removed the radio and the card settled, it was showing roughly what the real course was. I chalked it up to an unspecified magnetic anomaly and went to sleep.
The next morning compass was showing 100° off the sun's angle. I remembered Melville has a chapter in Moby Dick about reversed compass, but that happened after a severe electric storm. By the afternoon my compass locked on north-south, no matter which way I pointed the boat. I passed a strange ship. From a distance she looked like an oil rig, a big central derrick, helicopter pad, cranes, lots of boxy buildings. Coming closer I noticed it was moving slowly, and it resembled a barge more than a rig. It was a deep sea mining dredge, sucking something from the sea bottom. Could it be connected to my magnetic anomaly? I cracked up: for sure, it's mining it! Ha-ha-ha.
How come I haven't remembered this supposed anomaly from the last time I passed through here (twice)? Well, the first time in Africa, twenty years ago, I had no compass at all, I was then steering by wind, swell and stars. An anomaly would have had no bearing on us.
Sitting in the hatch, mulling over it, magnetic anomaly as an explanation did not feel right. Anomaly would not take a week to gradually manifest. Suddenly I had a startling thought. I picked up my little hand held compass, stood up on deck to keep it as far from steel as possible and checked it against the Sun. It worked fine, including the 20° variation. I looked into the cabin. Main compass inside was still locked north-south. And I knew what the problem was. "Kehaar" never had any electricity on board. For twenty years I burned candles for light. I had neither engine, nor solar system, no batteries. For this trip I installed a solar panel for the first time, one panel, a simple regulator and a battery. A couple of wires lead to the interior lights and to one power plug, simplest possible arrangement. Yet it was enough for the DC current to turn the whole boat into a magnet. I dismantled my big table compass and took it above the deck, away from the steel. Sure enough, it worked fine.
Mystery solved, I was sitting inside my seven ton magnet, pondering. Turning the power off would not help, the boat was magnetised already. I was not worried about the compass, I was thinking about electrolysis. I fix commercial boats for living, and I've seen the horrible things that stray DC current can do to steel boats. How to go about minimising the damage? So many basic things I still don't know! (Few months later I was leafing through the official Pilot Book for South African Coast, and there is actually a magnetic anomaly reported off St.Lucia, where I saw the mining dredge.)

In the Trade Wind haze I made a landfall on South Africa around Cape Vidal. Barely moving over the water in very light headwind,, I saw it slip past in couple of hours, as the current hurled us south. In the afternoon fair wind picked up, we closed in with the shore and run a slalom between migrating whales. Dozens of humpback whales were slowly moving up the coast, displaying the full gamut of their tricks: breaching, beating with the flukes, waving their tails, running mock attacks on us, diving at the last moment under my boat, scaring me witless in the process, the whole circus. They looked so aloof and unconcerned, truly alien minds. When they jump out and then flop back into the sea, the sound is like a cannon shot, dull explosion in the distance. Spectacle continued for hours, right until the entrance to Richards Bay.
The wind kept building up as we sailed south along the coast and by late afternoon it was howling. I was reefed down to a single panel, tiny little triangle of a sail, struggling to keep the boat before the wind with my crippled steering. After I passed the dunes of St. Lucia I kept lookout for the new landmark, a fresh shipwreck in the entrance channel to Richards Bay. I heard that a year previously a large bulk carrier sank between the breakwaters, and its nose was still sticking out of water.
I spotted the wreck from miles away, surfed around it, between the breakwaters and into the shelter of the bay, anchoring in 2 metres of flat water in front of a sandy island. Later I learned the full story of the shipwreck from the guys who worked on the salvage of the aft section soon after the ship sank.
How can a large well equipped commercial ship founder so near a port, in 21st century, with all the electronics and safety gear around? No amount of sophisticated gadgets can help you if you put an idiot in charge of the operations. In August 2013, 150 000 ton bulk carrier "Smart" took on a full load of coal in Richards Bay, bound for China. Greek skipper expressed concern about weather, SW gale was blowing at 40 knots, swell in shallow water outside of the breakwaters was running at 9 metres. Harbour Master sent him out, as the berth was needed to load another ship. Captain again questioned the weather conditions, particularly the monstrous swell in the shallows, but he was ordered to leave. Harbour Pilot guided his ship through the port, and he was taken off the ship at the breakwaters.
Sea bottom near Richards Bay is very shallow and outside of the dredged shipping channel there is not enough water for a laden bulk carrier. As the huge ship stuck its nose from behind the shelter of the breakwater, the first big wave picked up its bow and lifted it up. Next the bow crashed down into the trough of the wave, starting a rocking motion along the ship. Second wave lifted the bow even higher, pushing the stern deep under water. Third wave rocked the ship so far that stern bottomed out. Rudder hit the sea bottom and broke, as did one propeller blade. Ship was without steering and propulsion, and it was quickly driven by the gale out of the channel onto the shoals where it grounded. Crew were all taken off the ship and nobody was hurt, but the 230 metres long hull full of coal quickly broke into three parts.
The aft section sank near the shipping channel and the port authorities were worried that if it moved in a gale, it may block the entrance to the port altogether, which would be an economic disaster. At any given time there are 15-20 bulk carriers waiting at sea to be loaded. Two local companies salvaged the aft section, pumped the coal into a barge, refloated the bridge and towed it into deep water where they dumped it. Then African bureaucracy got mixed up in the story and for a whole year nothing happened. Finally the insurance company that was paying for the salvage reminded South African government that they could easily just walk away from the whole thing. When I came back from my bike ride I heard that the crew that refloated "Concordia" in Italy was being flown in and that the salvage of the nose section of "Smart", still sticking out of water, was resuming.

I liked Richard's Bay very much. Spread out across 12 or 15 km, on different lobes of a large natural harbour with narrow dredged entrance, it remains a bay more than a town. Until the mid 1970ies it was a forgotten small fishing village on a large lagoon. Then government developed it as a biggest coal loading facility in the world, to export from the nearby coal mines. The areal picture of the coal wharf looks like a lot of square black sand heaps with toy conveyor belts criss-crossing the field, until you realise that the little boats tied up at the wharf are really gigantic 1000 feet long bulk carriers. When the SW gale brings its 40 knots of wind, black dust drift across the harbour to the Marina, covering the decks and sails in fine black grit.
Rio Tinto is mining sand dunes for iron ore, titanium, zircon and some other metals. Miles and miles of dunes and rolling hills are covered in commercial eucalyptus plantations. Wood chips, Zambian and Congo copper, aluminium, local granite, phosphoric acid, platinum and other rare metals are also loaded onto ships. Several large industrial concerns built their factories around the bay – power plant, wood chippers, fertiliser factory, Tata steel mill, BHP put up a couple of of aluminium smelters. Seven widely separated suburbs, segregated by colour of skin, sprang up to supply the labour, but there is no real town, no centre,

no focus, no history. Richards Bay itself is a loose collection of huge Malls, shopping arcades, industrial suppliers and local government buildings, about 5km from the waterfront. The whole municipality only counts about 50 000 inhabitants and official unemployment rate runs at 40%.
I liked that along the roads a lot of vacant grassed space was left fallow, a lot of public land, stands of old casuarina trees along the beaches, wide belt of coastal dune forest. Canals are lined with canal estates, soft spoken quiet security guards in every entrance: have-nots guarding the property of the haves from their own folks. Great area to ride a bike around, Pelican island, beaches, eucalyptus plantations. Gangs of white mountain bikers emerge after work to roam the sandy lanes. In the stiff north easterlies kite surfers come flying to Alkantstrand Beach, two dozen at a time.
Troops of monkeys are rambling in the thickets along the road, thirty or forty of them in each band, totally unafraid. Black faces framed by a white fringe, otherwise shiny silvery fur and long tails, they are called vervet monkeys. Mature males have blue balls and red dicks. In the morning they come to the sea shore, right into marina, walking over the rails of bars and restaurants. I watched them a lot, and some reactions I got from them were so surprising that I looked them up. South African vervets were noted to display typically human behaviour not found among other animals, like anxiety, spite and alcoholism. They were seen to shit in spite on their neighbour's food just to piss him off. How human.
Africa manifests in little details. Witch doctors advertise in community newspapers: "4 in 1 for men problems, wallet magic, zam zam water for good luck, hip and breast enlargement". A woman is asking advise in the paper, what to do about her dead husband who keeps sending her SMS messages on the phone, two years after he passed away.
Hippos and crocodiles abound in local waters. Big speckled hornbill is a common roadside bird, flying in its sinuous way – four hard flaps of the wings, glide, four hard flaps of the wings, glide.

The first day in the harbour, waiting for the Customs to check us in, I was sitting in my hatch, watching a helicopter hovering over a moving tugboat, dropping off and picking up young commandos in training. Chopper was hanging still about 30 metres up in the air, winching blokes down on a wire in a harness. It looked impressive. Then at dusk the same helicopter hovered over my wharf, and dropped off a podgy middle aged guy with short beard and a fat young African girl. They came down on a wire one after the other, slipped out of the harness and walked to their car. They didn't look anything like commandos. A taxi service South African style? Finally I was told it's the way they take pilots off the ships, by a helicopter. It's cheaper and safer than running a fully crewed pilot boat in the rough seas outside the entrance.

The day after I sailed into Richards Bay a SW gale blew in, with bitter cold wind, huge surf and disagreeable rain. I lit a candle to the gods in my house altar for allowing me a trouble free passage all the way in. Winter and rain is the most miserable combination, but it wasn't that cold, Richards Bay lies 29° south, about same as Byron Bay or Geraldton in Australia, technically still in subtropics.
It's hard to find a place in the harbour where you can anchor on a wild for free, but it is possible. I went around looking for a space for "Kehaar". In Zululand Yacht Club they wouldn't let me in past the security gate. I wasn't white enough for them. They never heard of Darwin, we have no reciprocal agreements with their Club, I would have to join as a bachelor member before they let me walk in, $286, then pay for the mooring, about the same price they quoted me in a marina. Colossal pink Afrikaner woman who runs the Club's office wouldn't talk to me directly, even thought we were standing two metres apart. She relayed her message via mousy offsider standing next to her. A few days later some visiting yachtsmen asked me to the Club's barbecue night, so I rode over on my bicycle and tried to sign in as a bona fide guest. – "Do you have your ship's papers with you?" asked me one of the Club's officers. – "Ship's papers? Hell, no". – "Any other ID on you?" – God, what is this, police investigation? I was invited to meet local sailors. I did get in that night as a one-off arrangement, and the dinner was humongous, but after that, they can have their bloody yacht club.
Instead I moved into Tuzi Gazi Marina, next to the wharf where I first tied up. Tuzi Gazi is a private waterfront real estate development in the commercial harbour; hotels, bars, tiny clean beaches, marina, a few take-aways. A popular holiday spot for South Africans. One morning an old southern right whale swam right into the marina, lazily cruised all the way to the beach, turned around and copied the line of moored boats, not 10 metres away from us, before it made for the exit channel half an hour later. Scarred pink back, a lot of barnacles and an awful halitosis every time it blew.
In August, in the late winter, marina was nearly empty, there were only three live-aboards tied to rickety pontoons. Place apparently fills up with visiting yachts later, in November. Two long wobbly fingers on sinking plastic floats, rotting boardwalk, capacity about 50 boats, clean toilets and showers about 100

metres away, across the road, guarded by a key. Power and water of sort. Parallel to marina lie two concrete wharfs, which belong to government and are technically free. About 20 boats were tied up in there. Except for one Dutchman all were locals, some have been there for years. Lot of catamarans. None of them have access to showers or toilets. Naturally I gravitated towards the free loaders on the wall. Some of them were genuine pearls, some just lovable clowns. There were ex-divers, oil riggers, delivery skippers, characters. I picked up a lot of gossip and some valuable rumours from the guys.
In my bumming days I would have joined them at the free wharf, but the place is open to public, and I was going to leave my boat unattended for a couple of months while I went travelling up country. I thought, Marina is asking $160 a month, that's very reasonable. With full security, locked gates and all. I paid three months up front.
But first of all, before I could go walkabout, I had to fix "Kehaar", repair the broken steering and replace the missing wind vane. I pulled out the little BMX bike we carry on board, rode 5km to town, I spoke to a few people, I bought a few bits and pieces from industrial suppliers. South African power supply is same as in Australia, 220V, 50 Herz and I had my inverter welder with me on board. Richards Bay is too insignificant to find things like international adapter plugs, so I rewired my extension lead so I could plug my welder directly into the wall. We towed "Kehaar" to the public concrete wharf, I didn't dare welding on top of plastic floats and wooden planks. In one day of work I repaired all the damage from the ocean crossing, strengthened the self steering assembly and slapped a coat of epoxy on the new steel.
Next day we towed "Kehaar" back to marina and I felt I fulfilled my duty as a prudent mariner. Now I could have some serious fun. I assembled my recumbent bicycle, keen to hop into the saddle. Richards Bay is a good place, relaxed and easy going. It is perfectly safe because there is no proper town around, no riff raff. There is nothing there, no one to talk to, intellectual stimulation zero. Even the public library in town won't let the public in without a membership card. After a week I started chafing at a bit. I was facing three months' wait until the summer season came to round the Cape of Good Hope, and I wasn't gonna sit for three months in Richards Bay when the whole of Africa was right there, over the hill, waiting for me.

Chapter 2: One wheel drive safari

In the 1990ies I spent three years in the East Africa with "Kehaar", as an independent trader, sneaking between Madagascar, Zanzibar, Moçambique and Kenya. Like many people who came to Africa without a camera and who tried to really live there instead, I fell under the spell of the place and its people. A large section of "Monsoon Dervish", the first book that I wrote, deals with that time. Twenty years later I came back for another doze of madness you will not encounter anywhere else. I am not foolish to revisit in nostalgia places where I was happy twenty years ago. I know I would find only disappointment. So-called progress is marching in hobnailed boots, tramping our memories into the mire of change. World is in a constant flux, aura of magic waxes and wanes. I believe in looking for new places which are the right spot to be at this very moment.
In all that time I spent on the Swahili Coast I hardly ventured inland. Living on a boat tends to do that to you. It is a great way to carry your home with you, but it limits your experience of the land to the narrow ribbon along the sea. In many interesting places if you want to retain your boat, you stay with her. This time in Africa I was leaving "Kehaar" in a marina, for I wanted to see the Victoria Falls, I wanted to cross Kalahari Desert, I dreamed of beachcombing the Skeleton Coast.
I was going to ride my bike. There is no madder way to explore African interior than riding on a home made bicycle. Yet it is really simple. All you need is a bike and a bit of money. There is no way to train for a really long ride. Any healthy and moderately fit human being can set out on a long bicycle ride without special training. If you can ride 40 or 50 km in one day without sustaining an injury, you are physically fit to ride around the world. I haven't been to a gym for forty years and I know virtually nothing about theory of cycling, but I live an active lifestyle, swinging hammer for living, rowing my dinghy home from work every day, cycling everywhere instead of driving a car. That's enough physical exercise to prepare you for a long ride. First fortnight in the saddle will provide you with better training than any scientific fitness program. After two weeks on the road you'll be averaging 80 or 100 km a day, which is all you need. At that rate you are moving reasonably fast, yet you still have enough time to interact with your surroundings. Your soul can only travel at a pace of a camel.
I can't advise in choosing a right bicycle, because I am biased. As I grew older, I found mountain bikes uncomfortable and painful on long rides. Sore arse was there from the beginning, then the aching back, but when the old age added painful hands, I got off them. I have arthritis in my hands from 30 years of banging hammer as a carpenter and when I lean into handlebars on a dirt track my hands go numb and

sore and they hurt for days afterwards. Riding in bush was no fun any more. 10 years ago I discovered recumbent bicycles. On a recumbent you sit in a chair with your back supported and your hands take no weight at all. I could not afford to buy any of them, so I copied a photo of a model I liked onto tracing paper and I designed a bike from that. I built several variants from scrap bikes I bought at the rubbish dump.
After serious testing I settled on one design that suits my riding style. "Kraken", my beast of burden, is a long wheel base recumbent with 26" mountain bike wheel on the back and a 20" BMX wheel in front. Wide comfortable seat with its own spring suspension, high handlebars and a massive luggage rack to cart my equipment to work and back. It looks a bit like a Harley without an engine. Around town I ride on any odd second hand scavenged parts, but before I venture into the outback I replace all the running gear with new mid-range Shimano stuff. On recumbent back wheel takes all the load, so I have a decent double-rim wheel on the back with extra strong stainless spokes. Good tyres are important. I swear by Schwalbe Marathon. With a Kevlar lining strip inside and a thorn-proof inner tube I never have any punctures. Not even on African thorns.
Originally I built "Kraken" to cross Australian deserts along the dirt roads from north to south, Gibb River Road, Tanami Highway, Finke and Ootnadatta tracks. After that ride I regularly took her bush, every year for a few weeks after the Wet, criss-crossing the outback of north Australia. Besides that she is my favourite mount for daily commuting around Darwin. She has done some miles, and I know she can handle heavy loads.

I ride light. Light bike, light gear, light rider. If you can get two of those three, you are ahead. Over the years I paired down the weight of my machine as far as I dared. I lost a few kilos of body weight on the ocean crossing from Darwin, so the only weight I could save on was on the equipment I took with me.
As an old hobo I am used to get by on very little. I do not carry tent nor tarps. I sleep on a thin rubber mat, wrapped in a good warm sleeping bag, out in the open. I studied climatic tables before I left, and I picked the last two months of a dry season, so I did not have to worry about rain. And it did not rain once, right across the continent. I have not booked any indoor accommodation, ecept for the last two nights, when I had to pull apart my bike to load it on a bus. Even in big cities, I would ride out of town after dark, and crash out when I felt I was far enough from the drunks. I slept beside the road or in the forest the whole way, without any problems.
I am not a flashy dresser, clothes I wear are protection, not a plumage. I ride in my ordinary thogs, I've never had any fancy cycling rags. I ride in a pair of loose shorts, an old paint spattered T-shirt, thongs on my feet. For colder weather I add a woollen jumper. To cross the borders and for windy days on the mountain I packed a pair of neat jeans and a long sleeved flannel shirt. No spare clothing. When on a cold night I dress warmly for sleep, I put on everything I have. There are no rag left in my bag. This time I wore a padded workman's jacket on top of everything, a bleached orange hand-me-down from Queensland Railways that I picked up on a give-away table in our yacht club in Darwin. Dressed in it I look like a cross between a beggar and a scare crow and hustlers leave me alone. I wore the orange jacket virtually every day and on most nights. Africa was that cold. You will hear me complaining about cold often enough.
I never know how many spare parts I should take with me. On my early rides I lugged around far too much: spare tyres, a complete set of running gear, bearings, nuts, axles, cranks, full tool kit. I have used very little of it. This time I decided to run by the seat of my pants. Bicycles are a common means of locomotion in Africa and I was hoping to pick up spare parts as I needed them. I packed a good tool kit with all the special spanners, but I did make one grave mistake in my preparations. In Darwin I was getting my boat ready to sail around the world, and a bicycle was a long way down the list of priorities. I ran out of time to replace the worn out parts with quality new stuff. When I assembled the machine in Richards Bay, she was far from ready to roll. In the only bike shop in town I could not find Shimano cogs that fit my back wheel, and I had to buy a whole new wheel instead. All I found was cheap Chinese crap, which was not up to the demands of the trip.
I was not sure how closely I will have to guard my bicycle from thieving fingers, so instead of several panniers distributed around the frame I loaded all my stuff into one ordinary back pack that I strapped vertically on the left side of the luggage rack. I thought it will make it easier to detach my possessions from a bike so I can carry them with me and keep an eye on them. It never happened. Safety was not a problem at all. After a fortnight I gave away the padlock and bit of chain that I had to lock my bike. I haven't locked it once. There was no need to. Nobody touched my bicycle, the whole trip. When I parked her in front of a supermarket in town, to go shopping inside, I would place her near one of the security guards and they looked after my stuff.

On top of the luggage rack I strapped a cut-down milk crate where I place my jerry can for water and current food supplies. Water was another surprise. I did not have to buy a single bottle of water on the whole trip. I drank local tap and well water for two months, without any health problems at all. In southern part of Africa, if there are people around, there will be drinking water near by. It may mean walking 5 miles to the well, but the well water will be good. In heavily settled rural areas main water pipe runs along the road, with communal taps every two or three hundred meters. Even across Kalahari and Namib deserts I only carried one 5-litre jerry can. It was enough to get me to the next water supply. I had to plan ahead a bit, placing my cooking stops near a water source, but it was not a hassle.
What else was in my bag? One stainless steel cooking pot. I cook on fire, the way natives do, not bothering with portable stoves. Stainless cup, spoon, knife, can opener. Basic medical kit. LED torch. Tool box. Few little bits and pieces too tedious to enumerate. A book to read. And my journal.

Theoretical preparation for a trip, research and gathering information, can be tricky. Everyone has their own slant on things and you don't know what to believe. More you find out beforehand, better prepared you are, but the quality of information is hard to judge, specially if it comes from Internet. Most blogs are written by bloggers, not by travellers. Printed sources tend towards timid and scared. I remember when Tony Wheeler started his Lonely Planet guides in the 1970ies, with his first title, "South East Asia on a shoestring", it was a book for adventurous independent travellers, full of interesting gossip and information you couldn't find anywhere else, encouraging you to go and find out more by yourself. Over the following decades it first mellowed, then became respectable and responsible, ending up completely paranoid that someone will sue them for some idiocy they did while inspired by their guides. It reflects the trend amongst the travellers themselves. I looked up "cycling in Botswana and Namibia", and it was such a scared chicken shit that I quote it in full:
"Namibia and Botswana are desert countries, and totally unsuitable for a biking holiday. Distances are great and horizons are vast, climate and landscape are hot and very dry, and even along major roads, water is scarce and villages are widely spaced. The sun is intense and prolonged exposure to burning ultraviolet rays is hazardous to your health." – Reading this advice, don't you feel like jumping onto a bicycle to prove them wrong? I know of one bloke who did just that. He was in Gaberone, capital of Botswana, and inspired by this insipid drivel, he bought a cheap one speed commuting bike, and rode it right across Botswana, without encountering any hassles at all.

On the morning of departure I slept in late. Sun was up when I stuck my head through the hatch to check the weather. SW gale abated in the night, light northerly sprung instead. I tied the backpack on my bike, strapped the milk crate on top of it and locked my boat with three padlocks. I was leaving "Kehaar" in an empty run down marina for two months, but she'll be right.
I wheeled the bike to the road and set off north, rolling down a busy road full of trucks and minibuses. 8 feet wide shoulder on either side would be perfect for cycling, if only slow crappy drivers didn't use it as an extra lane. I have asked traffic cops, what is the law of the country. They said bicycles are to ride on the shoulder of the road, against the traffic. Riding against the traffic makes sense, you have a better chance to see what is facing you. Even then a good rear mirror is indispensable. When the road was wide enough to incorporate rideable shoulder, I did what the law required. When the bitumen shrank to two narrow lanes, I rode with the traffic, one eye constantly watching what was behind me. Two trucks passing each other meant getting off the road altogether. Quality of the roads varied greatly, from province to province, from country to country.
It took only an hour's ride to get the feel of the traffic. Bicycle has a place on an African highway. Everyone warned me against the trucks: "They will run right over you. They are killers." – I found truckies courteous and professional. They gave me as much room as they could, and when there was no room, they blasted their horn as a warning well ahead. Much more dangerous were the occasional drivers – geriatrics barely in control of their shit heaps and farmers driving their monstrous trucks and trailers. Truckies know their rigs, they know how far they extend, while the farmers drive on the highways so seldom that they have no idea how much road they hog.
Riding back to the main highway from a detour to a butterfly farm I be-darked. I had a fried chicken in a service station and crashed out in an eucalyptus plantation on the outskirts of town.

I woke up in dark, roosters were crowing, Orion has risen. I do not have a watch, and I assumed daybreak will not be far away. I packed the sleeping bag and rolled to an all-night petrol station for a cup of coffee. It was 3:30 in the morning. Roosters start crowing at midnight and Orion rises at 2:30 AM. At least I

calibrated my time piece for the next night. Coffee was awful, but meat pie was fresh and warm. With a litre of water in a jerry can I set off north.
Weather was freezing cold. I was wrapped in my padded jacked, furiously pedalling to get the circulation going. By the time the sun was high enough to make a difference, I rode 30 km uphill. I crossed the bridge over Hluhluhwe River and pushing hard into cranks I heard a sickening "crunch", my foot slipped in the pedal and we stopped. My derailleur split into two parts. I had no way to change gears or tension the chain. Luckily I was moving slowly, and the broken parts fouled only one spoke. Wheel itself was still turning.
I dismantled the gear changing apparatus, but it was beyond repair. I had no spare one. I tried to replace the broken spoke, but the cogs were stuck solid, I could not get them off with all the fancy tools I carried. Second day on the road and we had a major breakdown already. That never happened to me before. Nearest bike shop was back in Richards Bay, but I did not feel like backtracking 160 km just to buy a lousy Chinese derailleur. We will manage without gears, for the time being.
I shortened the chain and fixed the gear permanently on a middle cog, so I could ride the flat bits at a respectable speed. Uphill I didn't even try to mash it. To save my knees I got off at every hill and pushed the bike beside me. There was no hurry. I came to enjoy the country, observe the wild life, not to break any speed records. There was no downhill coasting, we were continuously gaining elevation. Open dry scrubland with acacias of all sizes and shapes. The most verdant and dense canopy has longest thorns and spikes. Acacias drop their twigs, and unless cattle clears them from under the trees, you can's sit in the shade under the trees. Thorns are quite vicious, they slide through the thongs like through butter.

Plagued by a toothache I followed the highway straight as a ruler, bitumen shimmering all the way to the distant mountains. World famous National Parks and private game reserves are lining both sides of the road, names that I recognised from the picture books I have read as a kid, Hluhluwe, Umfolozi. To keep the animals in and the poachers out, fences rise 8 feet high, 17 strands of barbed wire, plus three strands electrified. Uniformed game rangers are totting their Uzi sub-machine guns even when coming to town to fill up with petrol.
I was not tempted by organised up-market safaris. For start, you have to arrive with your own car. Cyclists are not allowed into parks that have big cats. We are called "meals on wheels". I preferred to meet the game by chance, along the road, as I ride through the countryside. I have seen plenty of interesting animals already. A common country bird was a big grey guinea fowl. Size of a small turkey, with tiny blue and red heads.
Africans walk a lot. There are none of the Asian tricycles in the countryside. Goat trails run parallel to the main road in all the villages. In larger settlements walking trails are concreted by community efforts and you can follow a continuous footpath for 20 km or more. It is too awkward to ride a bike on them, though. Too many trenches, unfinished drains, and potholes, not to mention a lot of people walking.
Late in the afternoon I reached Mkuze. On my auto map of southern Africa it was marked with a smallest circle, yet it was a full-sized disorderly Zulu town with several supermarkets, bustling vegetable market and a busy anarchy of a bus station. I did not carry a great stock of food with me. Clocking around 100 km a day I could rely on coming across a town with a supermarket at least once every day. After shopping I would sit down on the ground in front of the supermarket, eating most of my purchases. That was the main meal of the day, no matter what time it happened.
At dusk I pulled up outside of town in the harvested sugar cane field. On top of the hill stood a curious watch tower. A 30-foot section of two-feet diameter steel pipe, brown with rust, never painted, cemented vertically into the ground, series of rungs welded inside the pipe. I climbed the swaying structure to get a panoramic views of the hills. Feeling was like in the Flinders Ranges in South Australia, steep arid mountains with deep erosion gullies, country purplish in the gathering dusk. Unless irrigated, land was parched, rivers dry, vegetation brown, towns dusty. Mkuze river was flowing, though, and sugar cane fields were irrigated. I camped right there, next to the tower.
Villages grew poorer, individual dwellings smaller, clustered into family compounds. Some houses were traditional roundels, some were square, often barely 8 feet by 10. Built of concrete hollow blocks if affluent, wattle and daub when poor. Tin roofs without eves or overhangs. A lot of bare space left fallow between individual homesteads.
Before reaching Pangola River hills started climbing in earnest. Pushing my recumbent up the first pass, then coasting 6 km downhill. Pangola town lies in a wide fertile valley full of sugar cane. Distances in Africa are fluid. My two maps disagreed with each other by a wide margin, road signs announced something else again, and actual concrete milestones gave yet another option.

In Pangola bicycle shop closed down, but Chinese hardware store was selling basic spares. For $5 I bought the only derailleur on the shelf, the kind that hooks on the axle. Then for a whole afternoon I toiled like a grease monkey trying to adapt it to my bike, in vain. There was no way to fit it on. Looking over the rear wheel I noticed the cheap hollow axle was bent already. Probably a pothole I ran over. I'll have to replace it with a solid axle, as soon as I score one.
I decided I still carry too much weight. I discarded everything not absolutely essential. I ditched sarong, length of rope, the only book to read I had, spare spoon. On their own those things do not weight much, but the gain is incremental, it all adds up. Filthy from grease and sweat, with raging toothache, I look worse than local white hobos I meet on the road, young religious cranks. tramping the highways with no fixed direction, begging food from Africans. Messing around with disintegrating bike keeps my mind from throbbing toothache. In the afternoon I took the first doze of amoxycilin, antibiotics for the tooth infection. Loose chain dangling on a middle ring sometimes slips and I have to stop and put it back. At one maintenance stop I laid my only sunglasses on the ground so I could see better what I was doing, then I stepped on them, crushing both lenses. I did not curse. I saw it as another thing I didn't have to lug around and I did not bother replacing them.
Plants we were passing were astounding. A whole burnt slope of a mountain was covered in something like tree-agave. 8-feet tall trunks like palms, on top of it a tuft of thick meaty leaves like agave. Also true cactus, some enormous, with their bole over 7 feet in diameter, branching like a candelabra.
Another endless climb through densely populated country. Zulu villages are crawling up the slopes, 12 or 15 km of continuous build up area. During Apartheid days this was part of one infamous Bantustan, native homeland where the Africans were allowed to build and reside. Segregated by race, it worked both ways. No white company ever invested any money in Bantustans. They were abolished in 1994, but till now you will find here no supermarket chains, no services, no restaurants, no industry, no employment opportunity. Now and then a small cluster of almost empty shops, with a bar and a butchery next door, all ran by stone faced hard Chinese.
Same goes for remnants of Bantustans all over the country. In the Orange Free State I could tell immediately when I crossed into a former Bantustan. Huge dormitory black towns of Botshabelo, Thaba Nchou and a whole heap of others that my map neither shows nor names. Rubbish brown land, dry and eroded, no good for farming, covered in a sprawling sea of little boxy single storey dwellings, no fences, a lot of bony cattle grazing on the commons through the suburbs. Every herd has its own keeper with a big stick and a mob of dogs. No capital investment. No factories, no garages, no petrol stations, no cropping, no gardens, no trees, no visible employment, not a single multinational take away, no national chain of supermarkets. The only shops were around the centre. Large, hot, corrugated iron warehouses with neither fans nor windows, again owned by arrogant local Chinese, no frills bulk wholesalers. Don't bother looking for things like coffee, bacon or yoghurt on the shelves. Beef, plenty of it, pap, and junk food. On the streets outside of supermarket a big open air market: colossal black mamas selling bananas, yams and roots I could not identify, large expanses of second hand clothing piled up in disorderly heaps on the ground, cheap Chinese hardware, a whole steer butchered on a pavement, cuts spread on a sheet of plastic, flies having a feast. In the morning hundreds of buses are ferrying workers to the factories of the nearest white town, Bloemfontain, in the evening carting them all home.

Zulu teenagers keep yelling at me as soon as they see my crazy bike. There is something on a recumbent that moves them to uncontrollable laughter. They jeer, whistle, yell and shout. If I give them a perfunctory wave with my hand, they are content only to laugh. If I pretend to ignore them, their attention becomes hysterical. Sometimes I get sick of it, I stop and engage them. First time I confronted a big mob of madly jeering goons at a minibus depot, I rolled to a halt in their middle and with a broad smile I told the biggest thug amongst them: "Mate, I am an old man. I am 60. I am older than your own father. Would you yell at your father like this? No. You wouldn't. So, please, show a bit of respect for old age."
Reaction was astonishing. Everyone shut up and the thug dropped his gaze and mumbled: "Sorry, I did not mean it that way." There is deep seated respect for old people in Bantu cultures. Tension diffused, I brushed the incident aside: "It's all right, no bad feelings." And that was it. Next thing guys are asking me all sorts of normal curious questions and we had a good talk. English comes fifth as a mother's tongue in South Africa, after Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans and Sesotho. Very few people speak it at home, but virtually everyone can converse in it.
Whenever I rolled through an African settlement, kids would run alongside me with their smart phones trying to snap a picture. They would jog on for a long distance without tiring. If there were more than two or three, I stopped, let them all catch up and they had a photo orgy, posing with me, or with my bike, with

their friends, all sorts of combinations. It happened in every country I rode through, especially in poor rural districts. I though it was a funny reverse of late colonialism: thirty years ago whites came to Africa to take photos of the natives. Today the natives run a long way to get a photo of a crazy white.
Sometimes white drivers stopped their car a bit ahead of me to do the same, particularly later on in Kalahari and Namibia. We would have a chat, they took their pictures and then I would ask them to send me a photo to my e-mail address. I carry no camera, and I had no record of the trip. I wanted to send a photo to my love, at least. I do not know how many guys did sent me a snapshot, but I'd like to think that some of them remembered.
I have not seen any of it. Google in their wisdom barred me from accessing my own e-mail account. In a dirty underhand way. I was trying to check my e-mail from Zimbabwe, a country with a low safety record, so Google wanted to verify it was really me. They did not ask me any of the control questions I entered when I first opened my account. They data mined my past records, and came up with an obsolete information I had no record of. They chose questions I could not answer. Years ago, when I did not have my own laptop, I used public computers in a Darwin library. To log on, I had to type in my library card number. Google remembered that, and now they asked me for that number. In the years since I last used public computers my library card expired several times and I was issued new ones, every time with a different number. I did not have a record of the old numbers, because I didn't need them, I never gave them to anyone. Google recorded them without my permission. Another question from g-mail was: "when did you first used this account? Day, month, year." I had no idea. I could guess the year, it was 6 or 7 years ago, but I would have to open my e-mail account to check the exact date. I tried to guess, but that clamped my account shut even tighter. Access denied. I was stuffed. After that I spent a lot of time and money trying to find some human being in Google with whom I could take up my problem, but I do not have a phone and everywhere I turned I ran into automatic robots blocking access. My love, much smarted in cyber ways than me, tried to help me from Australia, but to no avail. I lost all my e-mails, everything from my African bicycle ride, everything I was foolish to store in my account. Luckily I am a paranoid old bastard, and I keep the important addresses written down in a note book, on paper. After that I moved my e-mail account across and I signed on with the Evil Empire. Russian e-mail providers ask no questions, they are not interested in fibs and lies.

Higher mountain ridges are all planted to pulp, mostly Australian eucalyptus, some pine and even mangium acacia, also from Queensland. Mature forests of pulp wood stretch to horizon. When you read those glowing reports how such and such country achieved this fantastic rate of reafforestation, do not imagine that local people got up and started planting native trees. Local people cut wood for cooking and for building. On their own initiative they plant no trees. Their village compounds are bare, their cattle and goats graze down any sapling that may sprout on the commons. Every day you meet women carting huge bundles of dead and not so dead branches on their heads, firewood to cook their meals on. Builders chop down any stout timber that is not protected by private ownership, brick makers mercilessly mutilate trees along the road sides to feed their kilns.
The only way to get the forests planted is to award a large profit motivated company a licence to use a big strip of bare land for timber production. The only successful reafforestation projects in Africa are giant wood chip plantations covering entire mountain slopes in imported monoculture. Swaziland planted a lot of their bare mountains to eucalypt, upper ridges of the whole Zululand are covered in fast growing pulp timber and South Africa is today second largest exporter of wood chips in the world. I am not criticising, every single tree planted is a step in the right direction, I only want to lift rose coloured glasses from the statistical reports. Eco-awareness has nothing to do with reafforestation, it is all a profit based business. With abundant cheap labour and vast tracts of degraded badlands southern Africa is perfect for it.
Timber plantations make for great camps. Even in rare cases when they are fenced in, nobody is guarding them and the gates are left open. You sleep in comfort on soft pine needles in the silence of forest, hidden from the drunks and dogs, sheltered from the wind, much warmer than in the open. Even though, I have to dress warmly for the night, putting on all the rags I have.
Crossing from Zululand into Mpumalanga province road surface changed immediately. No more sealed shoulder, instead a sharp edge with a 4-inch step off the bitumen onto the eroded gravel. Every time I have to give way to trucks I bump down that step. My back wheel groans every time. Traffic is heavy, but it comes in bunches. Semitrailers carting copper from Zambia and Congo down to the port of Richards Bay, also metal concentrate from the Big Hole in Phalaborwa mine further north. On the return trip Zambians load up with construction material and steel.
I took a shortcut up the narrow rural roads to the border post at Mahamba. My first land border crossing

since my hippie days three decades earlier. I have travelled a lot since, but I always arrived and departed by sea. On land it was so much easier than clearing in a yacht! I dressed up in clean jeans and a long sleeved shirt, and we were in Kingdom of Swaziland.
Smooth transition from South Africa. Road continues climbing, a gentle grade flanked by scattered dwellings. Swazi folks are much more laid back than South Africans, less edgy, friendlier, none of the underlying aggro. They never had many resident whites, never went through the abomination of apartheid, and I soon got the feeling people honestly did not care what colour you are. I felt the same later in Botswana. Swaziland has its own money, lilangeni, but South African rand is accepted everywhere, on par with lilangeni, one to one. That was true also for Namibia, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. I brought a lot of rand in cash with me from Darwin so I did not have to worry about changing money until Botswana, which uses only its own currency.
I had bad experience with banks, banking, electronic money and all that new plastic approach to wealth, so for this ride I took with me all the money in cash, in rand and US$, stowed away in a small flat pouch I strapped with a belt against my skin, under the pants. My passport was in there as well. Before the trip I was not sure how safe these countries would be, I even considered building a secret compartment into the frame of my bike, but on the entire trip I have not once felt in danger of loosing money. In my beggar's orange jacket and shod in rubber Crocs I looked so dirty, scruffy and poor, that ordinary people kept approaching me, offering me money or food. During the passage across the Indian Ocean hair on my pate tangled into a big solid cot, a lump of felt on top of my head. I could not see it, so it did not bother me, but my love told me it looked like I had a tumour growing from my head. Apparently I looked seriously ill with that possum rising from my crown. People must've felt sorry for an old sick beggar. Nobody would dream that I had $ 4000 in cash wrapped around my belly in a pouch. (I noticed that plastic money does work in Africa, if you organise it beforehand at home.)

Swaziland is a country of Swati, or Swazi people, about a million of them, who speak SiSwati, their own language. They call themselves after their warrior king Mswati II, who unified the bickering tribes and enlarged their territory to twice its present size in the middle of 19th century. Machinations of British, Dutch and South Africans shrank the kingdom to the modern borders. It looks on the maps like a little blot sandwiched between South Africa and Mozambique, but it's 200 km by 120, about size of Wales or Czech Republic. At least another million of Swati live in South Africa, close to the borders.
Swaziland is a kingdom, the last absolute monarchy in Africa and a stable one, too. In the past 115 years they only had two kings. Current monarch, Mswati III, one of 67 sons of Sobhuza II, ascended the throne in 1986 at the age of 18. His father, Sobhuza II, ruled the country for 83 years, from the Boer War in the closing years of 19th century until his death in 1982. He is credited with being the longest ruling monarch in history, anywhere. I know, English believe the same about their Queen Victoria, Japanese about the Showa Emperor and Thai about their recently deceased king. For Africans it's Sobhuza.

I spent only a few days in Swaziland, but I fell in love with the place and with its people. It's one of my favourite corners of Africa.
Swaziland mountains are really pretty, in an African scruffy way. Southern Highlands reminded me a lot of lower Nepal in the 70ies. On top of the ridges terraced fields, now bare in the winter, breath taking vistas, all the flat plains on the high plateau densely inhabited and cultivated. Descend to the valley of Mkhondava River was a murder. Swaziland roads are good, smooth tar, but they run straight up and down them big mountains, grade 1:7 is common, no quarter given. You push the bike six or seven km up the steep grade, then drop down a hair-rising slope on the other side. Screaming down to the river I smelled burning rubber even before my brakes failed. I stopped to replace the melted pads, and I saw where the smell came from: one torn brake pad twisted sideways and ripped open side wall of my tyre, putting a 6-inch gash into it. Tyre did not burst, but the inflated inner tube was pushing its way out in a bulge.
To complete the illusion of Nepal, we came across a big primitive suspension bridge across the river, foot traffic only, like in Himalayas. Two tall towers built out of river stone either side of the riverbed supported stout cables anchored in stone bulwark ashore. Split timber planks spanned the bottom two wires, a walkway about three feet wide. Two more cables at chest height made for handrails. The main bridge span was maybe 50 metres. Women were doing their laundry below in the river, people crossing the bridge above them, carting goats on their backs, climbing steep twisted path up to their village on top of the opposite ridge. I sat down to sketch the bridge. Peaceful countryside, very little traffic, crisp clean mountain air, no hassles at all
South African "Spar" supermarket popped up in the middle of nowhere. My eating habits on the road were

opportunistic. You eat what there is. For breakfast I had the same every day: cold instant sorghum porridge that you can buy in a kilo packet all over southern Africa. Cheap and filling, it was a solid base before I could guzzle my morning coffee. Every time I came across a supermarket, I bought a big tub of freshly cooked food, mostly chicken curry and rice. The biggest serve was about $3. A pint tub of yoghurt as sweets. As spares I always had in my crate a can of baked beans, a can of corned beef, and a packet of biscuits.
I kept climbing the murderous grade, pushing my bike straight up hill, mile after mile, until without warning at a T-junction on top of the hill we bumped into the main highway from Mbabane to Manzini, the two principal towns of the kingdom. Mbabane, elevation of about 1000m above the sea level, is the capital, while Manzini, 20km away and 300 metres lower, is the principal business town. They are joined by a four-lane crowded motorway, diesel trucks belching fumes, commuters playing at racing drivers squeezing into any gap in traffic. Dedicated bicycle and pedestrian lane is set apart along the hill side, without it cycling would be a suicide.
I turned right, downhill, to Manzini. I though the industrial centre will give me a better chance of a bicycle shop. I found it before I started looking, directly on the highway, right after the market. Indian Muslim babas, father and son, in long white flowing robes and kofia skull caps. The owners did not touch anything, they employed locals to do the actual selling. Indians only handled money. Their Swazi mechanic knew all about bike parts and he found me all that I needed. The correct type of derailleur, cables, sheath, brake pads, bottom crank assembly (mine was worn out and slipping). All up I paid $18. Cheap Chinese manufacture, but none of it failed and the derailleur saw me all the way home.
Happy as a lark that I scored all the replacement parts, I kept pushing my machine uphill in the direction of Mbabane. Sick of breathing diesel exhaust fumes, I branched off onto the old road leading to Enzulwini Valley. A big state festival was being rehearsed, The Reed Dance, due in a few days, and masses of school children were ferried on trucks into Enzulwini. First batch were screaming delight from the back of the truck as I sat on the side of the highway. Between 50 and 70 kids to a tray, truck after truck after truck passed me by. Astonished I started counting them. 56 trucks, I am not exaggerating, every one crammed full of school children. Multiply 56 by number of kids on each truck. A traffic cop on a motorbike ahead of the first vehicle, another one closing the motorcade. Incredible sight, all those kids.
It got dark and I kept rolling my bike along the secondary roads. Half an hour later I saw the same convoy of trucks returning to Manzini, empty. Yet another hour later they were all heading for Enzulwini again, again full of kids. There must've been thousands of children in that stadium. Some serious presentation, for troops of cops swarmed over the roads, and I could see something brightly lit across the valley in the distance, near the gigantic Casino.
Nervous from presence of so many cops, too close to busy Mbabane to continue riding in the night without lights, I camped in one of the ubiquitous bus shelters that pepper southern Swaziland, spaced every two or three km. They all look same, brick and concrete, with a long concrete bench under the roof. The only difference is the stage of vandalism. Too early to sleep with all the traffic roaring past, I replaced broken gear on the back wheel, and I had a functioning bike again. Not for long, though.

Up at dark, I rode to a shopping centre of Gables in Enzulwini Valley, supposedly the prime tourist destination in Swaziland. After the marvels of the Southern Highlands, Enzulwini was far too commercial and pedestrian. Lots of lodges, casinos, villas, a massive shopping centre with all the brand boutiques, not my kind of Africa.
At the top valley ends in a blind culoir of a high ridge, no gap or saddle, so highway powers directly uphill, over the obstacle, 7 km of strenuous climb, 1:7 grade. Perspective changes. Those curious rock formations that I saw from the bottom of the valley, wa-a-ay up there, became quaint little details wa-a-ay down there.
On top of the ridge lies Mbabane, the capital, a spread out small provincial town with shopping centre, minibus terminal, two blocks of office buildings and miles of bare hills all around. At the bus depot I found a great pie bakery and I stuffed my gut with freshly baked meat pies. The only Internet café in town was a proper set up with about twenty terminals, separate booths, printers and what not. Cheap, too. The only drawback was their server. It was off-line, indefinitely. Yes, there is one more public Internet in Swaziland. Girl at the counter described how to find it. It was not far, but its door was boarded up.
So I had a good coffee in a white man's café instead, took a bit of water on from a servo and continued pushing my bike up hill, north. Spanning the highway at every hamlet, every suburb, every bus stop, is a pre-cast concrete pedestrian overpass. In spite of altitude in the afternoon it got hot and I arrived in Molchave exhausted, shaking. 10 km from South African border, I didn't feel like leaving Swaziland, yet. I

really liked the people. Better educated than Zulu, speaking better English, and most important, I felt there wasn't a cultural wall between us. I could really talk to them. Level of literacy is one of the highest in Africa. On the other hand, Swaziland has the highest percentage of HIV positive people in the world. A quarter of the entire population has AIDS. The twin scourge of western civilisation, cancer and cardiac arrest, is virtually unknown. Attempting to stem the spread of AIDS, the ruling monarch imposed a 5-year ban on teenage sex for girls. Naturally he exempted himself from the ban, and two months later he married a 17-year old girl, as his 13th legal wife.

Menu in the only shop in Molchave was limited. I bought a few fresh fat cakes, two hot dogs, sorry, no buns, and I wolfed it down. On a ride I am not fussy about food. I eat what there is, even if it's garbage. My energy requirements are so high, that it is all immediately broken down into component sugars and burnt to power my machine. Garbage has no time to deposit itself on the walls of my arteries.

Instead of following the highway straight on, into South Africa, at Molchave I turned right, along a narrow country road heading to Pigg's Peak. A few miles later I met with the local crazy. A middle aged bearded black man sitting on the bitumen in the centre of the road, three-pound mash hammer in his hand, with serious concentration chipping petroglyphs into the surface of the road. He's been at it for a while, about quarter of mile of the road was rich with his carvings: numbers, letters, symbols, glyphs. A true artist totally absorbed in his task, he ignored the traffic that had to slow down to a crawl and drive around him.

Further along I discovered a new road sign. It said simply "Road failed". It did. Perfectly good smooth bitumen suddenly stopped for 15 metres of abominable dirt potholes, as if a bomb exploded there, or someone ripped off the road surface and took it home with him. Then a good road resumed as if nothing happened.

Somewhere around here is the oldest documented mine on Earth. Variously dated 28 000 or 40 000 years, it's been worked until 20th century. Local guys continue the tradition. All along the road you meet soap stone carvers, working on the shoulder of the road, selling their art on the spot. The first bloke I stopped with showed me where in the paddock they dig up the stone. The whole country is their quarry. They break up the reef with crow bars, by hand, and drag the slabs on home made wheelbarrows to the road, their workshop being two crude lean-to. With steel saws they cut the rocks into smaller pieces, then carve the soft stone into little figures. Carvings have to be heated in fire, so they can take polish. Technically they are good, their motives a bit stale. African animals, tourist stuff. I kept meeting same sort of set up right through Zimbabwe and Botswana, with little variation in topics. I stopped for a chat with all of them, and bought a few little carvings now and then, even though they were heavy to cart around. I collected a full satchel before I got back to the boat. I have no shelves to display them on, maybe I will inlay them into book covers that we make.

This little road on top of the Eastern Highlands leads through stunning country. Long terraced valleys, magnificent vistas, bunches of long horned antelopes grazing in fenced paddocks like cattle, destined for slaughter. We were in the headwaters of creeks, no more villages, only cattle. Country feels like highland heath in Scotland, only without rain. I found a burbling brook out in a pasture, and finally had a good wash. Rinsed my sweaty T-shirt, scrubbed the limbs. Even in mid-afternoon water was very cold, but my Russian thick blood was stirring up. I loved the country, so I ignored the cold. In the still air with no wind the sun soon warmed me up, and the dry mountain air sucked the moisture from the laundered clothes in an hour.

In one curve of the road on the edge of plateau I glimpsed a bridge across a river, improbably far down in the valley, like in a miniature landscape from toy train models. I could not believe I was heading that way myself, it looked so far down from us. On the diabolical 10 km descend to that bridge across Nkomazi River I cooked my brakes three times. Twice the brake pads overheated and melted rubber stripped from the steel backing. Twice I replaced them with cheap Chinese shit I bought in Richards Bay. Third time the entire assembly collapsed, the spring snapped, breaking the arm of the brakes. Grinding my crocs against the bitumen I managed to stop but from now on I had no brakes at all. "Kraken" has no front brake, a design fault I will have to address in the future. I walked the bike down the 2 km of the steepest grade, then tried to coast, using my footwear as brakes. A few years back I swapped my thongs for crocs, those ubiquitous rubber clogs that became popular around the waterfront about 10 years ago. Real brand, made in Vietnam, is expensive, but imitation come at $3 or $4, even in Australia, and they last just as long.

For the next 90 km I mainly walked, pushing my bike along. It was too steep to ride up hill without busting my knees, and too steep to freewheel down without brakes. I did not mind at all. I loved the place, I could not get enough of that country, even though it was quickly turning my machine into pile of scrap. On rare bits of ground that were not too steep I ground the crocs to shreds, using them to slow down our descend. Several holes were poking through the soles, clogs barely holding together in one piece. I wasn't desperate

enough to try a native brake that a white South African once described to me. His Zulu workers carried a big chunk of timber tied on a string with them on their bicycles, small logs, really. When the downhill ride became too fast, they dropped the logs behind them. Bouncing off the bitumen, dragged behind the riders, it slowed them down enough. I am not sure if the story is apocryphal one, I had no need to try it myself. I was in no hurry anywhere. Overnight camps were comfortable, timber plantations stretched for miles and it was only a matter of choosing one.
My bike wasn't the only machine tested. I saw two serious accidents, a car and a truck. Both with failed brakes, both a write off. Every time a descending minibus passed me, screaming down, I smelled burning brake pads. You can read the stories of traffic accidents burned into the road surface. Deep gouges scraped into tar, spilled oil, broken trees, spoiled cargo thrown over large area, timber, sugar cane, oranges, empty coke bottles or whatever it was. When the smashed vehicle burnt down, it melted bitumen in a wide patch around it and no amount of subsequent road works would fill the gap for long.

Next morning I pushed my beast into Pigg's Peak, a full sized country town on top of a mountain, 1100 metres above sea level. On Sunday morning shops didn't open until 9AM. I found an early opener at the bus terminal, a one-room café with an ambience. Roughly planed solid wooden tables and chairs of local manufacture, square strong joinery, neat and simple. A kitsch panorama of the Pigg's Peak painted on one wall, rest of the walls smeared with various ochres to resemble, successfully, an interior of a cave. Over the top of the earthy background fine confident drawings of bushmen art from Kalahari, stick people and animals not much different from Bradshaw painting in Australian Kimberleys. Really well executed. Café sold cheap fresh muffins, and Nescafe served with a class. On a wooden plate arrived a big mug of hot water, smaller mug with three spoonfuls of powder Nescafe, so you can make your drink as strong as you feel, and a bowl of sugar.
When the shops opened I stocked up on provisions and headed for the border. The notorious dirt road to Barberton in South Africa first climbs to 1300 meters above sea level. Narrow heavily corrugated logging track, never graded, never maintained. You are pushing hard up a steep hill, your heart jumping out of your chest, when you meet a road sign: steep ascend begins here; picture of a truck climbing a black triangle. And the sign is correct. From that point onwards you are no longer pushing your bike, you are pulling it behind you by the saddle, road is so steep. I met a Swiss guy later who drove a hired car down this road (you can do it only one way with a normal sedan, down to Pigg's Peak, not up to the border). When he returned the car to the dealer, they charged him for a complete rebuild of suspension, front and back.
It's 18 km to the mining village of Bulembu. I think it's greenstone they are digging up there. 200 identical square prefabricated cabins lined up parallel along the contours, each house painted a different colour. Yet more climbing, and bitumen resumes on the border crossing at the elevation of 1373 metres. Border closes at 4PM, that's when all the traffic dies.

On the other side of the border gate South Africa starts with a Nature Reserve. Not a game park, but a geological National Park. They call it "geotrail", a guided tour of some of the earliest rocks on earth. Stones here are over 3 billion years old, and blasting of the road exposed some magnificent examples of geological phenomena. At one of the rest places with their explanatory sign boards, I met "Whitey", the guy responsible for building of this trail. Next two hours we spent yarning, he telling me hilarious stories of the colourful characters living in the vicinity.
Coasting down the gentle grade, walking down the steeper pitches, including the last 1:7 drop to the plains, I passed an abandoned asbestos mine with its own ghost town, complete with orphaned little flags sticking from the holes on a golf course. To move the mined asbestos to the nearest road they built a long cable way spanning the mountains. Rusting towers are standing mute on the ridges, empty buckets still hanging from the wires.
I camped in another pine plantation and in the morning I coasted the last 10 km to the town of Barberton. Leafy clean manicured town of 3000 people, centre of a rich farming district with mixed population. White farmers driving in German cars, all made in South Africa, Mercedes, Opel, Volkswagen, BMW. Blacks walk on foot. The only unfriendly people were the Chinese grocers. For some reason all the Chinese I met in Africa were extremely rude. Fresh from the mainland China, none of them spoke any English, either.
I had a pig-out in the supermarket, stuffing myself with good cooked meals, then an apple pie and a murky coffee in a coffee house owned by an inbred Afrikaner wife. I bought a beanie to keep my head warm at night, and a cheap pair of crocs to replace the shredded footwear that served as my emergency brakes for the past three days. Looking for a bicycle shop I combed the small town, eating again and again, every

time I saw something yummie that I fancied. Finally I stopped an African cyclist wheeling down the road and he pointed me in the right direction – Indian Quarter, as he called it. On the highway out of town, surrounding a mosque with a minaret, three blocks of Indian shops and restaurants. Ingenuous home built rickshaw parked on the roadside was advertised the cycle shop. Young owner in a flowing white robe and broad bin Laden beard presided over mixed business. One corner of his shop sold bicycle parts, opposite wall was all about fishing tackle and in the back was full of school stationery. He offered a good range of cheap parts and he actually knew his stuff. I replaced the demolished brakes, bought more spares, and a great big honking horn. Inner tube on my back wheel was still bulging where I ripped the side wall, and the whole rim was out of round with one broken spoke, but I was light in heart. After murderous Swaziland roads we were ready for anything. Bring it on.

Hazyview is dominated by two gigantic shopping centres. Town is stretching over 10 km of small square one-room cottages, entirely black. Roofing designs defy European sense of architecture. Our roof line defines a look of the building, gables, ridges, dormers. African roof is a lid on a pot, an afterthought, flat and minimal. Very few dogs around, the only ones I actually see are road kill. Every suburb has its "tuck shop", that's what they call a tavern or bar, a square concrete box with a double door, flimsy sign and loud music. Every night youngsters concentrate around tuck shops, drunk. Places to avoid. Drunks are drunks no matter what colour they come in.
I found a functioning Internet café, first since Richards Bay, and I sent a note home.

After Hazyview we entered the safari country. English owes the word "safari" to Swahili, where it denotes a journey. Any kind of a journey. Catching a bus to town to see a cousin is a safari. Astronauts flying to the Moon are also making a safari. In Swahili my entire Kalahari Ride would be described as a safari. I am using it here more in the English meaning of viewing wildlife. Wide strip of land adjacent to Kruger National Park is a wildlife corridor of small private game reserves, one after another, a continuous belt on both sides of the road. Highway running between them is a public road and nobody can stop you from riding on it. Reserves are thoroughly fenced, to keep the animals inside, protected from poachers, so you are safe on the road, even if they had big cats inside. Most of them do not.
Towards the end of the dry season the feed was scarce, game was ranging all over the small reserves in search of pasture. In many places they were coming right up to the road fence to graze, usually towards dusk and the first thing in the morning. Fences run 20 metres from the road edge, and the stock was browsing the fence line, so I got a good look at many big animals from really close, 20 metres away, something you do not get even on paid organised tours inside the reserves. Animals are shy and easily spooked. They are used to cars and completely oblivious to traffic, but man afoot, or on a bicycle, will scare them away immediately. When I saw something grazing near the fence, I would stop at a safe distance so I did not frighten them away, and I waited for the next car to pass along the road. I would approach under the cover of engine noise and stop again, until I was close enough to pick all the details of the game in front of me. Animals ignored me until they caught my scent, at which point they would bolt into the scrub and stop only when they felt safe, hiding in the thicket until I left.
In Zulu country smallest circles on my road map used to denote full sized towns stretching for miles. Now, orphaned in a continuous strip of game reserves, circles referred to lone farm dwellings turned coffee shops, seedy decaying road houses or dying ghost towns like Gravelotte. At one time countryside supported large native farm population. When the farms were turned into game reserves, people were shipped out, country depopulated. Now the former supply centres do not have enough hinterland to survive economically. People were kicked out to make room for wildlife. Grumpy owner of the only shop that remained open in Gravelotte hated his clients. He chained four savage dogs in front of his store, strategically spaced, so no one would loiter on his veranda. Nostalgia of the first white settlers reflects in the place names you read on road signs: London, Wales, Guernsey, Hebron.

Game came in bunches, several mobs close together, then 50 km of nothing. Most common were various kinds of antelopes. I wanted to buy a decent identification guide to antelopes, but in four months in Africa I failed to find one. None of the book stores sold anything worth spending money on. Available books listed only the most common varieties, which I recognised without a guide. Impala with twisted horns, springbok with stripes of three colours, majestic shaggy nyala, I knew them, but when I met at dusk a massive black buck standing proud just the other side of the fence, I had no idea what it was. Size of a horse, white and black strips on its head, big long horns bent back in a gentle long-drawn curve like Japanese katana swords, immobile and majestic in gathering dark.

Warthogs are common everywhere, whole families of them barging through the fences anywhere they please. Several times I stumbled upon lone giraffes, my favourite abominations. When you look at a giraffe from really up close, you understand why they were called "camelopardus" in the middle ages. A camel crossed with leopard. I guess the Creator had a very bad day when he came to craft a giraffe. In the morning he summoned his committee and instructed them to make him a horse. As the English saying has it, his committee designed a camel. With a sigh the Big Man took the camel and looked it over. Then he dropped some acid, waited for the kick and started modifying it. First he stretched the legs until they were as thin as match sticks. Then he sculpted a massive long neck and topped it with a bovine head with narrow muzzle and wide lips. On top he slapped two ET antennas for no reason at all and covered the whole beast in exquisite tiles, large size over the body, smaller across the rump. Add to it long black eye lashes and you've got a giraffe. Next morning, coming down from his acid trip, I can see the Big Man fiddling with the leftover parts and ending up with a platypus.
Giraffes are huge. When you startle a giraffe and she decides to gallop away, it takes a second before she can conquer the inertia of her massive body and actually move the bulk. Every movement of limbs looks like a slow-motion movie, lumbering and syrupy, as if the air was a medium as thick as mud in a nightmare. Yet with their leg span, even in slow-motion they cover a lot of ground. I never tired of watching giraffes trotting in the scrub, bulky body and spindly legs moving out of synch with each other.
Little ground squirrels live on the shoulder of the road, outside the reserves proper. A black stripe on a side, they squatted on their back legs next to their holes like meercats, body upright, watching us curiously, following our progress. When spooked, they dive into their hole in the ground.
A couple of mining geologists stopped and gave me their cut lunch that they couldn't finish. Then a patrol car pulled up and cops offered me a 10 rand donation. People think that I am riding for some charity, raising funds. They are so used to the modern trend of slapping a socially acceptable meaning on every activity, that when I tell them "No, there is no charity, there is no reason for my ride, just one old man on a bike, curious to see how other people live", they do not believe me, they do not understand. They still want to give me money for a good cause.
With solid tall fences running forever on both sides of the road, choice of camping spots was restricted. I slept in the corridor, along the fence, in the open. One night a prowling vigilante farmer woke me up, pointing his gun at me in the headlights of his car. On an anti-poaching patrol, he wasn't happy I was sleeping there. "Too dangerous", he said, but he had to agree that I was on a public road, I was not breaking any laws, and he could do nothing about me,.
Next night I camped again on the road, and this time a police patrol car parked not far from me in the tall grass, using their hiding place to chase speeding drivers. I am sure they knew I was sleeping a few metres away and I wonder if I was not the reason they parked there in the first place.
No amount of fencing would keep one bunch of antelopes in. At the first light of dawn five does and a buck were trying to get back inside the fence, ramming the wires without success again and again. Big animals, two black strips down their arse, twisted tubular horns like from the engravings by Ernest Hackel. They could not find the weak spot in the fence that let them out in the night. Riding along I found the weak spot no worries, a mile away. Some idiot left the main gate open and the game walked out the gate.

At Mica Road House the main river of trucks that we've been battling since the coast turned right, to Phalaborwa mine. A big hole in the ground, a large export contract with China, rare metals, 27 years paid up front. Several transport companies truck the concentrate to Richards Bay, each running 500 to 700 trucks, driving round the clock, every day.
At Latebe we exit the belt of game reserves and enter the farming country. Orange and mango groves, smell of orange blossoms at dawn wafting like magic. Large shade houses to protect vegetable crops. Farmers are selling cheap produce from the road side, avocados, cabbage, onions, tomatoes, all sorts of fruit. Could not find a cup of coffee the whole morning, anywhere, so I begged a cook at a roadhouse to boil me my mug of hot water in a microwave and I made a cup of coffee myself, from the packet I carry with me.
Tzaneen sits in a pretty valley between green hills, slopes covered in banana plantations. After the town you ride past several large dams. I had a good scrub under the bridge, washed the only T-shirt and put it on wet. In the next dam I spotted a mob of hippos. A family of six was lazily sleeping in the water. From a distance they did not look all that big, I have seen pigs bigger than that. Hippos looked totally unconcerned. For some reason hippo's are not eaten, and they are so common that they are not protected. Hippos are vegetarians, but they guard their territory fiercely and of all the wildlife they are the worst killers of humans in Africa.

Moreberg looked on my map like sitting on the other side of a mountain range, 15 km away. So I thought, 7 or 8 km up, then the same downhill. With failing light I started climbing. Gentle grade, some of it I could ride, some of it I had to push. After 8 km there was no sign of the pass. 10 km. It got dark. Still climbing, unrelenting gentle slope. On the 15th kilometre I saw the lights of Morenberg in the distance, above me. There was no pass and no descend on the other side. We climbed the main escarpment from the lowlands onto the highveld, and ahead stretched the plains of Africa.
Louis Trichard is a large town in Limpopo province. Looking for a supermarket I passed a bicycle shop in the outer suburbs. A young racing type clad in Lycra even while manning his shop, he came out to check my machine and shook his head in disbelief when he saw it. When I told him how far I came and where I was heading, he dug up from a drawer a set of good brake pads, a ceramic ones, not rubber. In the store room at the back he found two tubeless tyres that they used once in a road race and did not like. He refused to charge me anything. A gift. Chinese grade, but I was grateful for it. Thanks, mate.
Strapped on top of the milk crate the two spare tyres travelled with me to Victoria Falls while I pondered how to use them most efficiently. I did not want to discard my Schwalbe tyre. Even with a ripped side wall it was superior to anything I could buy in the land, puncture-proof and hard wearing. At the Falls I finally cut up one spare tyre, stripped its knobs, and turned it into a 12-inch long sleeve which I inserted inside the damaged Schwalbe, to stop the bulging where the tyre was slashed. The solution was so strong that it lasted all the way home, even after the wheel itself collapsed twice with broken spokes. And I still did not get a single puncture.
The first 25 km after Louis Trichard crosses spectacular range of Soutpanberge. The northern slope are great valleys, deep gorges, switchback bitumen that ends with two impressive tunnels. A lot of scrub, no habitation, game reserves that raise antelopes for meat and sell freshly baked game pies from the road side stalls. Saw a bunch of ostriches on one farm and nearly fell off the bike when I realised how big they really are. Juveniles especially, clad in mottled brown feathers, stood 9-feet tall, with plenty of meat on them. At a road house a troop of big healthy baboons were pestering locked garbage bins. Walking on all fours, big males look like small lions, or really big dogs. Hippos, baboons, antelopes, guinea fowls and all sorts of spectacular birds are a common sight in rural Africa. Just plain riding along the main highway is a game safari, one-wheel drive adventure tour. Moving slowly you have time to notice them all, while zooming along in a car you can never pay attention. After this trip, when I rode back home on a bus, I crossed the same kind of country, but I did not see any game at all.
North of the Soutpanberge ridge started plains of sensational baobabs, their bark like sagging sheets of melting wax. Elephants of vegetable kingdom, baobabs are my favourite trees, and where they abound, I'll go out of my way to camp, rest and cook in their shade. Iconic monuments of African savannah, they are not distributed evenly. Some places they grow as thick as mushrooms after rain, then for 200 or 300 km you won't see a single one. They can't take frost, so highlands are out, and they don't like wet feet, avoiding swampy ground. They are lucky that their timber is mushy and good for nothing, not even for firewood, so people do not cut them down. All the large trees had a number assigned to them, on a tiny little steel plate nailed to the boles. Someone must be keeping track of them. Somewhere around here, in Limpopo province, there have the two largest baobabs in the world. Glencoe baobab has diameter of 16 metres. Naturally nobody could tell me where to look for it.
Traffic on the highway to the border grew interesting. Zimbabwean workers driving home, towing enormous loads of every possible junk. Their overloaded unmaintained old cars are breaking down all over the place, discarded batteries, tyres, mufflers and trailers dot the road sides. Crappy rusty Mercedes with roofrack packed so high that its wheels are splayed outwards, trailers with axles bending, very much like Turks driving home through Bulgaria in the 70ies. Salvage boys busy with hacksaws, stripping steel from a freshly burnt out intercity bus.
Musina was a bustling border town where you could buy anything, and then some. Chinese had a direct import supermarket in a massive warehouse, to deal with the cross border trade. With economy in tatters, most able bodied Zimbabweans look for work across the border. They do bring home part of their savings in cash, but with shops empty, there is little to spend money on back in their own place, so they buy what they need in their place of work and drag it all home. Great stimulus for South African manufacturing sector.

Chapter 3: To the Falls

Zimbabwe was not in our original plans. Back in Darwin, preparing this ride, all I found on Zimbabwe was doom and gloom and murder and mayhem. Zimbabwe was listed as one of the three failed states, a step

ahead of Somalia and Sudan. Third from the bottom in the whole world, a country that did not function as a modern country. Collapsed economy, national currency scrapped, succession power struggle, government corruption, human rights abuse, internal displacement, cholera and plague epidemic, rampant AIDS. White Zimbabwean expatriates I met were invariably bitter old men who lived in their long lost past and they could not help me form any coherent picture of the present. Two of my world's "must see" places are in Zimbabwe, Victoria Falls and the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, but the meagre information that I gathered was too discouraging. Reluctantly I drew a tentative route around it, riding through Botswana. Once I actually got to Africa, picture changed completely. In Pemba, Mozambique, I met two young Aussie backpackers who have just spent a fortnight in Zimbabwe. Their verdict was an enthusiastic "no worries". In Richards Bay I talked to some black guys from Zimbabwe. They were selling door to door, trinkets, sunglasses, art. Poor as church mice, yet they did not project doom and gloom image, and they told me, borders are wide open, tourists encouraged, visa granted on arrival.

I rolled in, to the only border crossing between South Africa and Zimbabwe, the long bridge across Limpopo River in Beitbridge. Stamped out of South Africa, I pedalled across the murky river with name so exotic that I still remember Russian nursery rhymes about it, Limpopo. Happy pandemonium reigned on the other side. For a failed state, economy in tatters, no currency of their own, that was a surprise, for the Babylon wasn't on the exit side, people leaving the country. The carnival chaos prevailed on the other end, where, people returning to Zimbabwe. Queue at the immigration building was 300 or 400 people long, split into groups of 70 or 80, snaking along the pavement in the midday sun. Mostly young people, bricklayers, labourers, farm hands, and their women, all in brightly coloured dresses and just as colourful scarves. Riot of colours, bustle of laughing, seemingly disorganised multitude, but it had its system. A mob of buses parked any which way in the dust, string of trucks half a mile long, dozens of trailers loaded sky high with household items. I wasn't the only cyclist, either. Enterprising small scale operators were wheeling their single speed black machines across the bridge, loaded beyond capacity with whatever their particular merchandise was at the moment. There is a substantial town on either side of the bridge, and difference in price between two sides made their livelihood.
I have heard horror stories about this particular crossing, bewildered white drivers spending 6 or 8 hours queuing to get all the papers stamped and all the dues paid, some driving a long way round to enter Zimbabwe through Botswana, just to avoid Beitbridge. Without a car I only had a long line at Immigration. I attached myself quietly to the tail of the front group and waited. I did not intend to jump a queue, but in my ignorance of the system I did just that. Nobody said anything. People were very patient, placid and obeying. Two or three cops in uniforms kept the crowd in order, short wooden sticks swinging from the belt. No guns, no swagger, no bullying. The most unruly mob was a troop of big monkeys, a bunch of battle hardened baboons. One big brazen male in particular was awesome. Even leaning on his knuckles his head reached to my waist. Confidently parading between the queues, looking for something to steal, he kept just outside of reach of cops' batons. When he espied poorly concealed fruit in somebody's luggage, he strolled nonchalantly by, looking on purpose somewhere else, then darted his long hairy arm, grabbed the fruit and fled. Once he even ventured inside the immigration building, and when two cops tried to bar him, he darted between their legs and out. He never retreated far, only out of the harm's way, calmly munching on the captured fruit.
We were herded into Immigration in groups, then spread to several windows. Africans did not need any visa, only a stamp, so the queue was moving fast. I was issued a 30-day visa on the spot, against payment of US$ 30. Simple. I could chose to pay in dollars or rand, cash only. I passed the guy a $100 bill with a crease in it which made it impossible to change with Indian money dealers who only accept unblemished notes. Officer cleaned his glasses, retrieved a bunch of large keys from his drawer and left in a search of change.
Zimbabwe does not have its own money any more. US$ is the official currency for all government departments. South African rand is also accepted everywhere, bills and coins. I heard a rumour that English pound, Aussie dollar and even Indian Rupee can be used, but the money dealers I met laughed at me. US$ and rand, in some border areas Botswana pula, nothing else was accepted.

The latest slide in Zimbabwe sad history started in 2000 when Robert Mugabe, former teacher, freedom fighter and seven times democratically elected president, figured a brilliant way to prop up his flagging popularity. He kicked out all the remaining white farmers, blaming them for the economic ills. They were driven from their land with no compensation. Some didn't go peacefully and violence flared up. Farms were meant to be distributed amongst the landless peasants, but most went to presidential cronies. Whites used

to run all the large cash crop farms. With big growers thrown out, harvest failed. Mugabe had to import basic foodstuffs for the first time. After two years watching, Americans got tired of his thieving. Congress froze all Zimbabwean overseas bank accounts and banks would not lend them any more money. Mugabe and his big spending wife were put on a banned list, bared from travelling to western countries. Gucci shares plummeted as a result.
With international credit denied, government was left dealing in cash. Zimbabwe is rich, there was a lot of cash coming into treasury, from mineral exports and from tourism, but the hard currency all disappeared into pockets of Mugabe and his mates. To make up for the shortfall, Central Bank printed more Zimbabwe dollars, starting inflation. By 2005 purchasing power of an average citizen fell to the level of 1953 in real terms. Public servants were not being paid, and when the wages finally came through, money was not worth anything. Facing famine, one quarter of entire population crossed the borders looking for work in the neighbouring countries. Three million of them are working in South Africa and Botswana alone. I kept meeting them everywhere, carpenters, labourers, truck drivers, cabbies, itinerant peddlers.
With no government budget, health care collapsed next. Hospitals had no money to buy imported medicine. One in five Zimbabweans is HIV positive, with no one looking after them. In 2008 a major cholera epidemic broke out. With no medicine to contain it, disease spread into all the provinces. Estimated 90 000 came down with it, 4 000 people died, mainly in big towns. All that Harare Council could offer was free graves for the dead.
People survived in any way they could. 60% of wildlife was wiped out by poaching. People have to eat. Health scare, unreliable services and hate propaganda in western media discouraged tourism. Visitors' numbers dropped by 80%. Resorts and hotels had to close down, unable to pay their staff. With no visitors, all the major airlines suspended their flights to Harare.
Mugabe printed more money, inflation galloping away. Shortly before it all came tumbling down in April 2009, inflation hit 11 000 000%, second highest rate ever recorded in history, lagging only behind Weimar Republic between the two world wars. That one brought Hitler to power in Germany. With this level of inflation usual practice is to rubber stamp the old money over with new value, as Boris Yeltzyn did with Russian rouble, but no, Mugabe kept printing beautiful new bills with astronomical numbers on them. Today they are barely worth the paper they are printed on. I bought from touts a pristine 20 billion dollar note. After some haggling I paid one US$ for it.
For the past five years people use South African rand and US dollar in daily life. Dollar bills, rand coins and bills. There is no problem paying with old and worn notes, some one dollar notes are completely effaced from passing through countless hands. And a rarity – a two dollar bill is in common use, while in America it was fazed out in the 1970ies. For shop transactions rate is pegged to US$1 = 10 rand. A good meat pie in a servo costs a dollar and five rand, and people are very fast in mental arithmetic.
The actual exchange rate fluctuates, in my day US$1 = 11.50 rand, not 10. This difference is enough to make living from, and every road house and highway junction supports a money changer. A young man with head for numbers and a pouch with 2-inch thick wad of bills. They are a good place to break up large denomination notes. I observed several of them operating, and all of them were loners. Slightly built well educated fellows speaking good English, besides all the local languages. They lugged around small fortune in cash, in plain view, but they did not employ any body guards or minders. They felt safe enough in a crowd, and a road house crowd can get rowdy, with all the drinking hovels and bars lined up along the road. I asked people about it and they confirmed – there is very little crime in Zimbabwe. For all the poverty and hardship, people retained the basic human dignity. T. The only violence are alcohol fuelled domestic fights and politically motivated outbursts. Violent robbery on the street is unheard of. State may have failed, but fabric of society did not tear, it keeps functioning as before.

Crossing the border, transition from affluent South Africa was abrupt, differences glaring. A lot of cargo carrying bicycles, stacked up with fantastic loads. Donkey carts constructed on a single car axle with car springs and two car seats up front. Not a single part bought in a store, all scavenged and hand made. Four donkeys harnessed abreast, all the yokes and leads manufactured from rubber strips, cut out from old car tyres. Donkeys were carting water from communal wells, firewood from the forest, shopping from town.
The main arterial highways were built as a good bitumen, but after three decades of heavy use and minimum of maintenance it is a mosaic of patches, and no shoulder to ride on. Road edge is abrupt, a sharp step down from the road surface. Highways are narrow, every time I give way to a truck I have to slow down to a crawl and bump down four or six inches deep step. Then find a place where I can climb back on without stopping. My back wheel does not like the bumping at all, number eight shape is becoming pronounced.

Traffic is unrelenting. Buses and trucks, many of them a left hand drive. We were riding along one of the main arterial roads of Africa, stringing south of the continent together, Jo'burg to Harare drag. Convoys of semitrailers heading for Zambia and Congo came in clusters. Zambia survives by exporting copper. A landlocked country, all the exports go out by road, since the Angolan railway is closed by political squabbles. Zambia alone sends out about 300 000 tons of pure copper every year. With 40 tons on a truck, do your maths. Two dozen trucks every day of the year. Congo contributes at about same rate. With ebola outbreak in Western Africa, Botswana closed its borders to Congo. All the copper of Shaba province exits via this road, heading for Richards Bay. And then they all drive back, full of consumer goods. When you think of it, every copper truck is carting a fortune. At $5 a kg, the going world price for copper, 40 tons in the load is a bit short of quarter million dollars. Every truck, every day, yet there are no hold ups. Copper is exported in half a ton sheets, or as 10-ton cast blocks, not something you can easily palm off to a pawn broker.

Deep at night, when trucks stop for a break, interstate buses continue. Direct run Jo'burg to Harare and further north to Zambia, a full bus every 15 or 20 minutes, both ways. Large modern air-conditioned coaches carting workers to and from South Africa. They stop for no one along the way. Going north their trailers are overflowing, loaded with mountains of mattresses, spare tyres, plastic chairs, suitcases, sacks, bicycles, buckets, jerry cans, poorly stacked loads sliding sideways, threatening to tip over. At this volume of traffic, attrition is proportional. Many cannibalised trailers are rusting abandoned in the grass. In three days on this road I counted 3 buses broken down, being operated upon, 4 broken down and abandoned, 4 burnt out shells, one of them after a grisly looking accident. And that's only the most recent toll. In Zimbabwe crashed vehicles do not remain long at the roadside, they are quickly scavenged for scrap metal. Guys strip the usable parts, cut up the bodies with hacksaws, and carry it all away on donkey carts.

On the 300 kms from the border to Masvingo I passed no settlements on the bitumen, not even a tiny hamlet, only unmarked turns into dry scrub, sandy lanes leading to rural villages 10 or 20 km from the highway, accessible by donkeys carts. Every 100 km a great road house, though, none of them marked on my map. I love African road houses. Do not imagine a western style road house with smooth bitumen parking space, spacious shaded petrol bowsers, branded restaurants and convenience stores. Nothing like that. African road house was seldom planned and never put up as one business. Their segments sprang up organically to fill a need, from whatever was on hand. At Bubi River it was a couple of fuel bowsers rising out of dusty ground, cluster of makeshift huts selling grilled meat and beer, a free water tap, lean-to shanties of bush mechanics, tyre repairmen, crude eateries with crooked logs lying on the ground as seats, a large sheltered fire place burning round the clock, where truckies cooked their own meals. There was enough room in the embers for me to boil my pot of coffee. Grey bulldust ankles deep, blazing sun, goats reclining in the meagre shadow of a scrawny acacia tree, two dozen long distance trucks parked along the perimeter, a semi-permanent population of touts, money changers, trinket sellers, general hustlers and girls cooking during the day, entertaining at night. A lively and friendly atmosphere with no aggro, no tension, no hassles..

Places that were marked on my map turned out to be duds. Mwanenzi looked like a town on a map but it was a police check post and nothing else. Few miles further stood Le Grand Baobab, the biggest gnarlest mother of all trees that you can imagine. About 6 metres in diameter, hollow, buttressed like a Hindu temple designed by Geiger. Photo would do it no justice, nor did my drawing, no matter how much I tried to capture the convoluted details on paper. A designated rest place, it was used as a toilet and nappies changing stop, so the mystique came across diluted.

Bush is alive, in a secret way. As soon as I stop in the middle of nowhere and lean my bike on a tree to have a break, curious people appear from the scrub. Where do they all pop up from is a mystery, for I can see neither a village nor solitary houses. People are very polite. They all want to know what charity I am riding for, and when I owe up that there is no cause for my trip, they were confused.

Some encounters are bizarre. A young white woman pulled up in her 4WD, wound her window down and asked me: "You are Tim?" No, I am no Tim. Who is Tim? Tim was on a TV a couple of days ago, a young South African who is riding a bicycle 10 000 km to raise money for protection of rhinos against poachers, 10 km for every rhino slaughtered last year. He started in East London, and he is rumoured to be somewhere around here by now. Woman finally introduced herself as Linda from Harare. She said that she herself just completed a circumnavigation of Zimbabwe on a mountain bike, first woman to achieve the feat. After boasting about that she stepped on a gas pedal and roared off.

Man sitting in a gutter next to the road, waving a little flag on a long sapling. Next to him hidden in the tall grass was his bicycle and several large diesel jerry cans, empty. Waiting for his connections amongst truckies, who are ready to sell a bit of company diesel for cash. With unemployment officially at 80%,

people will do anything to survive.
Another road house at Runde River, more bull dust, more hustlers, more demi-monde in the heat, more unforgettable atmosphere of the African highway. I am glad I do not have a camera. I would have tried to capture the feeling of a road house on a photo, and it would have failed. You can't photograph an experience. Instead I sit under acacia, scanning the scene, burning in my memory all the little details which make it a whole. That works better. As I write it down now, I am back there, at the road house.
On the other side of the river rise picturesque granite hills surrounded by neat round huts with thatched conical roofs. Every hill is one single boulder, a monolith, a rounded hillock washed smooth and streaked by elements. Deep at night, as the traffic thinned down, I rode in a full moon through pretty hilly country of little hamlets and lonely homesteads. None of them had electricity or running water. Police check posts every 50 km. Cops haven't been paid their salaries for the past 8 months, and they survive by charging bogus fines to all passing drivers. A bit like a medieval bridge toll. Modern trolls have to collect enough not only to feed themselves, but also to support their superiors, who will not dirty their hands with such an obvious rip off.
On the side of the road local pottery on display, also serpentinite carvings. No different from Swaziland. Milestones marking the distance are rare. I found where they all disappeared – people dig them up and cement them into the footings of their houses.

After three days of nothing I rolled into Masvingo, first town since the border. South African "Spar" supermarket was reasonably complete, first shop where I could chose what I bought. For the past three days I bought what there was, mostly meat pies. Functioning Internet café, a helpful tourist bureau. I dropped in to ask about the nearby ruins. Advise I received was pragmatic: "If you are going to the ruins of Great Zimbabwe down the road, bring all your food with you. They is nothing there, only a water tap". Farmers were selling good cheap vegies on the pavement in front of the supermarket. I stocked up and towards dusk left for the ruins, or "monument", as locals prefer to call it. The Great Zimbabwe, one of the 54 places I wanted to see when I was 16.
Shortly after World War II a couple of young Czech engineers, Hanzelka and Zigmund, begged a new sedan from the Tatra automotive maker, and drove it across Africa, from Morocco to Egypt and down to Cape Town, where they loaded the vehicle on a ship and continued in South America. In the late 1940ies it was still an accomplishment. Their three-volume book, "Africa of Dreams and Realities" was richly illustrated with brown sepia photographs they took along the way. We had a signed set at home, and it formed my first impressions about the dark continent. Ever since I first saw their pictures of Great Zimbabwe, I dreamed of visiting the place. I am not sure why Zimbabwe in particular captured my imagination. My dream of seeing pyramids and Victoria Falls also arose from that book, and over the years I met several Czech travellers whose wanderlust was also sparked by the "Africa of Dreams and Realities".
Word "zimbabwe" is translated as "a large stone house", and the ruins I was approaching are called the Great Zimbabwe, to distinguish them from about 200 other Zimbabwes, smaller ruined towns of the same style and origin, which are scattered over a large area, from Kalahari desert to Indian Ocean. Mutoko, Chiwana, Maduchu, Chibuumani, Nalatale, Dholo Dhob, Khami, Mtoa, they all bear witness to a medieval empire that was centred around the Great Zimbabwe. Ancestors of modern Shona people built their capital in 11th century, a thousand years ago, enlarging it as they went, housing at its peak about 18 000 people in the town itself, together with their cattle. Smelting and working local iron, copper and gold, trading in ivory and gold as far afield as Kilwa on the Swahili coast, excavations unearthed Chinese pottery, glass beads from Arabia and coins from all around the Indian Ocean. The Great Zimbabwe was abandoned in 15th century, as the focus of empire shifted north, and the trading routes became dominated by Arabs and Portuguese. Up north the descendants of the great builders founded Monomotapa Empire and continued building dry stone walls.
Designated a National Monument, fenced in and accessed only upon payment of a hefty entrance fee, Great Zimbabwe does not disappoint. The ruins feel more like a park, spread over hundreds of acres of rolling hills of the highveld with lots of shady trees. The often photographed Great Enclosure is only one of ,many stone structures interlaced with granite monoliths rising between the hills. Place is open from sunrise till sunset, and for the first three hours in the morning I had it for myself, before a bus load of noisy Czech tourists rolled in. Stone walls blend into the underlying boulders, narrow walkways follow the serpentine meanders of original landscape, it would take days to walk all the former streets.
The Hill Complex, the earliest structure, is a mountain citadel built to withstand an indefinite siege. It served as a fortified settlement since 9th century. With its own water spring and steep convoluted access path, it is easily comparable to a traditional European castle and it could be defended by a handful of men.

All the masonry is laid without mortar, neat walls holding together by gravity alone. A number of separate enclosures are encompassing and incorporating boulders of various size. Not one bit of a wall is straight, everything curves in all sorts of directions. Main walls are 16 feet wide at a base, tapering to 5 feet at the top. A fantastic amount of labour invested in building a labyrinth of narrow walled passages, galleries, yards, balconies and defence surprises. Original builders were fit, slim and used no beast of burden to lug their gear to the top of the Hill Complex. In some of the passages you have to turn sideways to squeeze through. Masons did not know about arch, all the entry openings are supported by massive stone lintels. Today it's a photographers' paradise, if you like details.
A scruffy bearded face is looking down at me from the top of a boulder. First I thought it was a big cat, but cats do not move their facial muscles. A curious monkey, then.
From the Hill Complex you have an aerial view of the whole plane. The Great Enclosure below looks like what it is, a complete enigma still not explained in spite of many attempts. Its awkward name, Great Enclosure, tell the story. It looks like a big enclosure and that's all that we know about it. What it was built to enclose is not clear. It makes no sense where it is. 250 metres of continuous curved walls, some up to 11 metres high, are enclosing elliptical ground, a biggest indigenous structure south of Sahara. Divided by more curved walls into smaller spaces and passages, it would have been useless in defence, for it has no water. It includes several completely baffling buildings, or maybe I should say sculptures. The main conical tower is a solid mass of masonry 10 metres tall and 6 metres across the base, with no cavity inside it, no entrance, no rooms, no steps to climb it outside, nothing sticking from its rounded top, no adornment to suggest its purpose. Surrounding it are bases for several similar towers, purpose unknown. And all around are remains of numerous supporting buildings, enclosures, towers, acres and acres of it. It is a self contained medieval stone city, full of narrow passages, cattle yards, round buttresses, paved foot paths, walls with little grooves that suggest original timber rafters supporting roof.
The first whites who tried to guess origin and age of the ruins came up with King Solomon and Queen of Sheba, believing this was the Biblical Ophir. Zimbabwe certainly exported tons of gold during its existence, so that part would fit, but unfortunately it happened two and half millennia after Queen of Sheba died. That does not stop her name being applied today to everything connected with the ruins.

One end of the park is housing a life sized model of Shona village, a cross between the original huts of ancient Zimbabweans and contemporary rural dwellings. I am a builder myself, I am always curious how people put their dwellings together. Traditional round huts that you find all over Africa are all built to the same pattern. Diameter is determined entirely by the budget. 12′ to 15′, but I've seen tiny grandmother's holes, barely 7 feet across the floor, but also huge communal huts 20′ wide. Modern brick ones can be even bigger. Traditional walls are a circular row of 2-inch thick saplings stuck firmly into the ground. A collar of strong vines holds them in shape, another collar runs inside the walls and is knotted through to the outer ring. Walls are covered with thin layer of mud, inside and out, in today's villages painted with lime and ochre in various designs. Rafters meet in the centre of the conical roof, and another collar holds them tight. In really big roundels a king post supports the roof. Thatching is common roadside grass. Old roundels had only one hole in the wall, a doorway with 8-inch high threshold. Air and light came in by a few narrow short slits below the roof and through the eves, the gap between the wall and the roof which is left open. Today brick buildings sport as many windows as the owner can afford. Floor used to be tamped earth, raised about 8 inches above the outside level so the hut didn't get flooded during the rainy season. Maize and grain is stored at the edge of the compound near the fence, on a raised platform. Six or eight sturdy poles support a raised floor, about 6 feet off the ground, two feet layer of corn on top, cattle corralled underneath for the night.

With dwindling supply of termite resistant wood contemporary builders returned to solid masonry. In affluent times they build in concrete block, in dire straits in home-made baked bricks. Kiln baked bricks cost absolutely nothing to produce, so many primitive brickworks line the road. Any clay bank of the river is worked, sometimes when clay is available on the building site, bricks are made and fired a few metres from the future dwelling. As a young hippie I worked for a time in a two-men brick factory in Bulgaria, and the system used in Zimbabwe is not much different, only simpler.
Clay is dug out with mattocks, mixed with a bit of water from the river soak, and pushed into wooden moulds to form bricks. Stiff blocks of clay are left in the sun to dry, then stacked in an intricate pattern, seven layers of bricks on top of each other, to form a mound about as high as a man, eight feet square. In Balkans all the gaps were filled with charcoal and the mound covered in 2" layer of mud to keep the oxygen out. In here they have no charcoal, so the kiln is fired from three places underneath, burning thick

branches of trees. Last few mature trees lining the road are mercilessly mutilated to feed the brick works. Desperate vandalism that is matched only by the damage that herds of elephants inflict on the forest.
At night you can't just walk into the bush and crash out under a tree. Any tree surviving is protected by massive thorns, the only reason it hasn't been grazed to the ground by goats. Breaking twigs for fire, to boil a pot of coffee in the morning, you end up scratched like by a vicious cat. Places where cattle or goats shelter under a tree in the midday heat are good camping spots – thorns have been stamped into the ground, anything palatable eaten clean. Just watch out for ticks. Finding a clean patch of ground, reasonably secluded and free of thorns, so you can drop your pants and do the business, can take a while. In dry acacia scrub a roll of toilet paper assumes a high level of importance.
Best camping places are the designated rest areas, spaced every 20 or 30 km along the highway. Built under large shady trees, set off the road, originally sporting a concrete table and two seats. Places differ only in degree to which they have been smashed up. Every one of them. Seat covers were removed, to be used elsewhere as god knows what, tables broken up or uprooted in anger. Concrete furniture was built to last, and it takes a lot of anger and muscle to smash the robust masonery all to pieces. In Zimbabwe they were all destroyed, right across the country.
All highways are toll, no matter how potholed or dilapidated. Goods and people move along the north to south axis, so the east to west highways are deserted except for a few local buses. From Masvingo to Bulawayo, heading west, it was a great relieve, riding on empty roads.
Wheelbarrow is the main cargo mover in the countryside. If you can't afford a donkey team, you haul your stuff on a wheelbarrow. Water cans from the well, ground corn from the mill, firewood from the forest. One of the three most prominent items you see strapped on every trailer towed home from South Africa, along with a mountain bike hanging at the back and a queen sized mattress tied down on the top. Mattress is stuffed full of contraband cash, I've been told.

Passing several mines, gold and asbestos. Landscape is dominated by a flat top white mountain of tailings. Some of the largest deposits of platinum in the world are worked nearby, and a massive field of gem-grade diamonds was discovered recently. Regardless of failed economy and threats of nationalisation, large multinationals are eager to dig out of the ground anything there is. Hunger for natural resources overcomes political squeamishness. Mugabe will have plenty of money coming into the treasury.
In the afternoon I crossed the administrative divide between Shona country and Ndebele province. Change is noticeable. Shona, the majority tribe, descendants of the stone masons who built zimbabwes, form 85% of country's population. They are friendly, open, happy, hard working people, proud of their past, not grumbling about present. Ndebele, new boys on the block, were sullen, brooding and hard to warm up to. I was passing depressed road houses, entire male population drunk and quarrelling, shops bare, fridges empty, smouldering anger and aggression in everybody's eyes. At first I did not want to generalise, but after I passed three such gloomy villages in a row, I had to accept: Ndebele are very different.
Around 1821 in South Africa, Zulu general Mzilikazi rebelled against King Shaka, and created his own clan, Ndebele. Organised like a military order they split from the main Zulu force and fought their way north into the Transvaal, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. I remember as a boy reading grisly pulp fiction called "Captives of Matabele". Dutch settlers drove the tribe further northward. They overrun the Rozwi Empire, one of the heirs of the Great Zimbabwe, along with the other petty Shona states and established themselves as minority rulers. After ups and downs of colonial period, they ended as a small minority in Zimbabwe, accounting for about 12% of population. Unruly, unwilling to put up with Shona as their new masters, they rose in rebellion several times, severely crushed again and again. In the 1980ies Mugabe killed over 20 000 most vocal opponents amongst Ndebele, which did not endear his regime to the rebellious tribe.
Bulawayo is the capital of Ndebele. With half a million people it's the second largest city in the land. As big cities go, it was quite pretty. Town centre was laid out like a European metropolis. Wide boulevards, split in the middle by a brown strip, presumably intended for plants, remains of tree sheltered alleys, wide side walks, lots of space. Very few cars drive around, so pedestrians slowly wander down the centre of the road, while dozens of street hawkers sell their wares from the pavement. Huge market, enormous square covered in vendors of second hand clothing. None of the South African supermarket chains but many locally owned ones, surprisingly good choice of merchandise. I had to calculate well. From Bulawayo we were facing 435 km stretch of nothing until Victoria Falls. Rumour said there is water along the highway, but not much in the way of food. Which in Zimbabwe means nothing at all.

As the weather grew hot during the day, we turned nocturnal, riding in the coolness of the night. Waiting for the moon to rise, sitting on a boulder at a small cross road, I watched goings on that stirred as soon as the sun dipped below horizon. Black economy that springs up everywhere when the open market does not pay. A five ton truck loaded with cabbages arrived along a dirt track from some farm, parked next to me and switched off its head lights, waiting. Half an hour later a bakery delivery truck rolled down the main highway from town and parked hard next to the cabbage truck. Baker was only half loaded and he was delivering bread to all the road houses and remote settlements strung along the length of the highway. Half a dozen blokes started shifting cabbage, packed in huge sacks, from the farm truck to the bakery van. At a fast clip guys stowed away two tons of contraband cabbage behind the bread crates. Perfect way to distribute the produce over the next 400 km, secure in knowledge that money will come back to the growers, instead of somebody else in an office who would pocket it for his own use. In the next few days I met the same bread truck on the road, and sure enough, road side vendors were offering nice ripe cabbages, dirt cheap.
Traditionally in southern Africa wealth is judged by number of cattle you own. No matter how dry the land is, how little grazing remains, cattle is everywhere, even in the suburbs. The sound of Zimbabwe is melancholy hollow "clang-clang-clang" of tin cow bells, as the string of bony cattle slowly returns home to be corralled for the night. At dawn they cross the highway on their way out again. Every night, everywhere, imprinting in my memory as a dominant sound of savanna. Not a happy high pitch tingling of cast bells, but low, dull, brooding "clang-clang-clang" of cheap sheet metal. I can hear it now, as I am writing about it.
Highway is a strip of tired much patched up tar, criss-crossed with deep bone-jarring, axle-bending cracks like an earthquake spider web. It runs east – west, so traffic is light.
We settled into a rhythm. At daybreak we start with a 20 km ride, then a stop to light a fire, eat a bowl of instant sorghum porridge, cold, with a dollop of honey and sliced banana, followed by a big mug of brewed coffee. Next 30 km we are flying, mind roaming loose, soaring on caffeine. This ride across southern Africa I dreamed up five years ago, while I was finishing my first transcontinental ride, across Tanami desert in Australia. After two years of research, preparations, put downs, hesitation and uncertainties I pushed off into Tanami, and it turned out to be a breeze, a trip of a life time, which I continued across the Red Centre, following the desert tracks all the way to Southern Ocean. Towards the end I mulled where to go next. That's when I dreamed up this burn across Kalahari. And the same happened again. After five years of people convincing me how unrealistic my plans were, how dangerous and foolish to attempt something like this at my age, it turned out to be a breeze again, another trip of a life time. Now that I was happily covering hundreds of miles of the magic continent, temptation rose to carry on north, cross Zambezi River and just keep rolling into the depth of Africa. Every single day we saw something new, something unexpected, surprising, astonishing, something that made me stop and scratch my head. Intoxicated by the continent I wanted to continue for ever.
I curbed my flight of fancy. In its present condition my machine would not make it. And I didn't take with me enough money. Also, riding north I would miss on Kalahari itself, and Namibia. And my main goal was sailing my boat to South America, this ride was only a side trip, really. Fair enough. But I promised myself I will come back to African dry savannah again. And I started dreaming up other destinations, other stunts, other trips across dry country.

Entering Mbembezi Forest, next to the enormous Hwange National Park, we met our mystery bird for the first time. Trees became healthier, acacia shading the road, in places forming a great canopy joined in a tunnel overhead, all the shades of green and ochre. I never expected so many big trees so close to Kalahari desert. For the first time in Africa flies became abominable, as bad as in Australian outback. Suddenly I saw that monstrous black bird standing on the ground, a stone's throw from the road. Charcoal black raven size of a big turkey, its head a full metre off the ground. Standing on short powerful legs, a massive black beak curving slightly downwards, a mean eye, and huge blood red wattles drooping behind the ears and around the eyes, each patch maybe 8 inches long. It hopped along the ground, each hop was a step a metre long. Mesmerised I stopped, watching it. I had no idea birds could grow to this size. In the next month I met them several times. In Botswana, on the edge of a swamp, it was standing next to a marabou stork, and it was no dwarf when you compared them. Marabou is as tall as a man. Once I saw a flock of them, four or five, flying. Wingspan of seven feet, they glided with no effort. Underside of wings, the tips of pinions, the primary flight feathers, were bright white. I have never heard of it and nobody could enlighten me, either. I described it to several people, but all I got for answer were blank looks. Surely it can't be that rare, I've seen them a number of times.

Finally in Maun, in a curio shop, I found a little trinket made of glazed clay, a brooch that you pin on a blouse. It was the shape of my mystery bird. Price tag called it "ground hornbill". Now that I had a handle, I looked them up. Southern ground hornbill grows to 4 feet long and 7 kg of weight. They feed on lizards, snails, frogs and anything up to size of a hare. They are very long lived species, one bird lived in captivity till 70 years of age. African village folklore makes them 300 years old. They mature slowly. At six years old they are physically able to breed, but they do not know how. Young birds then spend several years helping an older couple in rearing their sole chick, learning how to go about it. Only then they are ready to breed themselves. Their range is limited to healthy savannah with old trees where they can find hollows big enough to make a nest in.
Every time I met them, I stopped to marvel. For me it became the symbol of this ride, a discovery of a magnificent creature whose existence I have never suspected. And to think that most people have never heard of these magnificent birds either and never will.
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Hwange National Park itself is huge and with its buffer zone of protected forests is one of the largest continuous habitats in Africa. It is the only big park in Africa without a permanent river. The first warden, Ted Davison decided to provide year round supply of water for his beloved elephants, and over the years he developed about 50 waterholes, supplied by diesel pumps and windmills from deep bores, for 6 months of the dry season. Today this system supports enormous number of elephants, anything between 35 000 and 70 000, and during the rainy seasons they leave the artificial water supply and range wide, crossing the borders into Botswana and Namibia. My "elephant highway" that I followed from Kasane to Nata in Botswana, runs along the back boundary of this Hwange National Park.
Riding in the heat of the day, down to my last litre of water, I stopped for a break at a rest place. A diesel duffer sitting in the shade of acacia told me there is a better place to stop, a running river 2 km further. As I mounted my bike he asked for something to remember me by. A smart way to phrase it, but I shook my head: "Mate, I am quite happy if you forget all about me."
Wide sandy river bed with a narrow murky green ribbon snaking at the far bank, cattle drinking from it and shitting all over. I washed my T-shirt in the sludge, then scrubbed my skin in it. Desperate for a cup of coffee but unsure how far to the next drinking water, I saved the clean litre in my jerry can and boiled the river water instead. I figured, if I keep boiling it long enough, it will kill everything wriggling in it. I really wanted that cup of coffee. In the heat of the afternoon, sitting in a shade of a large tree on the river bank, I watched the slow life on the bridge. Bulk of traffic were coal trucks from the Hwange mines. A while ago one truck ploughed through the guard rails of the bridge. It's still there, in the river bed below the bridge, the burnt out husk and bits of anthracite coal too small to scavenge for fire. An hour's ride further I encountered a semi-trailer that snapped in half under the weight of its own load. Whole country is sand. Sand from Kalahari desert. A healthy forest growing out of sand.
Just before Gwai River bridge a bunch of bored cops tried to shake me down for $20, on account of "no mudguards on a bicycle". I did not argue with them, I just stood there looking like an idiot, smiling, pretending to understand their language but not to understand their demand. Playing a good soldier Schweik, "Ich bin ein Idiot, Herr Commandant." After 20 minutes they gave up and told me to fuck off. I got away without paying, but it spoiled a beautiful day.
First baobabs after a long time, majestic big trees. I ducked behind one into the shade to have a nap through the heat of the day. Game rangers with AK-42 stopped to check on me. Country is enveloped in thin blue smoke, an hour before the sunset you can look directly into it. Rolling hills, picturesque country of traditional villages, thatched roundels painted with various designs in ochre, white, and black, baobabs as a backdrop. People are very different from Ndebele on the other side of the forest, more polite, I don't get hackled when I pass a bunch of them on a cross road. Women carting 20-litre buckets of water on their heads, string of barefoot men returning from a soccer match, their knobby sport shoes hanging around their necks, to save the wear on the soles, omnipresent hollow ringing of cattle bells. An old copper phone line is leaning drunkenly on the half-collapsed posts. Vestiges of the first road to the Falls peep through the undergrowth – two narrow trails of bitumen, each only a foot wide. Original low level bridges now serve as fords, but most rivers are dry.
Road sign ask you to slow down on account of "painted dog", a rare native canine with big hairy ears and markings of a hyena. The road sign has a point: the first and only painted dog I saw was a road kill. Dried and mummified skin, tufts of stripy hair were hanging in the grass. I glued a bunch of his painted hair into my diary as a memento.
Villages form a continuous strip along the highway, nowhere to camp in privacy. I crashed for the night in a small gap between two homesteads, and inevitable happened – dogs found me and started barking. In

that aspect people here are also different, Ndebele do not keep guard dogs. I packed up in a minute and wheeled away under bright moon, spooking a bunch of drunks who were leading their donkey cart to the well.
The last 20 km to Hwange is the most stunning baobab country, with little hamlets integrated into the landscape. What you imagine traditional Africa looked like, neat little roundels with grass roofs and painted walls, scrawny cattle, little fields fenced off with prickly scrub, donkey carts, sandy ground, people moving slowly, carting everything on their heads, women dressed in colourful wraparounds, smiling when they answer your greeting.

Hwange is a pretty little company town made important by its isolation and by several huge coal mines. Deposits were discovered 120 years ago, and at present rate of digging they are expected to last for another 1000 years. Older readers may recall Wankie Mine Disaster of 1972, when underground explosion killed 427 miners. Wankie is the old spelling of Hwange.
In spite of coal dust drifting in from the mines, town is clean and well looked after, almost manicured. Best stocked supermarket in the land, even though they had no real coffee, only instant one and chicory mix. Munching on goodies in park I listened to the stories of people who gathered around me. A young arts graduate pumping petrol at the fuel station, dreaming of emigrating to Zambia to work as a graphic designer. A coal miner who gets paid once in three months, for the last month only. His dad worked in the mine for 42 years. On retiring he found that government pension funds were looted and there was no money to pay his pension. Coal is there, demand is high but output is falling. Mismanagement, zero maintenance, graft, familiar story of this country. People recounted the sad stories without anger, without bile, as plain facts, not as accusation.

In the middle of forest, just off the highway, stands a long tin barn full of woodcarvers, surrounded by their sculptures for sale. Their workmanship is good, their imagination zero. They could be in Swaziland or Mozambique, and you could not tell the difference. Or even in the Philippines. They all carve the same American eagle. Too many of them in one barn, all producing exactly same stuff. Carvers told me there is no water until the Victoria Falls Airport. Luckily you reach the airport long before town, and the last 25 km you ride on superb new highway built recently as a show off for some international conference in Vic Falls where Mugabe wanted to impress his guests. I didn't want to arrive at the Falls at night, so I camped a few miles before, in deep sand of the forest floor.

Whoever built the Victoria Falls, got it right. Adjectives and superlatives fail to do justice to the majesty of the gorges. Neither highest nor widest of the great falls, it is still considered the biggest vertical sheet of water on Earth, and for the sheer grandeur it can be rivalled only by Iguazu Falls on Brazil – Argentine border. Twice as high and twice as wide, it dwarfs Niagara. The falls did not need to be discovered, they were always known to the surrounding tribes, who called them Mosi-oa-Tunya, "smoke that thunders". Arab traders on the Swahili coast also heard of the Falls, and even European cartographers marked them correctly on their maps as early as Nicolas de Fer in 1715. Armchair geographers in universities scoffed at the idea, though. In the area of supposed falls Zambezi river flows over flat featureless basalt plateau for hundreds of miles in all directions. There are no mountains, escarpment or ridge to create a necessary step. Common sense decreed that there couldn't be any falls.
At Victoria Falls Zambezi drops into a crack in the earth, whole river tumbles down into a narrow gorge a mile long and about 100 metres deep. Surrounding basalt shield is fractured by many cracks that filled with soft sandstone at one time, and river gouged the yielding sandstone into a series of vertical canyons, as it retreated upstream in its development.
The first white man to see the falls was Dr. Livingstone in 1855. He has a bronze statue at the top of the falls, commemorating the discovery. The sculpture shows a classical colonial explorer, one foot forwards, an arm akimbo, the other elbow bent, leaning on a cane, misty gaze directed into distance. A complete bullshit. In his own diaries he described how he was paddled by his guides in a dug out canoe to a small island in the middle of river, above the falls, then crawled on his belly to the edge of the chasm, staring in disbelief into the smoke that thunders roaring below.
Amount of water in the falls fluctuates widely with the season. Maximum flood after the rains is in April, about ten times what you see during the driest period from November till January. I arrived in the middle of dry season, expecting to find a disappointing trickle, but the river was flowing strong, the smoke was thundering. In the quiet of the night you could hear the deep rumbling in the hostel I stayed, two miles

away, like a distant cargo train. The spray rising continuously from the gorges like an inverted rain can be seen from 30 miles during the rainy season.

As I was riding from Bulawayo, I met on the road an owner of one of the backpackers' hostels in Victoria Falls. He invited me to stay at his place, free of charge, when I got there. Mr. Bean is a trained hydrologist, an engineer dealing with water. A few years back he had to quit his chosen field, before he was shot by the government for treason. Every time he took a contract to look into some water related problem, his team would come up with results incompatible with the wishes of Mugabe's men. They discovered gross irregularities in treatment of sewage, they found catastrophic levels of lead in Harare drinking water, 20-times permissible amount of chromium in other supply areas, mismanagement ranging from negligence to disaster, every single time. Mr. Bean refused the pressure to fiddle with the samples and he preferred to quit.
To support his family he opened a hostel in Vic Falls, well kept clean set of bungalows in a garden setting. As a fourth generation white Zimbabwean he loved and cared for his country, and he refused to emigrate. He knew he had nowhere to go. You meet his ilk all over the world, lost souls, white Africans who were forced to leave their continent, expelled by new regimes practising reverse racism. They never fit into the white world. Like albino's, they may look white, but that's only colour of their skin. Deep inside they are Africans, and they can only be happy in Africa.
When he returned from Bulawayo one evening, we sat down at his kitchen table and drinking his evening beer he unburdened himself to me. He saw no hope for his country. He did not complain, he only recounted stories and gossip circulating around. I picked up a little already, just observing, but the insiders' view was much more bleak.
Zimbabwe is a mess. Public servants have not been paid for the past 8 months. When they threatened to go on strike, Mugabe ordered his accountants to send pay slips to all the employees, listing their due wages. The pay slips were not dated, so nobody could be held responsible for not depositing the wages in their bank accounts on time. Two months later, nobody got paid, yet.
The ruling elite is blaming the few remaining whites for all the mistakes of their own leadership. The paramount chief, Robert Mugabe, is a smart well educated ruthless crook who cooked the last five presidential elections. He is a paranoid brilliant strategist in the mould of Joseph Stalin. When some newsman compared him to Hitler, he took it as a compliment: "Hitler cared for his own people, and he did everything to better their lot. I do the same." That's one way to look at history.
Mugabe blames the economic problems of his country on interference of USA and western banks, not answering the question what caused that interference. Slippery as eel's snot, he can weasel out of every uncomfortable truth by stepping sideways. Ordinary people can see clearly through his manoeuvres, and they are sick of him to death, but oppressive system is guarding its own. Some of the everyday political dramas are bordering on farce. While I was there, the First Lady, not known for her brains, enrolled in a University course. Two weeks later she was granted a full PhD diploma, without doing any studies. Not a honorary degree they give to thugs to keep them happy, but a full degree, causing uproar of Academic circles.
Then there is the problem of succession. That question arise every two or three years as the chosen successors repeatedly falls out of grace. Mugabe is now 90, and he desperately wants to start a political dynasty, a hereditary democracy. Wiki won't tell you that, but everyone in the country knows that President is sterile, he can't father kids of his own. His darling son, whom he sired on his secretary while they were both married to someone else, is not his. People quietly point at a well known society stud as the real father. Current First Lady, 40 years younger than Mugabe, must've been a charmer in her younger days when she was an ambitious president's secretary. Married to one bloke, sleeping on a side with a President, she found time for a fling with a playboy to provide her employer with a son. Mugabe is a raving homophobe. Recently he pushed through the Parliament draconian anti-gay laws, some of the harshest in the world. Last year he anointed his only son as his successor. The boy returned the favour, coming out of a closet as a practising gay. Back to square one.

Zambezi River forms the boundary between Zimbabwe and Zambia. Victoria Falls are fenced in, surrounded by a National Park in both countries. Crossing the border is easy, you pay a fee and they give you a day permit to walk across the bridge and have a look at the Falls from the other side. Zimbabwe was always the preferred option, with larger frontage and better views. The township was built right next to the Falls, while Livingstone on Zambian side is 10 km away. Since the collapse of Zimbabwe and concerns about safety, everyone goes to Livingstone. Their hotels are fully booked, while the accommodation on Zimbabwe

side was 80% empty. There are no reasons for safety concerns. Town of Victoria Falls is not Africa, it's what Africa could have been, if the wealth was distributed where it belongs. Town is clean, full of green trees, people friendly, pimps not pushy, services work, garbage is collected and removed, water runs out of a tap. You can safely walk on the streets any time of the day and specially created Tourist Police are helpful and unobtrusive. Unlike the game parks, the Falls get more African visitors than foreigners, and a school trip to the Falls seems to be a part of curriculum.

National Park opens at daybreak. That's the best time to visit, before the helicopter tours and microlights blight the scene. You pay $30 for one-entry permit and you are free to wander around. Locals pay much less. You hear the roar long before you see anything more than a cloud of spray rising over the surrounding forest. Entrance gate is at the elevation of about 1000 metres above sea level, but October, when I arrived, is the hottest month, so it wasn't particularly cool even in the early morning.

Above the Falls river widens to over a mile, split by many low flat islands which break up the falling curtain of water into several separate falls. During a high flood water only two of the islands remain. The Livingstone Island in the centre, where the explorer first landed, is one of them. Only at the lowest water you can see from the viewing trail all the way to the bottom of the gorge. Apparently there is a path descending into the canyon, but even at the minimum flow rangers will not allow anyone down. As I arrived at mid-flow, wild spray and foam was rising from the chasm like upside down rain, obscuring the bottom. Cascading water disappeared in cloud mid-way down. Falls must be a photographer's nightmare. They try to capture the feeling of awe they experience, but they can't see a great deal of it, and the spray covers the lens as soon as they take the cap off.

Visitor's path follows the southern rim of the canyon, a number of viewing points hang over the chasm. There is no place where you can look up the falls, it's always down. Only 60 or 80 metres separates you from the edge of the fall on the opposite side of the narrow canyon. Slippery and cool from the spray, every point of viewing footpath offers a different experience. Looking down the length of the canyon, you sit quietly and absorb the majesty of the place. Perpetual rainbow drops into the gorge, curving upon itself deep in the bowels.

Misty air supports a dense rain forest with mahoganies, ebonies, lianas and creepers. Entire volume of the river exits the first gorge by a 100-metre wide gap, entering a zig-zag string of canyons, each one a front line of the falls at some time in geological past, as the water chewed its way backwards into soft sandstone, retreating up along the cracks in basalt. At the Devil's Cataract, the first fall from the west, you can see where the Falls are gouging the next step in their backwards progress.

The second gorge is spanned by a classical steel railway bridge, part of Cecil Rhodes dream of continuous Cape to Cairo railway. Built in 1904, it carries all the road traffic with Zambia. Closed on and off due to maintenance, repair and bickering between the two countries, it was quiet the morning I visited, no cars allowed. Cyclists and pedestrians were the only ones moving across. Zambian half of the span was recently painted hospital green, while the other half was covered in patches of red oxide primer. Two gangs with rattle guns were suspended below the bridge, chipping away the rust. Rhodes insisted that train passengers must experience the cool spray of the falls as they cross the bridge, never thinking what the spray will do to the steel structure. Troop of baboons was tramping under the road level, using the girders and struts as if they were jungle trees. Later in the day bungy jumpers will join them on the bridge.

By 10 AM first troops of flown-in tourists creep into the Park, time to retreat. I picked up my bicycle from the guard house and the rest of the day I spent riding the neighbourhood. Lower gorges, the former falls, are just as impressive as the latest step. Adventure companies set up all sorts of money making enterprises across the canyons, flying fox, bungy jumping, abseiling, a whole heap of variations I do not know the modern names for. Bloody expensive, too, but popular.

On a colourful wall map in town I noticed a locality called Hippo Pools, not far above the Falls, near the Big Tree. I thought, an afternoon lazing on the river bank would be a good way to round off the day. And who knows, they may have called it Hippo Pools for a reason. An eternal optimist.

I found the Big Tree, an old baobab formed by a cluster of trees grown together into one bole. River above the falls is peaceful, full of little treed islands, banks of soft sand covered in elephant dung, where the ellies wade in and cross the river to Zambia. Tourists do not seems to venture this way. I propped my bike against a tree at the edge of Hippo Pools, scanned the water surface, and the hippos were right there! About half a dozen brutes were wallowing in the water about 40 metres from me, oblivious to my intrusion. Completely submerged, they look like a cross between a croc and a whale. Shaking and twitching their tiny ears, blowing breath out of the little nostrils like whales, opening and shutting their cavernous mouth for no apparent reason.

I camped two nights at Mr. Bean's, sprawled on the grass lawn. I did the laundry, overhauled my bike, did

all I could to gather information on the next leg of the trip. I found very little. Thin trickle of travellers is spread between dozens of competing hostels, so it's hard to meet anyone, unless you go drinking in bars. Mossies were bad, but malaria has been eradicated in the immediate neighbourhood. On the third day, at dark, at 3:30 in the morning, I wheeled my bike on the street and turned west, across Kalahari desert, towards the Atlantic Ocean.

Chapter 4: Kalahari

70 km from the Victoria Falls to Kazungula on the Botswana border run through a low key Zambezi National Park, then Matetsi Safari Area. In Zimbabwe Parks are not fenced, and protected areas merge into each other. From the Falls game areas continue without interruption all the way to the Hwange NP and across the border to Botswana. Everybody warned me about wildlife on the road to Kazungula, everybody met someone who has heard of lions on the bitumen. Both cars that I met before sunrise stopped and offered me a ride, to keep me safe. Yet all I saw till the sun was a long way up was a flock of Guinea fowl. About 40 km from the Falls we entered the unmistakeably elephant country. Vandalised trees, shrubs torn from the ground, massive droppings on the road, swarms of flies, culprit himself long gone in search of water. A luxury coach on a day trip from Botswana stopped to inspect us like a 2-wheel safari curiosity, cameras flashing through the tinted windows. As a payment for sitting still during the photo shoot the starched shirt guide gave me a couple of their pre-packed lunches. Haute cousine? In exchange for the fortune they were paying for this outing you'd think they feed them well. All they were having for lunch was one small dried up drum stick, one hard boiled egg, half a tiny tomato sandwich, white bread with crust cut off, one apple and small fruit drink.
Ten miles further several tawny giraffes, almost grey, were stripping tree tops along the road. I stopped to wonder, but they soon smelled me and with a slow grace cranked up the locomotive appendages and galloped into thicket. I can't make myself to write "run" in connection with giraffes, because they do not run. They move so slowly and ponderously as if they were moving through thick molasses.
Approaching the Botswana border elephant devastation became appalling, forest ruined, trees uprooted or broken, it looked like bombs went off, vandalism on a big scale. At the bottom of a gentle descend I saw the border post itself, maybe 300 metres ahead; low buildings, striped bar across the road, flag on a pole, several trucks parked off the road. I slowed down looking around, searching for a private nook where I could duck in and change my dilapidated riding rags for decent border clothes. There was a nice big acacia tree across the road from me, under that acacia tree I could … under that acacia tree was standing an elephant.
I nearly fell off my bike. A real fully grown African elephant, 20 metres form me, with no fences between us. Motionless, completely camouflaged by standing still in the shade of a tree. How did I miss him looking his way from a distance, I do not know. Almost black, size of a house, in a bare savannah with no undergrowth, on a clear day. A lone young male with short tusks that are a norm around here. He was upset about something, his ears extended wide, flapping furiously fore and aft. Flabbergasted I stopped the bike and instinctively pulled out my journal and a pen, sketching him. My hands were trembling with excitement and I soon dropped the attempt at drawing, and watched the elephant instead. I was awed speechless, in a deep turmoil. No amount of photos can convey the experience of meeting an elephant in the wild for the first time, face to face this close, with no obstacles between us. 20 metres is a bloody close encounter.
His ears were still fanning when I realised he was upset about me. I was baring his way across the road, towards the river. I wheeled my machine a bit further and turned to watch him. He calmed down, waited a bit, then crossed the road and tramped into scrub. In that time several tourist coaches sped by, on their day trips to Chobe National Park in Botswana, hoping to see some wild life. Yet right here, on the road, they had an elephant, closer than they will ever get to one in a park. None of them noticed him, the way I at first did not see him, none of them slowed down for a look. He was my private elephant.

Border to Botswana was a joke, officers bored and relaxed, entry into the country free of charge. More confident the country is, less of a hassle at the borders. Riding further, the first cross road leads to the antiquated ferry landing where trucks heading for Zambia hope to board an ancient barge to take them across Zambezi River. Three large flat bottomed boats operate on the ferry, at least one of them broken down at any given time, often all three of them. Trucks then pile up in a queue two kilometres long, camping on the river for a fortnight, waiting their turn. When Rhodes Bridge at the Falls is closed to heavy traffic, they have no other choice but to come here. Right now there is no other way across the river.

Tired of bickering with Mugabe over access to his rickety bridge at the Falls, Zambia approached Botswana with a proposal to build their own new modern concrete bridge across Zambezi river. Botswana agreed, plans were drawn up and investors rounded up, promising the quarter of billion dollars that it will cost. That's when Mugabe butted in. Pissed off that he will loose revenue on his own bridge, he claimed that the new crossing will be passing over Zimbabwean sovereign territory, and therefore he wants a piece of action. He insisted on a toll gate, with all the taking going to him. Other two countries disagreed. Zimbabwe was not putting up any money for the new bridge, why should they charge a toll. Technically Mugabe was right. The unsurveyed Corner Where Four Countries Meet (Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia) is in theory a point, somewhere in the middle of the stream of Zambezi. Physical border frontage between Botswana and Zambia is not wide enough to accommodate a width of the new bridge. Concrete will be spanning a few metres of Zimbabwe territory. But to charge an exclusive toll? Passage was meant to be free.
Botswana approached Namibia, which also ends in that corner. Windhoek government graciously allowed the bridge to span a few metres of their land in the middle of the river, no strings attached. Architects redrew the plans, designing a banana shaped bridge. The two anchoring points ashore remained the same, but the span is curving to avoid Zimbabwe, casting shadow over Namibia instead. Greedy old man in Harare is shitting bricks, spewing rhetoric about imperialist plot to undermine his country.
In Kazungula I asked people about the new bridge. Yes, apparently the actual earth works have started, the approach roads are being upgraded, the project is going through.
Kazungula, border village in Zimbabwe, has a twin namesake across the river in Zambia, and another Kazungula in Botsawana, which is only a modern road house and a petrol station on a major cross road. For the shopping you ride another 10 km to Kasane, a quintessential African town where families of wart hogs openly trot down the main street in the day time, where elephants prowl the suburbs and behave like football hooligans, demolishing fences and concrete gates, uprooting shade trees, town where Zambezi River full of hippos quietly flows below the back wall of a supermarket. I had a glorious feed of cooked supermarket food, and then a good espresso in a fancy coffee lounge, watching Chinese foremen trying to direct local labourers, laying the main sewage line in a ditch in front of the shop. Mainland China does a lot of major capital works in this corner of Africa. Their reputation is no different from what we think of them back home. Shonky workmanship not intended to last, poor expertise, arrogant racist attitude to their local workers, cost over-runs, haughty disdain for written contract.
It is not only in Botswana. Chinese government is pushing into Africa in a serious way. Usually it is masquerading as foreign aid, development projects, building of infrastructure. An Aussie geologist with contacts in Western Africa told me that in Ghana there are tens of thousands of undocumented Chinese, left behind when their contracts finished. Peking ships a complete package to Ghana, plans, materials, workers, they even fly in plane loads of Chinese whores to entertains their workers. Most labourers are criminals who exchanged a prison sentence for a spell of working in Africa. When the project is finished, government abandons them. Peking does not want them back home, and they are left to fend for themselves where they are. Chinese are a resourceful race, and they do well wherever they land, but there are just too many of them all of a sudden, and in Africa they stick out. It's only a matter of time before they face the same fate that kicked out the Indians.

Botswana is a prosperous country. As big as France, three quarters of it are covered by Kalahari desert. Today it supports a population of 2 millions Tswana. Thanks to British colonial administration who drew the borders in London without regard for reality, majority of Tswana people do not live in their own country, Botswana, but in neighbouring South Africa. Same happened in Swaziland and Lesotho with their people. At the independence in 1964 Botswana was one of the poorest places in the world. Soon afterwards they found diamonds in fairy tale quantities, and the most important, they did not get duped into surrendering them to multinationals. There are three ways you can handle national mineral wealth: you can nationalise the mine, giving the state total control over it. Mine becomes a section of public service, dead wood accumulates, followed by corruption, nepotism, lax accounting, graft. Money is siphoned away to other departments, little is reinvested in the mine. That's what happened to coal mines in Zimbabwe, to nickel in Cuba, petrol in Venezuela. A disaster. Second way is to privatise the mine. Let a company do what it takes, hoping to recover money in tax. That does not work either, because more money the mine makes, more accountants they employ to stash the money away and state get next to nothing. That's happening in Australia, and it's sad to see the country's wealth being looted by multinationals who pay less tax than their own workers.
There is a third way, which is very seldom employed, even though to my thinking it makes most sense.

What Botswana did with their diamonds. Debswana, the company running the mines, is owned equally by the government and by the biggest diamond mob in the world, De Bears from South Africa. Both parties have exactly 50% of shares, so there is no way one party can outvote the other, they have to agree on the main policies. State receives half of the profits, and it leaves DeBears to run it as a serious business. Orapa mine in the south is the biggest diamond producer in the world, digging up $ 1.5 billion worth of stones every year. There is enough money for everyone. And the government, aware that diamonds will eventually run out, is investing the money in infrastructure and in its own people. Roads, water, sanitation, power lines, agriculture, education, health service, you see buildings going up everywhere. I was impressed with what they did and do.

Direct road west from Kasane to Okavango leads through Chobe NP. I could not ride that way. For one, they would not let me into the park on a bicycle, on account of lions. Remember? Meals on wheels. Chobe lions are no pussy cats. In the 1990ies someone filmed a pride of 27 Chobe lions killing an adult elephant, the only recorded case of this kind.
Second objection was the road itself. There isn't any. Only a roughly cut dirt track, and for long stretches it is soft sand. I have seen photos of safari trucks sank up to their axles in the soft ground. I learned hard way in Australia that a bicycle and soft sand is not a happy combination. No, Chobe was out of question, I had to take a 600 km long dog leg along the bitumen, first south to Nata, then over the salt pans west to Okavango.
Too hot in the afternoon to ride, I settled about 3 km out of Kasane on the bank of Zambezi River, where a wild life corridor was left open. About 3 km of river frontage, a wide gap between the fenced farms, orchards and irrigated market gardens protected by electric fences, a strip that allowed animals to wander down to the river, and ford across to Namibia. Our southern bank was bare, but lush green forest lined Namibian side. Round foot prints size of a dinner plate, fresh mounds of dung, residual smell of wild life, raptors circling above in the thermals. I was still excited from my first elephant encounter, happy that I came this way. This whole area, where the four countries meet, is a concentrated essence of picture book Africa. If you only have a fortnight in Africa, fly to Victoria Falls and then spend two weeks driving in the vicinity, say, within 100 km. Hwange Forest with traditional baobab villages of decorated roundels, Vic Falls, Kazungula, Zambezi River in Kasane, Chobe NP, Caprivi Strip in Namibia. You'll get enough impressions to last a lifetime.
As if all that wasn't enough, the corridor, next to the river, has hot springs bubbling from the ground, a rare thing in a basalt country. A local cyclist I chatted in the supermarket told me about them. No sign marks the springs, unimproved muddy puddles of mineralised water, stomped into quagmire by passing elephants. Springs are reputed to have curing powers and I watched many a local as they stopped their car and came to fill a plastic bottle with murky water from a puddle. On the river beach I found a complete skull of a baboon, so fresh that there were tufts of baboon still attached to the jaw. I cleaned the skull and took it with me as a memento of this magic place.

I back tracked 10 km to Kazungula road house, took 5 litres of tap water into my jerry car, and in gathering dusk I turned south on a desolate lonely stretch of the road. Highway leads through a forest reserves full of animals. Not far from the junction eight agitated elephants were feeding at a road side, demolishing acacia trees, ripping large shrubs out of ground for one single mouthful. Then three more. Incredible. Ellies on the road, in the open, completely oblivious to the traffic passing by. A couple of times local drivers stopped and asked if I want a ride. – "Lions will eat you." – I answered with a question: "How long since you, yourself, have seen a lion on the road here?"- I spoke to game rangers in Kasane; they warned me against elephants, but lions apparently stayed far from the road, close to water holes.
After sunset I ran head on into a large Army anti poaching exercise. First a trio of armed soldiers, in full camouflage, Kalashnikov's, spotlights, night vision glasses, radios. They jumped out of bushes, surrounded my bike and asked to see what I am carrying. Polite but deadly efficient. Then an officer in a Land Rover arrived and tried to talk me out of riding this way. – "Lions will eat you." Educated, speaking good English, he had to admit reluctantly that there are no lions currently reported along this road, that I am on a public highway, not in a restricted area, and therefore I can ride to my heart's content. There are a lot of elephants, as I noticed already, but no lions. For the rest of the night I was passing detachments of military driving up and down the road. Bitumen runs only a kilometre or two parallel to Zimbabwe border, and there is the whole of Hwange Forest on the other side, with thousands of elephants, rhinos and other wildlife, and unknown number of poachers that try to get at it. A kilo of rhinoceros horn fetch $5 000 for the black and $20 000 for white.

At the independence Botswana had no army. The country was desperately poor, it had no enemies, no expansionist visions and nothing to protect. For the first decade they went happily without an army. Then in mid-1970ies Mandela's ANC and various Zimbabwean factions started using Botswana as a base for their armed struggle against apartheid and white supremacy. South African army crossed the border and raided their camps, so Botswana had to create their own armed forces to protect their borders. After the fall of apartheid the need for army disappeared. Botswana still does not have enemies, so the army was redeployed to fight poachers and protect the wildlife. They designated poachers as an external enemy, which they are – foreigners armed with AK-42s. And the army takes their task seriously. As a result Botswana is the only country in the region where poaching is not a problem. I think it's a great solution. If you can't get rid of the army altogether, the way Costa Rica did in their constitution, give them something worth while to do, something useful, instead of turning them against their own people.
Every time I stop for a rest and a sip of water I can hear branches being torn off the trees, whole tree breaking under the onslaught of elephants. Finally I found a quiet camp at a road side, after I checked with my torch for absence of elephant signs – no dung, no foot prints, no broken branches.
In the morning first thing I saw was a pair of ellies feeding in a treeless plane. Mother and a calf, tearing big clumps of tall grass from the ground, knocking it against the ground to loosen the soil around roots, shaking it with a swinging motion, then one bite and they drop the rest on the ground and walk further. Messy wasteful eaters. In the distance in the tall grass I could see five long black backs of the rest of the herd. Numerous gnu (wildebeest) grazing along, ugly versions of antelopes, hump on a black back, horns curved like cattle.

South of Kasane Forest country opens into treeless agricultural plane. Aptly named Pandamatenga, "place where they plough land", is an oasis of black fertile soil in the middle of sandy vastness of Kalahari. 40 km strip of intensely cultivated ground, it feeds the entire country, and even exports food to South Africa. Managed by South African agribusiness, fields are measured in square miles, well protected from elephants by 8-feet tall electric wires. Massive machinery drags the modern implements, towering silos store the harvest. Corn, soy beans, sunflowers, irrigated vegetable plots half a mile across each. All the produce is trucked out, so the local shop was bare. I had a big serve of pap and beef with extra cabbage at the road house, as the locals do. Pap is a basic staple of Bantu diet, corn flour stirred into hot water, cooked, and thickened with more corn flour. Afrikaners love it, too.
After the meal I sprawled in the shade in front of the road house, waiting for the sun to move on, chatting to locals and to truckies carting grain from the silos. Everybody is talking about lions. I put a lot of effort into tracking statistics on lion attacks, but they must be all buried in obscure monographs, hidden from the eyes of potential tourists. I located only one large area where lions are a serious problem to man – border between Mozambique and Tanzania. Farmers are encroaching on protected wildlife areas, cattle grazing competing with lions for ground. In a bad year up to 200 people are eaten. In a slow year it's still 30 or 40. People are occasionally taken even in Botswana, deep in Kalahari, but it's rare and you will not find anything printed about it. Riding along the main highway I am hundred times more likely to be run over by a truck, but people do not tell me "oh, do not go on the road, truck will get you." There is something of a primal animal fear when it comes to having lions prowling around your house at night as they do in Botswana. Trucks are more deadly, but raise no emotions, the way big cats do. I take a calculated risk with both, trucks and lions. Getting snuffed out by a semitrailer is just as grisly death as being mauled by a lion, but think of it, what a way to go, eaten by a lion.

Half an hour ride into Sibuyu Forest we came across a shallow dam by the road side. Five Tswana villagers were standing knee deep in the murky water, laughing, washing and splashing, filling their jerry cans and stacking them on their pick up. I stopped in the shade of the tree, watching the scene. As the afternoon cooled, three separate herds of elephants trooped across the road to the same dam, 21 of them all told. Announcing their approach from far away with loud trumpeting and trampling the forest, the three families converged on the water and waded into the dam on the opposite side from people. Gradually spreading along the shore to take up entire one side of the dam, they started drinking, splashing, washing their young, very much like the Tswana barely 50 metres away from them. The two groups ignored each other in perfect harmony, without any fear.
The sight was awesome, a big mob of happy elephants a stone-throw away. Every passing tourist car stopped to film and photo the occasion. I felt really happy, fulfilled, even though I took from this moment nothing but a memory. Apart from big cats and a rhino I have seen already all the African wild animals that I know. And we were only half way into the trip.

Continuing in gathering dusk we rode past a mob of 8 or 10 Cape buffaloes, grazing alongside the road. Big animals, size of beef cattle, their massive convoluted horns covered in knobs remind me of the way African women plait their hair.

This section of road is new, completed two years ago in anticipation of trucks that will be crossing the new bridge in Kazungula. Sections of bitumen were expanded into emergency air strips, for 3 or 4 km becoming four-lane wide bitumen, with wind socks and warning signs. The old road runs beside us, 20 metres away, covered in elephant shit. On the road from Kasane to Nata, a 300 km of dry Kalahari forest, I saw maybe fifteen separate mobs of elephants. I never got used to them, it never became a common sight, and I stopped every time to marvel. I called the road the Elephant Highway in their honour, and when I talk of this trip to people, I can't stop raving about it.
A lot of tiny little antelopes, not bigger than small goats, with straight little horns shorter than their ears. They live single or in pairs, you never see more than two together. When disturbed, some of them hop over unseen obstacles like freshly shorn sheep let out of a pen, while most will duck, press themselves into the grass like rabbits, fold their ears back and pretend they are not there. Truckie told me they are called "phudu".
60 km before Nata a boom across the road, a large veterinary gate to stop spread of cattle diseases further south. Cars drive through a trough of chemical wash, people wet their shoes in a rag saturated with disinfectant. Large camp of soldiers, with their own bore and water tanks. These veterinary gates are on all the main roads of Botswana, and their camps were god-sent: assured water supply in the middle of desert. Soldiers at the gate warned me that a family of elephants hangs around the first bend in the road. And sure enough, as soon as the military camp disappeared from view, I see this old bull standing on its back legs like a clown in circus, stripping top of an acacia tree. A mile further a mother and a calf were grazing a lush tree, hiding in its shadow. It's great that there are still places where elephants are as common as cattle, and live together with people, not restricted by fences. Sometimes it felt like elephants are running Botswana for their own benefit. They even got the army to protect them.
Just before Nata we rode through a nomadic village of reed cutters. About 100 temporary shelters in sandy scrub, people living in small boy scout camping tents, under tarps, canvas and plastic extensions, like a big gypsy camp in Romania. Cars, utes, trucks, squealing children, plastic drums for drinking water, piles and piles of thatch tied into tidy bundles to be taken for sale in cities. I came across a similar village outside of Pandamatenga, but I never found out who the folks were. Tswana people I asked did not want to talk about them.
Nata is a large African village of square masonry houses, sandy lanes, wandering goats and cattle. Every front yard is fenced off by a low brick wall, less than two feet high, decorated with curls and ornaments, much like villages in parts of Sahel. At the southern end Nata straddles a major T-junction. We arrived at the main east – west highway connecting Bulawayo to Winhhoek. Three sprawling road houses, much more affluent than their equivalents in Zimbabwe, each with a brick and mortar restaurant, shop and outdoor dining area. Interstate trucks were parked everywhere. It was Friday and they were barred from driving until midnight. Friday, Saturday and Sunday, at 6PM all the huge semitrailers had to pull up wherever they were and wait until midnight. By a government decree. Weekend is the time when everyone gets drunk, and trucks were killing far too many drunks stumbling along the dark roads as they were heading home. There is no way to stop people drinking, so Botswana government enacted a law to reduce the murdering traffic during the crucial hours.
Most truck drivers that I talked to, anywhere on my ride, were young Zimbabweans. They all spoke good English, besides several local languages, and being well travelled men, their views and opinions were free of small town prejudices. Many a useful detail and information I gathered from a curious truckie who came to have a look at my bike at some petrol station. Many had relatives in Australia, a couple even in my home town of Darwin. Nurses.

In Nata I turned right for a 1000 km burn across the Kalahari desert. I already had a good taste of it. Everything west of Hwange Forest and the Elephant Highway is part of the Kalahari basin, if not the desert itself. This end of Kalahari is not what you imagine a desert to be. For a true sandy waste you have to travel into the far south and south west, where Botswana, South Africa and Namibia meet. Rest of the basin is filled with Kalahari-veld, dry scrub, savannah and surprisingly lush dry forest. It's sand right through, it gets bloody hot in the summer and it does not rain much, but country looks a lot like most Australian deserts do, not like Sahara or deserts of Arabia.
Desert takes its name from Tswana word "kgala", meaning great thirst. In not too distant geological past a

great lake sat in the middle of the basin. Bigger than lake Victoria, it drained about 10 000 years ago, leaving behind the biggest salt pans in the world, Makhadikhadi, just east of Nata. Until recently all of Kalahari was a home to elephants, lions, cheetahs and countless species of antelopes. Replaced by cattle, today much of Kalahari is a grazing land and disease controlling fences sectioning the desert restrict free movement of wild life. Cattle is a traditional symbol of wealth amongst Bantu, and half of Botswana families own some cattle. After diamonds beef is the next most important produce of the country and open range lands of Kalahari are overgrazed in common.
After Nata we are riding down the flat grassy plane interspersed with salt pans of various sizes and shapes, the Makgadikgadi. Ochre and light grey predominate. Clumps of trees, leaf-less and autumn colours. Stacks of prickly bushes, none of them green. Cattle and ostrich country. I watched one bird, much taller than a man, in a suicidal dash across the road, crossing in front of a speeding fuel tanker. Tawny grey juvenile, it tore at full speed towards the barb wire fence, cleared it in one step without breaking its stride and disappeared in the scrub. Traditional mud hamlets of cattle herders dot the plane, squat huts round and square, a row of outer poles supporting the roof. About twice or three times a day we pass well fenced small fields, about an acre each, boundary heaped up with interwoven thorny branches to keep the goats out. Sorghum and corn grown even in the depth of desert. Funny haze in the sky, clouds pushing from south, in the night we watch distant lightning. Great riding. Bitumen is old and tired, but in sparse traffic we can pick a good line of clear surface.
Stand of healthy old baobabs, and we ride into Gweta, a large village with a shop. Every country shop has a kitchen at the back where you can buy freshly cooked meal and beg from the cook a mug of hot water for coffee. Fare is pap or rice, chicken or goat stew, or as today, a vegetable soup, a couple of Russians (sausages) and a hard boiled egg. A pig-out of a meal, all for $3-4. Mama stirring the pots told me the next water is 85 km away, in Phudukhudu. Mama must be a retired truckie moll. In Africa only the people associated with truck business can estimate the distances in kilometres anywhere near the reality.
Basic colour of Kalahari is Naples green, colour of dry grass. Lot of horses, cruelly hobbled, and countless donkeys. Large fan palms, in clumps or singly. Guys in Maun make paper from their shredded leaves. Pockets of green belong to acacias. A lone fractal tree rivalling baobabs for majesty, its branches bifurcating in perfect symmetry right down to the tiny twigs at the tips. A brace of ostriches and unmistakeable devastation from elephant passage. Elephants in a desert? Miles and miles of decimated forest said yes, elephants in a desert.
I had a lot of preconceived ideas about African wildlife that I had to revise on this trip. Elephants in the middle of Kalahari desert was one. Antelopes galloping across totally barren stone plane of Namib was another. On my way home to Richards Bay I rode across the Drakenberg mountains. One morning I woke up in my camp in a culvert, high up, maybe 2000 metres above the sea level, and country all around me was covered in hoary frost, grass blades bending with their white tips, crystals shining in the sunlight, shaded sections of savannah pure white. And everywhere on the savannah there were zebras and antelopes grazing, in small groups, three or four in a bunch, not worried about cold at all. I could not associate zebras with a frost.
My saddle became so threadbare that my arse gets no protection from the stuffing. I was going to rebuild the seat in Richards Bay before the ride, but I completely forgot about it. Now I had to sacrifice the only woollen jumper I have. I wrapped it around the saddle several times and stitched the bundle on. Sore arse got a respite, my mood improved instantly.

In the night strong wind arose, blowing sand in my face. Even sheltering behind the bole of an acacia tree, sand got into all my gear. It sprinkled a rain for a half a minute. Yet starting a fire in the morning to brew a mug of coffee was no trouble.
Every couple of miles a wide animal highways cross the road at right angle, clear trail running into scrub on both sides. I stopped and had a look at recent foot prints. Elephant and a dog. I soon saw the dog – a variety of a jackal, with a bushy tail and a black strip down his side, jumping over the thorny undergrowth like a fox. Trees peter out around Mxai Wilderness Lodge, we are left with three foot tall prickly scrub.
Water was as the mama said, in Phudukhudu, village of some 100 huts at the gate to Makhadikhadi National Park. Set a bit off the highway, people here do not look Bantu, their faces are tiny, with a chineesy slant around the eyes. Dispossessed Khoi-san nomads who were driven out of their ancestral lands in the desert when the National Park was declared. Botswana government is trying to settle the nomads, seeing their ancient life style as a blot on the record of modernisation. Like every village in the country, this desert outpost has good water. Bore is 10 km away, a buried pipe feeds the communal water taps. Every tap in the village is protected by a 4-foot tall masonry enclosure, several kinks of concrete

blocks forming a tight labyrinth, too narrow and confusing for stock to squeeze through and foul the source. Local guys were burying another water pipe in a ditch dug across the road. Their foreman took me to the public tap and filled my jerry can. I didn't have to ask if the water is drinkable. Botswana government done a fantastic job providing water to their people. Every village, every few huts, no matter how remote, have an access to clean drinking water, even if it means a trip to a strategically placed tank near a bore.
I stopped a couple of miles beyond the village to munch on biscuits and honey. Getting up to resume the journey, I noticed that my back wheel was wobbling alarmingly. The best deal I could get in Richard's Bay, cheap Chinese shit, looked very sick. I leaned the bike on the tree again and ran my hand over the spokes. Ping – ping – ping, six spokes were broken! Every one on the cog side, too. Bumping down the sharp step from the bitumen every time I had to give way to a truck in Zimbabwe snapped one spoke after another. I detached the luggage, took the wheel out and applied the spanners, but the cogs were ceased tight, they would not come off. I had no way to replace the broken spokes with the spares that I carried. I got up and pushed my machine alongside, watching the wheel. No way. The rim was wobbling loose at a different rate than the hub, my wheel was on the point of total collapse.
I sat down under a tree to ponder. I opened my journal and wrote down all the option I had. I had all the spare parts I needed, but there was no way I could repair my machine in here. The next big town was Maun, 130 km away, the provincial capital of Okavango Delta. I could hitch a ride with my bike to Maun, hoping they have a bicycle shop where I could procure another wheel. I could leave the bike here and hitch a ride with the broken wheel alone. I could walk alongside the bike, taking the weight of my body off it. I could attempt to ride the ruined wheel, gingerly, until it collapsed completely, then choose from the list above. The last option appealed to me the most, so I gently lowered myself into saddle and pushed off. The most difficult part was to gain initial speed without wrenching the hub from the rim. Once I was wheeling, however wobbly, we were moving in the right direction. Avoiding every pothole, picking the smoothest surface, turning only in gentle curves, I continued. 20 km down the highway there is a big donkey standing in the middle of the road, facing me, its ears twitching. When I came close, it turned sideways to walk away, and it was not a donkey at all, but a zebra! Slowly, with dignity, it joined its mate waiting under a tree and both galloped unhurriedly into bush.
A few hours later a 4WD tour bus stopped under the same tree where I was resting. Six couples from Poland doing a big safari loop around southern Africa. They saw me in Kasane, four days ago, so we are moving. Driver and his offsider were both from Zimbabwe. Before they left, they gave me leftovers from their picnic lunch. With full belly I coaxed my machine to roll in sickening wobbles down the bitumen. I did not push hard into pedals for fear that I rip more spokes from the hub. It got dark by the time we reached the first outpost of civilisation. At a veterinary gate, with 52 km left to Maun, wheel refused to spin any further. With nine broken spokes, all on the same side, it was not a wheel any more. I define wheel by its shape. It ought to be approximately round. What I had left on my bike was nowhere near round.
I leaned the bike on a tree and walked over to the army camp to fill my water can. Half a mile down the road I cooked a meal on a little fire of twigs, and decided I have tortured my machine to the brink. Tomorrow I will have to hitch a ride to town and look for a new wheel.

At dawn I walked the bike back to the veterinary check post, pulled apart the wheel, left the remaining bike and all my gear in care of the cops and I caught a lift with the first passing car, 56 km to town. Maun is a spread out provincial town on a large swamp in the middle of sandy desert. By a quirk of geography several substantial rivers flow a wrong way, instead of sea they drain into a blind basin in a desert. Some water courses can't make up their mind which way to flow. Savuti Channel in Chobe NP sometimes flow in one direction, other time in the opposite way, and most of the time it does not flow at all. At the lowest point they have nowhere further to go and they soak into sand, creating the Okavango swamp. That lowest point is still 950 metres above sea level, so climate is mild and nights are cool.
Maun is a beautiful place, if you can conceive of beauty in a dusty sandy desert. A wide flooding river flows under several bridges, water full of reeds, flowering lotus and wading birds. Both banks are sand, with stately trees leaning over the water. Scavenging goats and donkeys rule the streets, oblivious to horns of drivers. Pedestrian paths are deep sand, high heels of pretty dressed up secretaries sink until their ankles in powdery dust as they cross the strip from a cab to their office. I found the bike shop by an old ruse – I stopped the first decent looking cyclist and asked him where it is. It was too early in the morning, shop was closed, so I walked further, to a shopping centre. I changed money with a money dealer, had a breakfast and a coffee and went to see Freddie the bike man.
Hamu, Freddie's mechanic, was a bit gruff at first. He had no new parts to work with, at all, and dearth of

second hand back wheels. He found an old steel rim in the heap of scrap at the back of the yard and he fixed it up for me, so I can ride on it to town. I learned a neat trick, how to force the stuck cogs apart from the hub. A three foot long pipe wrench and a strong muscle. He promised to rebuild my collapsed Richards Bay wheel by the next day.
Business done, I turned around and hitched several rides to the veterinary gate.
Amid the kibitzing cops I reassembled my machine, adjusted the brakes, took on 5 litres of water and in the afternoon I left, to get away from them. In strong tail wind I approached Maun. Black limbs of leafless trees lined the road, their tips covered in white catkins and pink flowers, like something from a surrealist dream. Okavango delta has a lot of fish and supports a sizeable population of subsistence fishermen. It looks strange, a guy standing on the side of the road in the middle of sandy desert, in the blazing sun, offering a string of freshly caught fish for sale. They dry a lot of fish too, before transporting it to town by truckloads.
In the suburbs I passed a craft shop – guys are making paper from all sorts of things. The most notable was elephant paper, made from that part of elephant which renews itself every day in copious quantities. And they do call it what it is – elephant dung paper. When I returned next day to buy some, they admitted they were using offcuts produced by a factory in Zimbabwe. They shred the bits and lay the paste on their screens. So it was a recycled elephant dung paper! I bought a number of sheets, just for the fun of it, rolled them in a newspaper and carried them with me the rest of the trip home.
Riverside Maun is full of mossies that breed in stagnant swamps. All the backpackers' hostels line the river frontage and with their dormitory prices equal to my daily budget, I saw no profit in forking out good money to be eaten by mosquitoes. For the next few nights I crashed at "Longrass Inn" about 6 or 7 km from town, along the highway heading back towards desert. A bed and breakfast place, accommodation is free in sand and in the morning you get a dingo's breakfast – you have a piss and look around. Mossies do not venture that far from water.
I rode up river to the Old Bridge, a man-made earthen dyke with water flowing under several sections bridged by logs. Built by locals about 100 years ago, it was a part of major long distance pedestrian highway. Parts of the stream are bridged only by a couple of bare logs thrown across, so today no car can pass. Shame I could not find anything more about this old trading route, it would have been fun following it. Today fishermen sit with their lines under the old trees that grow from the dyke, pulling out bream after bream.
Okavango delta is unreal country. Water and reeds and a narrow strip of alluvial forest surrounded by deep sandy desert. Hundreds of square miles of temporary swamps and inundated savannah are only accessible by a helicopter or by a primitive shallow punt poled around. Wildlife gathering on the flood planes is the last remnant of the original African herds. Game tours departing Maun are a big business. Tours into delta start at $100 per day, but such cheapo's offer nothing more than I have seen already for free, zebras, giraffes, hippos, elephants. To see the big cats you are looking at $300 a day, and a stay in one of the fly-in lodges. For really spectacular wildlife I suggest a DVD by Mr. Attenborough. Places where he was allowed to fly and film are off-limits to normal budget. You talking megabucks here, not some measly $400 – $500 a day.
Reading their advertising I though a mokoro tour may be a way to see something interesting, a ride on one of the little flat bottom punts poled into the swamp, but then I found that guides only venture a few hundred meters from their lodge. Hell, I've been living on a boat for the past 20 years, deep in the mangroves, I do not need to pay $100 a day to see the same scenery here.

The next daybreak I found six weather beaten Estonian cyclists picking themselves up at their rough camp site in the middle of town. A cool bunch of dudes riding around the world, ordinary blokes doing extraordinary things. In their early middle age, they all lead fairly normal lives in Estonia, with family and a job, they can't afford to take two or three years off to do the whole trip in one go. Also, they do not have the money. Instead every four years they get together and ride one stage, as an adventurous holiday for a few months at a time. They convinced a major Estonian supermarket chain to sponsor them. They get a cheap crappy Chinese-made bike each, airfares and a bit of pocket money. They shoot a TV doco on the way. They travel light and share the few basic necessities between them. One carries tool kit, another one a small camping stove, yet another one the communal tent, a tiny two-men affair, also a cheap supermarket brand. Their tent squeezes in three of them, at a pinch four. If it rains, they draw lots, who will sleep outside.
They haven't had much rain, so far, their route led mostly through desert areas. Starting from Ulaanbataar in Mongolia, of all places, the first stage was Tibet, China and Nepal. Being new to outback touring, they

had hilarious stories. Cheap mounts developed square ball bearings, chains stretched like rubber elastic, yet their grit the teeth and carried on. Four years later they rode through India, Pakistan and Iran. Then came Arabia, ending in Yemen. This year they were crossing Africa, from Djibouti and Ethiopia to Swakopmund in Namibia. Not being fanatic purists, they don't insist on pedalling every single mile of the way. The most dangerous stage, across lawless northern Kenya, they rode on a back of a truck, in an armed convoy. Arriving in Kasane, Botswana, locals convinced them that lions were too dangerous on the Elephant Highway, so they hired a ute and drove to Maun via Chobe NP. A bunch of happy drunks, they got plastered on the way, arriving in Maun late at night, blind. Searching for a convenient camp spot, they asked a cop on the street, where can they pitch their tent. Policeman smiled: "Anywhere you want". Guys took him up on that: "What about right here," pointing to a tiny patch of dry grass on the main roundabout. Cop smiled again and shrugged his shoulders: "Anywhere." – So they put up their little tent right there, in the middle of town. Three of them fitted inside the tent, other three sprawled outside. Nobody bothered them, nobody minded. That's Africa.
Once they put their pants on, we all went to an early opener for a breakfast. Hung over from the day before, they started with a beer each. Their "Mayor" was leaving them that day, he had to return to his civilian commitments, so they were celebrating. Also it was another member's birthday, an occasion for a double celebration. They quoted me a Russian saying about drinking first thing in the morning. It will set you free for the rest of the day. I really liked their no-nonsense pragmatic attitude to the whole thing. It shows that you do not have to be rich to travel to exotic places, you don't need to become a drop-out, a social outcast, to ride around the world on a bicycle. Just get off your arse and go. We stay in touch.

The old steel wheel that the mechanic sold me popped a spoke already and twisted out of shape the first day. I discovered that Hamu the mechanic is rated no.2 road cyclist in the whole of Botswana. To train he rides 40 km to work every morning from his village in the desert, then the same return at night. This afternoon he rebuilt my old wheel and he fixed up the steel one I was riding on for the last three days. The plan called for riding the steel rim into the ground first, then replacing it with the rebuilt Richards Bay rim. Two crappy wheels ought to see me across 700 km of Kalahari to the next big town, Windhoek in Namibia. After I saw what pathetic supermarkets dung the Estonians rode on, I was more confident in my own machine.
For three days in Maun I've been eating huge servings of good food, lying on a river bank the rest of the time, having a perfect break. Before mounting the saddle I discarded more weight from my bag. I gave Hamu my spare front tube, the second spare tyre I was given in Loius Trichard in South Africa, all the steel parts, bits and pieces of camping gear. Shedding 2kg of surplus gear, I strapped the repaired rim to my handlebars and I was ready for a long haul to Windhoek.

Kalahari continues as an unusual desert. We cross a bridge over Kunyere River. River is full of water, flowing towards Ngama lake, also full of water. My mystery bird, southern ground hornbill, is standing motionlessly on a bank right next to a giant marabou stork, both silently hunting for fish. Horses and cattle are drinking in the river, green meadows in the flood plane. Understorey is grazed to death, landscape dominated by classical acacias in full leaf. Legethlwana is a little village to break your tongue on. Herero women are wearing traditional dress, a complex bonnets on their heads, with 8-inch extrusions shaped like cattle horns. Shortly before the turn off to Lake Ngami road is flanked by a large tent camp of nomadic fishermen, 300 or 400 souls, very much like the reed cutters' settlement we passed earlier. Professional fishermen in the middle of desert. Africa.
October being the hottest month of the year, afternoon temperatures climb above 40°C and we spend the day hiding in shade, preferably at some road house with an eatery or on the outskirts of a village with water tap. Meals in the eateries became bland pap with sinewy meat stew. I have two or three servings, then prowl the village in search of water. A building site laying bricks means a lot of water to mix mortar. Smiling Zimbabwean bricklayer with two local helpers, they filled my jerry can from a hose. Crashed for the night under a stately tree, dense, green, a bit like a monkey puzzle.
Mid morning I arrived at a veterinary gate at Kuke with its military camp. The tiny village of Kuke itself was meant to be a bit further, so I stopped near the gate. Soldiers had plenty of water, but no shade. About a kilometre further I found a good sized tree to sit under and a culvert under the road to start a fire in. Hot wind is whistling across out path. A South African touring 4WD stopped at my culvert and stared down from his window. It had nothing to do with me, driver noticed a road kill, he says it's a rare aardwolf, a cross between a hyena and a wild dog. Semblance to Tanami in Australia is complete when wild melons appear in the gutters, pademelons. They are too bitter to eat.

From the Kuke gate it was 115 dry kms to the next water supply. I rode through the cool of the night, virtually no traffic. Had a short nap under a tree, then clocked a couple of hours more. Woke up in the second camp at sunrise – someone forgot a full bottle of water at that rest place. I boiled it into a big mug of coffee and before the day became too hot I rode into Ghanzi, scruffy desert town without character. Shops were open, food aplenty, water tap at a service station. I gorged on chicken liver and chips, banana, yoghurt, found a sheet of old newspapers lying in the gutter and rode out of town to read it in the shade. Cops were out in force. Elections are coming up, the incumbent president, the son of the founding president, flew into Ghanzi today for a rally.
I am desperate to lay my hands on something to read, anything, in any language. Since I abandoned the only book I took with me, a month ago, to lighten my load, I had nothing to read. There was nowhere to buy books, nowhere to swap, bargain or steal any. I tried newspapers, but even that took three days to locate a copy. In the supermarket I saw a vaguely white face, so I asked him if there was a bookshop in Ghanzi. Bloke was an Algerian second hand car dealer. Married to a local lady, for the past seven years he's been operating out of Ghanzi and he knew everyone in town. He drove me to a bookshop. The only books for sale were school books, grade one to four. And picture calendars. The Algerian then ducked home and brought me a book of his own, as a present. A Marxist take on the rise of black consciousness in 1930ies America. It was given to him by another left wing Algerian, currently in Australia.
Ghanzi was the most run down Botswana town I saw. Streets around the centre were full of garbage and destitute begging children in rags. All were San, Bushmen, thin, dirty, malnourished, stoned, staring with vacant eyes. The only patch of grass was around Caltex service station. I stretched on their irrigated lawn, waiting for the cool of the evening. The same rotten tooth flared up again. Loath to start on antibiotics again. It will have to come out as soon as I hit civilisation.

Riding on a wobbly back wheel we joined the Trans-Kalahari highway, Windhoek – Gaberone – Jo'burg. Trees become sparse, growing in clusters spaced several miles apart. Scrub nearly gone as well, leaving it to open thin grassland with a lot of green shoots. It looks like a bit of rain fell recently. Land is no longer fenced off, no sign of cattle. It's hard to believe that this overgrazed desolate plane supported a large population of elephants only 150 years ago. Thuggish Hendryk van Zyl murdered 400 of them, before he was shot himself in 1880. It gets very cold at night. I did not notice it at first, but the country is rising steadily. Not steeply, I can ride in second highest gear, but my legs feel it. Biting headwind slows us down further.
Stories are written on the road surface. I read the dramas and for want of better things to do I fill in the missing details in my head. Burnt out patch of melted bitumen. Spilled pool of oil. An old wheel rim cracked right across. Forgotten tools. Discarded bra. Jacket neatly folded on the ground, two spanners lying quietly next to it. Little things you would not notice from a speeding car. Bleached bones of a wild donkey too stubborn to give way to a truck. A five ton mound of black coal where a truck flipped over, too far from anywhere to attempt a salvage. A quarter of acre patch deep in broken Coca-Cola bottles. Half a mile long trail of crushed plastic fittings. A foot deep bed of desiccated sugar cane, with some timber poles mixed in it. Sugar cane? In a desert? Where are you taking that load of sugar cane, boy? Mortality rate on this road must be shocking, so many small crosses line the road. An impressive black granite monument, carefully fenced off, erected where in 2003 23 people died in one single accident, mostly kids. On a straight flat road with nearest tree several miles away. Driver must've fallen asleep.
A bit before Kalkfontain (Tsootsha) a large shallow lake of fresh water, all the surrounding country pure white. I washed my limbs, it was too cold to do more. A bunch of little ground squirrels were watching us from the entrance to their holes, posing like classical meercats. I made a wish: for once make our mid-day rest place somewhere nice. And it was. Kalkfontain, an Afrikaans for "chalk spring", describes it neatly. Amid the white plane another shallow lake on the other side of the road. Road house is boarded up, but half a dozen fuel bowsers thrown around a big circle are doing brisk business. No signs, no advertising, no company name, yet a dozen long distance trucks were taking fuel at any given time. You have to know it's there, and you have to make prior arrangements, I was told. The owner of the road house gives fuel to approved clients on credit. Truckies do not pay themselves. For the ones not in the game, a Shell servo sells fuel a mile down the road, for cash.
The clandestine fuel depot is bull dust ankle deep, some places deeper. On the edge of action a hot tin shack where enterprising young mama cooks pap and stew, tender spiced ox shanks. Used to international truck drivers, she automatically asked for 30 rand, South African money. When I showed her local pula, she smiled and dropped the price to 25. A tap in the fence, cool fresh water for free. I settled across the road from Shell servo in a shade, with cicadas loud and clear. Village itself is about a mile further, but on a

Sunday I expect nothing from it and do not bother to investigate. I buried my nose in the book I scored in Ghanzi.
Even nicest places can be spoiled by little details. Lounging in the shade under a tree I noticed a cattle tick crawling up my leg. Then another one. When the third one started its climb, I shook myself clear, checked that none have crawled further up and walked back to the road house for more water. A lot of Namibian truck drivers were white guys.
I have no stomach for Marxist sociology, and I abandoned the only book I scored in five weeks. I left it behind on a rock where black hitchhikers habitually congregate.
After Karakubis, a desperate camp of dispossessed San tribesmen, living in crude shelters not fit to corral goats in. The whole country burst in green, all the prickly bushes, all the trees. It must've rained lately. Strong headwind from the overhead cloud forced another break. I cooked a meal on fire, and my toothache flared up again, dull pain of infection. I had no painkillers, only antibiotics which take a while to kick in. I waited till I finished riding for the day and settled in a camp, then started on the pills.
Excruciating pain in my tooth hit me as soon as I laid down. I can take pain, but this was extraordinary. I would have screamed, if it would help. I had to get up, pack the camp and hop into saddle, to see if exercise will ease the pain. When the toothache became a tolerable background pain I leaned my bike on a milepost, in absence of trees, and tried to sleep again.
In the morning, loaded to the gills on antibiotics and coffee I rode into small border settlement of Charles Hill, founded by Herero refugees fleeing German genocide in South West Africa a century ago. A good one-stop road house, in a village a small concrete room with a sign Bureau de Change. Exchanged my remaining pula for Namibian dollars, eaten a fill at a road house and cruised the last 8 km to the line. Right beyond the check post I found a well stocked air conditioned shop, so I had yet another feed. Freezing nights put some bug on me, sore throat, fever, nausea. Coming on top of a bad tooth it is no fun. And we are facing the hardest bit of Kalahari ride, a long dry stage to Gobabis.

Namibia is a manicured Africa, what the continent could be like if the profits were ploughed back into society instead of disappearing into few chosen pockets. For the first 10 km after the border road steadily climbs along a ridge with views of perfectly uniform level landscape, not a single gully, hill or creek depression, horizon 30 miles away, completely straight line like on the sea. A sea of scrub. Road is a strip of new bitumen with no lines marked, no sign posts, no mileage. Sturdy fences all along, cattle country in large estates, all the names on the shingles are Afrikaans. The very first dwelling I saw was a mock manor, a parody of a castle, at the end of a sweeping driveway. An awful pretentious kitsch built in concrete block, with crenellations, towers, turrets and dormer windows. Not a single native hut to be seen nor any ubiquitous little square boxes Africans build in the rural areas.
Nothing grazing along the roads, no donkeys, no goats. Every few miles a game lodge, a guest house, guest farm, built with total lack of aesthetic feeling. At the border I picked up 700-page guide to accommodation in Namibia, advertising hundreds of lodges. Yet when I checked the places we were passing, not one was listed. The total number of empty tourist beds must be phenomenal.
After the first 40 km of wilderness we enter more civilised strip, with roadside rest places every 10-15 km. Clean, maintained, recently raked, bins emptied, picnic tables and seats all set in octagonal slabs of raised concrete, a perfect platform to sleep on. Painted white and hospital green, built to withstand modest vandalism. Majestic acacias lining the road, boles two-feet thick.
It's freezing cold, I crawl into my sleeping bag wrapped in all my rags. Wart hogs are everywhere, digging up the ground with their improbably shaped snouts full of knobs and tusks. Every time I see a wart hog I think of Orcs from the "Lord of the Rings". Antibiotics nuked my system, I feel mealy, tired, cold, but the country is new and different, and my toothache abated. Landscape is same as Botswana, but here it is all private property, everything is fenced off and managed, not overgrazed and filled with rubbish. Windmills feeding huge water tanks on every hill.
Gobabis is a clean little provincial town with couple of banks and several supermarkets. Arriving around noon, in time for my standard chicken curry and rice in supermarket, then a hand of bananas and yoghurt. I am still on antibiotics, but I hope yoghurt will help crank start my guts. After the big meal I crawled into shade next to a dam. In shade it's cold even during the day. I did not expect a ride across Africa to be freezing most of the time. October may be the hottest months at the Falls, but on the high plains of Kalahari it was damn cold.
South African rand can be used over the counter alongside the Namibian dollar. I was directed to the only Internet café in town. It had one functioning computer – the laptop that the owner was using to do her own work. She gave me a blank stare: "Come back later". I came back half an hour later. She was closed

for lunch. Town is full of whites, everyone speak Afrikaans. I took stacks of free shiny brochures in a tourist office to have a look what's ahead of us.
Towards dark I am riding on the cool road, looking for a place to camp, preferably on a designated rest place with its fabulous concrete pad. I glance in the rear mirror, what is all that noise behind us. A truck overtaking a truck, hogging the whole width of the road. Highway is too narrow, there is no room for us on the road. No smooth shoulder to slip onto, I have to exit the bitumen in a hurry, the hard way. Sickening crack of broken spokes as we dropped 6 inches to the gravel shoulder. Within metres my back wheel is ruined, deformed beyond the shapes from classical geometry. It will not turn in the forks. I get off and push the machine under the nearest tree. Ground is covered in twigs with very sharp thorns. With no stock grazing along the road, there is nothing to clean the rubbish under the trees. Half heartedly I started clearing the ground so I could camp there and in the morning work on the wheel. It got completely dark. On an impulse I followed the headlights of the next passing car, and there, on the horizon, they reflected in a familiar trapezoid road sign – "rest place 1 km."
I loosened the wheel nuts and forced the bike to wobble the last kilometre to the camp spot, rear tyre scraping the forks. Tiny antelopes are grazing the narrow gage railway line running parallel with the road. A bunch of bigger ones on the other side of the highway. As they smell me they hop over the fence without a slightest effort and disappear. Warthogs dive under the lowest strand of barbed wire and force their way through, entire families. I reached the resting place. Comfortably spread on the floor, benches and table, in the faint moonlight I had a gourmet dinner, Kalahari style. A can of baked beans, cold, and a can of grisly corned beef, cold. Three cloves of raw garlic made it palatable. Whole night I kept waking up as wildlife was struggling to free itself as they got stuck negotiating the fence. Some big fellows, too, by the sound of them.

Next morning found me happily mechanicking on the clean concrete pad, making a new wheel. The old steel one had only three broken spokes, but the rim twisted into Moebius Strip. It wasn't only spokes that were wrong. Inner lock nuts on the axle somehow ground to nothing, axle has shifted in the hub and for god knows how long it's been turning on a sick angle. Sand swirling low along the road surface, driven by unrelenting headwind, acted as grinding paste. All the wheel bearings were ground into multifaceted polygons, more like free-form sculpture than pieces of precision engineering.
In Maun I applied a good dollop of nickel paste on the thread of the sprocket, so it came loose without an effort. I changed the sprocket to my Richards Bay wheel. I checked the tyre that got slashed in Swaziland when the brakes failed. Schwalbe tyre with its massive inner sleeve from Viv Falls seems to be holding, no bulge. I saved a dozen spokes as spares, and left the steel rim from Maun leaning against the rubbish bin. Inner tube refused to take the pump, valve was worn out. I stuck the spare tube into my Frankenstain tyre and replaced the wheel in the forks. My last spare parts gone, bundled in all my clothes against the cold, I straightened the jumper which is covering my seat, hopped into saddle and rode to the next watering place, called Whitflei.
Someone described it to me as a really small village. Correct. It had only one shop, shelves nearly bare. Shop yielded a can of beans, can of corned beef and two packets of biscuits. Restaurant was along the road in front of the shop. Four restaurants side by side, the most minimalist establishments you can conceive of. Crooked timber posts stuck in the ground, 6 feet apart, to support a torn shade cloth above. A few upturned milk crates to sit on, no table, dirt floor covered in diesel stains. Each eatery owned exactly one tin plate to serve the meal on, no cutlery. You eat with your dirty hands, nowhere to wash them before the meal. A cool-box with no ice, full of cheap cuts of meat, shanks of beef. Outside the shade, in the sun, four three-legged cast iron pots sitting in the embers of fire on the bare ground. Menu did not need to be printed. All the pots contained the identical fare – stew of beef shanks with a bit of onion. A dollar a serve, surprisingly tender and juicy. Nothing to go with it, no pap, no rice, no veg, just beef. Under the next shade cloth you can buy "Herrero bread" for an extra 50 cents, to go with your meat. Truckies stopped to buy take-aways – ox shanks wrapped in dusty newspapers. This is a Herrero country. Herrero are cattle men, they live on meat. I had two serves, it tasted great. Riding whole day you need to eat, you need calories, or you will drop off your bike.
Rumour had it that a farmhouse half way to the airport sells dried biltong from its road stall. They may have water, if they are open. Nearest shady tree was 38 km from Whitfei, and I waited there for the afternoon to cool off. Namibia is much less friendly to an itinerant vagabond than the rest of Africa. Everything is fenced off, private property, nowhere to sit in a shade, nowhere to pull off the road to have a crap in privacy. Until now all the road sides were grazed clear. In Botswana and Zimbabwe even if the paddocks were fenced off, some poor herdsman was grazing the long paddock along the road, so around

the trees the ground was clear. In Namibia they have to slash the roadsides with machinery. They stay clear off the trees, so under the trees a large ring of tall grass interwoven with fallen prickly twigs builds up. Trees become useless as shade, unless a road gang camped there at some point, or a broken down truck took shelter from the heat, burning the rubbish under the tree first. Rest places are the only clear patches of the ground. They are about 25 km apart, built in the shade of large trees. Often the tree sheltering them died since then, or was hacked for firewood and you are left with a bare patch of concrete under the stars.
Biltong farm was well marked. Large sign nailed on a tree proclaimed "Biltong, now open". I rolled down the driveway. Shop was closed for renovation, windows boarded up. A gang of bricklayers were expanding an outhouse and they gave me all the water I needed. I found a tree where a road repair gang once took their mid-day breaks, nice clear space, complete with several fireplaces, logs to sit on and a heap of left over firewood. A comfortable camp.
In the dry desert air distances are deceiving. What yesterday looked like a clump of prominent hills not far ahead turned out to be a range of high mountains 70 km away. Easily polished off the morning 40 km before the first break, where I discovered that I forgot my pouch of daily tools at the last camp site. A little bag that I keep in my front pannier on the handlebars, with my reading glasses, torch, lighter, knife, spoon, antibiotics, gell pen, vitamin C. Nothing irreplaceable, but a nuisance, loosing it. And this very morning I looked at it and I felt good that for all the breakdowns on this trip I have not forgotten anything behind. Then I left my whole pouch there. I wasn't going back for it, I will have to replace the stuff in Windhoek.
About 70 km before Windhoek country suddenly changes. Kalahari desert ends with a clear line. You can point on the ground where the boundary runs, it is so abrupt. No more sand. Kalahari basin is the biggest continuous patch of sand in the world, bigger than anything in Sahara, Gobi or Arabia. With no more sand, trees disappear, replaced by endless undulating plane of stunted shrubs, running to the mountain ranges on the horizon. Paradox, desert being more lush than the surrounding scrub. A completely black baboon is knuckling his way across the road. Two curious young warthogs are standing on the rails of the narrow gage, watching me. In two days I saw a train only twice. Two wagons rolling east, and six wagons pushed west.
Windhoek International Airport is so new that hardly anything is open. The only restaurant served breakfast and nothing else. I had a good coffee and a Black Forest cake. At 10AM half a dozen Indian money changers were counting their money, not interested in doing business. After a long pleading I convinced one of them to change me US$200 into local dollars. Airport sold no real food, so I took on water, and kept going. Without a spoon we better hurry to town, 40 km to the capital of Windhoek. Stiff headwind, erratic mileage. I am hungry, which does not help my mood. We are riding through complete wilderness, with absolutely nothing along the road. 20 km from the centre of the capital there is less sign of human habitation than in the central Kalahari. Land is continuing to rise, wind is blowing hell, against us. I guess they do not call it Wind-hook for nothing. A "windy corner", in Dutch.
In howling gale I pushed my bike to the top of the pass 10 km from town. Still no sign of a capital. I reconnected the brake cable and screamed down the switchback to town, arriving completely fagged out. Welcome to Windhoek, capital of Namibia, elevation 1700 metres.

Chapter 5: Skeleton Coast

Too tired to look for a sneaky camp site in suburbs for free, I found on my map Chameleon Backpackers Hostel in the centre of town, and I paid for a night, as a camper. For $10 I got a strip of sandy ground 7 feet long and 3 feet wide, sandwiched between a parked Land Rover and a laundry room, barely enough to stretch my swag on. I had a long hot shower, quick laundry in a wash basin, I cooked a meal, then a frantic hunt for something to read. Two shelves of books to swap, but all were in Dutch and Afrikaans, except for one obscure autobiography in Russian. I immersed myself in Russia, circa 1980.
Namibia can muster maybe 2 million people. Half of them speak Owamba at home. They live in the north and in the centre of the country. Various Bantu languages split the balance, Damara. Herrero, Nama. All the whites taken together, of English, Dutch, German and Portuguese descent, make up about 6% of population. Whites speak Afrikaans and they expect everyone else do the same. At the independence in 1990 the founding fathers were concerned about the dominance of Afrikaans, completely out of proportion to their number, so they declared English as the official language of the country, even though hardly anyone speaks it at home.

With 300 000 inhabitants, and a capital of a rich country, Windhoek can supply everything you may need. I prowled speciality shops, replacing lost and used up gear. New LED torch, thornproof inner tube, break pads, a few good cans of food for the next stage. Windhoek is clean and organised, in a German way, but it has no soul, no ambiance, no feeling. It could easily be somewhere in Europe. The only enlightened spot is the sculpture in the middle of the pedestrian Mall. You noticed how places erect modern attempts at identity definition in their malls, some awful twisted structure with enigmatic name? Windhoek went one better. A few hundred years ago a large meteorite slammed into the desert somewhere around Brukkaros, in the outback. Estimated at about 15 tons, it splintered into many fragments as it was hurling through the atmosphere. Composed of iron and nickel alloy, fragments partly melted, partly evaporated, deeply pitted on their fiery descend. About 70 or 80 pieces were eventually recovered, and two dozen largest ones are bolted down on simple stands in the middle of Windhoek Mall. Each one weathered separately, as it abraded, burnt, dripped and cooled on its way down, forming a charming group of sculptures. So much more humble than some stuffy forgotten dude on a horse as Europeans prefer, or a starving racist explorer gazing into nowhere as we favour in Australia.
Leaving town in early afternoon, riding down a busy Friday night highway, everyone and his dog was on their way to Swakop for a weekend. River of little suburban cans, I didn't know Namibia has so many cars. Highway is under construction, big trucks and earth moving machinery rumbling through the weekend exodus, no shoulder to ride on, nerve wrecking experience.
Between the capital and the coast highway drops 1700 metres of elevation, on 360 km of the road. It could have been a scream, down hill to Atlantic, one of the memorable rides, if it wasn't for strong head wind, narrow potholed road and busy traffic.
Little antelopes, like phudu, with cute black rings around their eyes, like ladies' make up. Singly or in pairs, all dolled up and nowhere to go. Met a marathon runner in training, a quiet self-confident man with not an ounce of fat on him and sparse perfectly balanced moves.
Country is too desolate to support trees, so rest places are covered in man made tin shelters on four legs, painted blue. Rings of big boulders were dropped around the shelters, to stop the cars driving in and vandalising the shade. Baboon country, healthy 30-40 men troops every 10 km. A couple of juvenile ostriches, and a mob of springbok antelopes, horizontally striped white, ochre and black, like neon fish in an aquarium.
My map is confusing. Its smallest circle denoting a village used to mark a full sized town in Zululand, and a small market place in Botswana. In Namibia an identical circle turned out to be a single farm house, boarded up, its shop locked for holidays, no-on around. Wilhemstall by name.
Karibib is a dusty one-street gold mining town full of yobboes. Some fiesta was in progress, army trucks, food stalls, brass band, sad clown in heavy make up sitting on a stool all by himself, smoking a fag. Everyone was drunk and obnoxious. As I was waiting in a queue at the cashier in the supermarket this big black guy looked at me for a long time, then growled: "You look ugly." He was looking for a fight, and if I was a local white, he would have got it, they jump at a chance to fight at a smallest provocation. I just smiled at the drunk: "Don't blame me, mate. You don't like my face, you have to take it up with my mother." – It was too complicated English for the bloke, but the young black girl behind the till cracked up. That cooled him off, a young chick laughing at him in public.

From Usakos we climbed a long ridge, sharp edges of Spitzkop Peak on our right. From SW the mountain does look like Matterhorn, as the tourist brochures say. Its prominent summit is on the elevation of Windhoek, we are dropping so fast. Steep descends mix with sweeping curves, flying along in front of strong desert wind. Then the highway straightens up, a narrow ribbon straight as a ruler, tiny little cars visible for 20 km ahead.
About 100 km from the coast I see the grey line of inversion ahead in the sky. I am looking down at the top of the coastal fog as it's muscling its way inland. Namib desert begins, first as a pink gravely ground with short stubble of grass in Naples yellow, an odd stunted shrub. Wind rules OK, from behind, we are flying.
Namib desert is one of the driest regions in the world. A narrow strip 60 to 120 km wide, running along the ocean from Angola to South African border. Desert begins from the beach, there is no green coastal fringe in Namibia. Local nomads called the desert "Land that Gods made in anger". For the Portuguese it was "Gate to hell". You get the picture. All the moisture arriving from the ocean condensates as the air cools over the Benguela Current running few miles offshore, and there is no water left for the land. In Namib it never rains. The geologists reckon Namib is one of the oldest deserts on the surface of the Earth, they are talking in millions of years. Imagine a place where it did not rain for the past 50 or 80 million years. Yes,

since that day, you remember, when that big rock slammed into Yucatan peninsula and wiped out all the dinosaurs. No rain, what little moisture there is, it comes from the fog, created by the same Benguela Current.

As we ride along, suddenly we are enveloped by an unseen change in weather. Very dramatic. About 75 km from Swakop, one moment we are barrelling in front of hot desert wind, then comes a gentle "whoosh", and a cold moist gust sweeps in from the opposite direction, from the distant ocean. Change was so sudden that it raised goose bumps on my arms. Temperature dropped 10 or 12 degrees in an instant. I have never experienced change so sudden and so profound. I loved it. I turned the bike around and pedalled back to overtake the line of change and experience it again. I exited the moist remains of cold fog, dove into warm desert wind, rode for a bit and then stopped. A few moments later the cold mist from the coast caught up with me again and mountains on the horizon covered in a blue haze. Welcome to Skeleton Coast. Atlantic can't be far, now.
I have read a number of accounts how the Skeleton Coast got its name. Some writers held that the first mariners called it after the skeletons of shipwrecked sailors who lost their bearings in the perpetual fog that always shrouds the shore. Others suggested it was named by whalers after the discarded bones of whales and seals. In fact the name is quite recent. It comes from a title of a book by John Henry Marsh published in 1944. It's a true story of a shipwreck of "Dunedin Star" during WWII, and subsequent dramatic rescue of the passengers stuck on this coast. Name he coined originally referred only to the northern section of Namibian coast, but it caught on and today on most maps you find it encompass the whole length of Namib desert.

Town of Arandis is not marked on any maps. It's a company town. Rio Tinto must've paid a lot of money to keep it out of maps. Arandis is catering for the Rosslin Uranium Mine, the biggest of its kind in the world. Mine built its own railway branch and a four lane bitumen highway, also not marked on any maps. Rio Tinto paid for the building of Institute of Mining Technology with a curved drive flanked by stately date palms. Buildings are deserted. New shopping centre has one well stocked supermarket and nothing else. Nobody took a lease on proffered shops and the gigantic air-conditioned mall is completely empty. One mama put up a corner stall, cooking good cheap meals. A couple of street sweepers were pushing their brooms on the marble floors.
All around a desert. No more grass. Fine gravel and coarse sand, in beige, pink and various hues of ochre. The only vegetation is a "dollar plant", greenish silvery clumps a foot across, half covered with sand, with thick succulent leaves size of a large coin.
After Arrandis I wanted to hole up for the afternoon in a shade under a shelter, but the first shelter was occupied by a traffic cop with a radar. Next shelter was vandalised, roof gone, table exposed to the sun. I kept pushing into the punishing wind, looking for a shade. There was no shade. The road degraded into thin strip of roughly patched tar with no shoulder at all, worse than anything I rode on in Zimbabwe. Vision of Swakopmund drove me on, a seaside spa town with coffee lounges on a beach.
In the late afternoon the head wind got really bad. Gritting my teeth, grinding in a low gear, I was fighting my way west. I crawled past the Swakop airport, silos, first signs of suburbs. Exhausted, I pulled up into a yard of an abandoned shop for a break. No, not abandoned, more like unfinished. I leaned my bike on a post and sat down in the lee of the wall, to shelter from the wind, my back propped against thick glass.
I little faded sign above me caught my attention. Washed out letters read "Martin Luther". Something stirred in my memory. I peered through the dirty glass behind me and inside the room I saw a huge black vehicle, with two enormous spoked steel wheels at the back, cylindrical boiler in the middle, short stumpy chimney and two small wheels up front, steered by a loose chain. I know where I am. I have read about this. By accident I stumbled onto one of the local attractions, a museum, a monument to German obstinacy.
When they first started pushing their way into the interior, German progress was hampered by formidable transport obstacles. Usual means of propulsion in Africa was an ox wagon, but crossing the arid Namib desert, settlers were loosing too many oxen. There was nothing to feed them, no water, and the beasts were dying in droves. In 1896 a young Lieutenant Troots decided he will bring modern progress to the backwards Namibia. In Germany he bought a steam locomotive and he had it shipped from Hamburg to Swakopmund. In Swakop they had no crane big enough to lift the 14-ton monster off the ship, so they continued to the next port, British territory of Walvis Bay about 20 miles further, where they offloaded the machine.
The engine remained on the wharf for the next four months, as the Lieutenant had other business in Cape

Town. When he finally returned for it, he found that the engine driver hired to run the machine already departed back to Europe. There was no one around with enough experience to operate the locomotive, but two local adventures volunteered to drive it to Swakopmund. It took them three months to fight their way, 30 km. Ponderous heavy machine sank in deep sand every 50 metres, enormous quantities of precious water was wasted keeping her boilers stoked up, fuel had to be imported from a great distance, all that for an average gain of 300 metres a day. Once in Swakop, they did transport a few pay loads to Nonidas, about 11 km away, and one to Heigamchab, but it clearly was not the solution the Lieutenant had in mind when he bought the beast. When she finally broke down about 4 km from Swakop, she was abandoned in the sand. That's where she stands today, museum was built around her on the spot.
The best known bit in the whole sorry saga is a complicated quote and misquote that gave rise to its current name, Martin Luther. A German resident quipped in a pub: "The steam ox is called 'Martin Luther' now because it can also say — 'Here I stand, I can do no other' ", quoting the medieval pastor completely out of context. German attempt at humour. Modern scholar actually doubt if Martin Luther said anything like that.
Exposed to the salt, wind and fog, steel and iron parts corroded away, so when she was restored between 2000 and 2004, many new parts had to be manufactured. The original rusty bits are propped against the walls of the museum that they erected to protect the relic from the weather. Museum is the building I mistook for an abandoned shop. It was closed. I passed that way several times, and it was always closed. A peek through the dirty windows was all I ever got.

Rested enough I rolled the last few miles to town. I bought a big cooked meal in Pick and Pay supermarket, took it down to the wharf and eaten it watching the magnificent surf roll in from the ocean. Fog was hanging like a grey curtain about 5 miles offshore. Ocean was too cold to think of a swim, even if the surf wasn't up. I was sitting on a boulder in the sand, contemplating. We are here. Atlantic. End of the trip. We crossed the continent, in 42 days, 4163 km from Richards Bay. It did not feel like an end of a trip. My bike was a wreck, I was tired, it was cold, but I wanted to ride further, I did not want to stop, not just yet. Africa was still calling. I experienced what happens to many long distance cyclists who do not want their trip to end. I met guys who have been riding for years, with no goal in sight, cycling for the sheer pleasure of rolling. It is a mindset in which you can easily get stuck. And if it doesn't hurt anyone, why not?
Towards sunset I was slowly riding over the bridge across the dry Swakop River, looking for an inconspicuous camp sheltered from the wind, when this little car pulls up in front of me, an excited African jumps out and runs back to meet me. Can he talk to me? Two young film makers from Cameroon, doing a doco about Namibia. They first saw me on the road a couple of days ago, as they we riding in a local minibus from Windhoek to the coast. They wanted to stop and do an interview with me, but the driver would not stop for them. Then they saw me a couple of times in Swakop, disappearing on my bike around the corner and they missed me again. They got me this time. Can we do an interview? For an independent production company called "24 hours Africa"? I don't like media circus, and the light was failing, but the guys were so excited, so genuine, I gave in.
Professionals, they had it all set up within 30 seconds, a video camera on a tripod, a fluffy microphone hanging low over my head. The anchor man knew exactly what he wanted to ask, interesting questions, too. No axe to grind, no agenda to push, smooth and painless. Then the cameraman wanted some motion shots, so he ran with his gear alongside as I slowly pedalled on the shoulder of the road. Guys promised to send me a clip, and I'd like to think that they did. G-mail barred me from accessing my accounts, so I will never know.

First thing I did next morning was to locate a dentist. Right away he squeezed me between two appointments and in a practised manoeuvre he relieved me of the rotten molar. I asked him to write me a prescription for a course of antibiotics, for the next time. All up it set me back $40, and I was whole again.
Swakopmund is a strange place. White Namibians consider it a prime holiday destination, equal to a best spa-town in Europe. In the early summer it was grey, cold and miserable. Town itself does not feel like Africa at all. Scores of guest houses, small hotels and pensions make up bulk of the town. Not a single building over 3 storeys high. Dozens of tour agents and booking offices, but no map of the area and no info on the attractions. The attitude is – book a tour with us or fuck off. Coffee lounges on every corner, but it took a lot of scratching to locate drinkable coffee. Most shops are protected by inner grills – you can't just walk into a shop. You front a grill, and ring a bell. The owner comes out to check you out, and if she approves, she buzz you in.
Waterfront promenade is being developed, in a tasteful low key way. Instead of dull grass lawn which

would soon die in the salt-laden air, local succulents are planted everywhere. If Botswana and Zimbabwe were about wild animals, Namibia is about weird plants.
Anything that survives in Namib must do without rain. Fog is the only moisture plants receive. Most species are succulent, fat 3-D tubular affairs, some almost balls, storing water in its own tissue. Wind blown sand accumulates against their roots, so clumps slowly rise above the ground, as they grow, and a garden bed planted to native flora looks like a coral reef ashore, dry aquarium on the beach, different colours, textures and details, delicate shades of blue and grey. Bending down to look at them closely you end up looking for anemone and a clown fish. Over two miles of it lines the Swakop esplanade, and it's a joy, sitting down on a bench, looking at the flowers, if indeed flowers they are. Oldsters ride their exercise bikes, youngsters jog, black kids scream, plants look pretty. Namib succulents are ideal plants for public spaces: no need to water them, no need to trim them, no need to weed them. There are no invading weeds in this climate.

Riding around the back unpaved roads of Swakopmund, I came to the edge of town. No cardboard shanties in here; no self respecting slum dweller would live in this miserable weather. A line of mature date palms delineated a temporary water course, and beyond it towering orange sand dunes, like instant mountains, obscuring everything else. I stopped to marvel at the bright orange colour, and the first thought that crossed my mind was: "Hell, that looks like somewhere in Africa!". – Something did not sound right. I looked at all those German cars parked in front German pensions and it clicked: we ARE in bloody Africa.
In a back alley I located the first and only coin operated laundromat that I saw on my ride. Everywhere else you had to surrender your rags to a washing-wallah and pick them up clean the next day. Swakop laundromat was an item in a mixed business, four-in-one under one roof, combining laundromat, bar, casino and a whore house.

Swakop Museum has a good collection on ethnography, but it glorifies the German era as a time of progress.
The first Europeans to land in Namibia, Portuguese in the 1480ies, were so appalled by the natural conditions, that Namibia was left to fend for itself for the further 400 years. Only in 1880ies did Germans occupied the territory, only because there was nothing else left free to grab. British in Cape Town looked north, but they did not think Namibia was worth their hassle. They sent a ship to occupy the natural harbour of Walvis Bay, though, and they held it until the fall of Apartheid in 1994.
Germans crossed the arid strip of Namib desert and pushed inland, confiscating the best ground, driving the native cattlemen from their ancestral lands. Between 1904 and 1907 dispossessed Nama and Herrero revolted against the aggressors. Germans answered with a savage campaign of attrition, a true genocide, determined to exterminate both peoples. With German efficiency they systematically shot, starved, poisoned and tortured to death estimated 65 000 Herrrero, 85% of their whole population. In those three years 10 000 Nama, a half of the tribe, were also annihilated. Survivors were driven into the depth of Kalahari or across the border into British Bechuanaland, today's Botswana. At the end of campaign the surviving prisoners were drafted into forced labour in the mines and on the farms, or resettled in so-called native territories, which later under South African rule became the infamous Bantustans. Many historians believe that the German genocide in Namibia was a model used by Nazis in the Holocaust of the World War II. Herrero did not forget those three years, and even today's young people remember where they originally came from. Germans are not popular amongst blacks.

For the Full Moon I went to the dunes. Dunes are not a dominant landscape form of Namib. Sand dunes congregate in several distinct areas, while most of the desert is flat boring gravel plane. Nobody knows why dunes form in some areas and not elsewhere and why they stay put, completely stationery, in spite of the wind moving their individual particles around. They seem to remember where they belong.
Namib dunes are the tallest dunes in the world. Highest ones rise 300 metres tall, a 1000 feet, and there is one that runs for 32 km. Dune surface is fragile so access to them is restricted. An odd footprint would not hurt them, but modern man does not walk, he drives around, and car tyres wreck the dunes in no time. You can't keep people out completely, so some dunes were nominated as open areas. Closest open dune is about 20 km south of Swakop, on the road to Walvis Bay airport. With their poetic sense Germans named it "Dune 7". You can climb on it, sand board down, slip and skip and cavort to your heart's content. By a fluke of topography Dune 7 does not get any fog, and during the day temperatures soar. Climbing steep soft flowing sand in 45°C heat is a sure receipt for a cardiac arrest, so I went there at night.
Two roads lead out to Dune 7. The main coastal highway connecting Swakop to Walvis Bay is a suicidal

strip of narrow bitumen without a shoulder or overtaking lanes, clogged by heavy container traffic from the port. Crosses of all shapes, sizes and denominations line the road, one for every self immolated young petrol head. Riding it once was enough. Around the back, starting at the Martin Luther museum, runs one of the "salt roads", as Namibians call their well made dirt tracks. Wide, regularly graded, strengthened by a bitumen emulsion on the surface, it carries hardly any traffic and it runs directly below the Dune 7, a dream ride. Golden dunes on one side of you, beige featureless plane on the other side, abandoned single strand of copper wire sagging between the telegraph poles, not a blade of grass, no vegetation, no life of any kind. Salt roads that I saw are much better riding than the tired bitumen of the main highways, wider and safer.

Approaching the dunes in the moonlight, they change colour, shape and perception of distance. The foot of the dune looks pale as if it was backlit by a halogen lamp. It seems far away, even when you know it can't be further than a few hundred metres, until suddenly you are there, slope rises dramatically into the air in front of your front tyre, towering mountain of sand directly above you, yet it still looks far away. Even in the cool of the night climb is an exercise to be taken slowly, or your heart will jump out of your throat. The top of the ridge is solid ground, sharp and twisting. From the top you get a helicopter view of the surrounding desert with the neighbouring dunes, distant quarries, sand pits, tracks and roads, all clearly visible in a cool light of the moons. Walvis Bay town lights in the distance.

I was going to camp at the car park below the Dune 7, there is a water tap, toilets, and a few dozen date palms I was going to shelter behind, but no sooner I kicked open my swag that an army of mosquitoes descended on us. Where they all came from I had no idea, but the infernal buzzing and quiet sneaky bites drove me back into the saddle. At the snail's pace that I was moving I ported my tormentors with me, and I never got away from them. I did not find any cosy camp site, so I had to sleep on the side of the road, bike leaning on a road sign, my padded jacket draped over my face to keep the mossies out.

With a sore tooth now only a grateful hole, world was a much nicer place, and in the morning I rode the last 12 km to Walvis Bay. Proper desert, absolutely no vegetation. Date palms lining the approach highway, waterfront given to the port and the industry, wide belt of tiny rabbit boxes for the black workers, outer ring of affluent white suburbs, walled compounds, green, looked after and topped by razor wire.

After a decent coffee and civilised breakfast I went to see the birds. Flamingos are the main reason to travel to Walvis Bay and they make it easy for you. You must've seen those gorgeous National Geographic photos of hundreds of flamingos crowding each other, wading at a low tide. You don't have to book any safari to go bush searching for them. Glamorous photos are taken from the Esplanade in town. At low tide thousands of birds line the Esplanade, wading right up to the concrete footpath, heads down, scooping the moisture with their inverted beaks. They let you approach to within 5 metres. If you try to come any closer, they slowly shuffle away like a bunch of crabs, to keep their distance. They don't fly away. You do not need any fancy camera either, at that distance a phone will do. Both species mix in one flock, greater and lesser flamingo, cloud of white, pink and black.

In deeper water, where they can still reach the bottom, they all duck their heads under to siphon water through their beaks. All you see on the surface are their bodies and two spindly legs. As long as flamingo keeps its head under water, it looks gracious. The moment their straighten up to catch a breath of air, illusion breaks down. Their huge black crooked beaks do not belong on such slender fragile bodies. Built like bilge pump, they dwarf the surrounding head. Flamingos remind me of ageing fitness obsessed aunts, who traded their face for their arse, as my love likes to say. You know, wrong side of 50, perfect body honed by daily purgatory of a gym, but one look at her wrinkled, dried up face and you can see how much stress and effort it takes.

Black backed seagull picks up a large green mussel in the mudflats, flies straight up and drops it onto the bitumen path a few feet in front of me, scaring the hell out of me. With a crack shell fragments, seagull dives to scoop its soft inside. Not being a famous playwright I feel safe and continue my ride along the Walvis Bay lagoon shimmering in the haze, smelling of sea weed and bird shit.

If it wasn't for the miserable cold climate, I would spend weeks in Swakop, exploring all the outlying curiosities, beach combing endless dunes, hunting the plants from the nightmares. Cold was wearing me down, I was itching to return to warm climes. But at first I had some guys to look into.

Fairy Rings. Fairy Circles of Namibia were the main reason I did not cross the bridge at Victoria Falls and continue north, into the depth of Africa. Fairy Rings were not negotiable. Nobody really knows what they are. A number of otherwise respectable academics made their entire careers by studying Fairy Circles. All they agree on is that they exist as a tangible physical phenomenon. They do not disappear the moment you point a camera at them, unlike other denizens of the Goblin Universe. I've seen some very intriguing

photos.
Fairy Rings are circular patches of ground, completely bare of any vegetation, often framed by a narrow circle of vigorous grass. Appearing in grassy planes, they inhabit a narrow belt about 100 km inland from the Skeleton Coast, stretching from Angola to near Cape Town. In size they vary between 2 and 12 metres, depending on their age. Fairy Rings have a life cycle. It takes 30 to 60 years from their appearance, as a two-metre bare spot, through their growth stage, till they max at 12 metres diameter, then die by invasion of surrounding grass. Himba people in the far north call them "Footprints of gods".
A number of sober theories were put fore to explain the phenomenon. Most are proposing some form of a ground termite responsible for creation of the rings, or radioactive ground, possibly residual poisons from some native plant. So far none of the theories could withstand attacks by their opponents, every idea is full of easily picked holes.

Every outdoorsy character in Namibia who stopped their vehicle to take a photo of me got closely questioned about fairy rings. They all knew what I was talking about, they all have seen them, and they all had their favourite spot for them. My map started filling with crosses and enigmatic notes. Fairy Rings are common, but even in the best conditions they are hard to see on the ground. In the spring time they are bordered by a circle of fresh grass and easily visible. We were in the middle of dry season, with the grass cover at its lowest, large chunks of desert completely bare. People warned me that without a decent grass cover I'll probably walk right past them.
Nearest accessible fields of fairy rings were located just inland from the salt road heading north from Swakop. I bough a few cans of food and set off north. Past a huge mysterious factory in the middle of nowhere, straight out of a James Bond film. Enormous evil looking cube with no windows, heavy duty power lines leading in and large diameter pipes exiting, deep hum of busy machinery but only two cars parked in front of the office. Maybe a water desalination plant? Next came a little settlement of Wlozskasbaken near the beach, several dozen fishing shacks, each with its own water tank mounted on top of a tower. Boarded up, every one of the huts. Like in an Eskimo village in Greenland, every building was painted a different colour, some very bright, set against a background of bleak grey sand.
Steel road signs corrode into rusted colanders. New signs use timber posts and aluminium sheets. In dry sand, with no termites, timber lasts longer than steel.
The main salt road is excellent riding. Every two or three miles a side track branches off to the beach. At the end of every driveway anglers are fishing in the surf. One side road leads to the shipwreck of "Zeila". A large Angolan stern trawler, she was decommissioned about 8 years ago, stripped off everything valuable in Walvis Bay and sold for scrap. An Indian scrap merchant paid to have her towed to a breaking yard back in India. He didn't pay much for the transport. Delivery captain skipped on a decent tow rope. Trawler broke the line a few miles out from port and washed up on the beach. It wasn't worth the salvage, and now she sits in the surf, bow to the shore, cormorants and seagulls roosting in the outriggers. A gang of hustlers are hiding from wind amid the dunes, displaying their semi-precious stones for sale, gems dug up in the nearby Uis.
One side road south of "Zeila" lies a Skeleton Beach. That's what I call it. The storm line is literally covered in skeletons, rich graveyard where the ocean current deposit the carcasses. Many dead seals. Bones in their flippers look just like human hand. Their rib cage is spooky as hell, too human for comfort. Seal bodies come from the large breeding colony at Cape Seal about 50 km north of here.
Beach combing the grave yard I found a complete desiccated mummy of a seal, its whiskers still attached to the lips. Hollow shell, light as a dummy, stiff as fibreglass. Desert dry air stops the putrefaction. Carcass does not rot. Body dries up, shrivels, shrinks closer to the bones, and remains on the beach for years. Many large sea birds, stripped off their feathers, only bones lying in the black sand. Complete turtles of various species, their shells fallen apart into little polygon disks. Grinning skull of a large carnivorous turtle, every tooth composed of two separate parts. At the end of the beach another complete mummy, this time a fully grown dolphin, its vertebrae clearly outlined by the stretched skin. And one partly preserved skull that stumped me. A powerful lower jaw with the incisor ground back like on a rodent, only the tooth is 3 inches long. I couldn't imagine what animal it came from. Later I showed it to several marine biologists, they scratched their heads, baffled and offered no guess. Even the curator of mammals in a museum in East London had no idea what it was. Shame I only took a fraction of the jaw with me, a bigger piece would probably help to identify the beast.
I love bones, skeletons, skulls and dried up mummies. I spent hours combing that beach, but I only took a few samples with me. I hoped to come to another skeleton graveyard closer to town, to collect a larger selection. Alas, like everything in Africa, second chance does not come. On the way home and in the next

days I rode to every detour, I explored every trail to the surf, but never found another beach covered in bones. The one next to shipwreck was a result of some local eddy in the current which did not repeat elsewhere.

Further along the coast, for the last 8 or 10 km to Henties Bay, black beach is lined by sentinels of civilisation. Every 100 metres a pair of solid masonry toilets, complete with little chimney vents. Row of shit houses disappears in the bend of the coast, on and on and on. During the Christmas period beaches are invaded by hordes of holiday makers, camping all along the ocean. Therefore the dunnies. It may look ugly, but it sure beats omnipresent used toilet paper and children's' nappies that dot the road and cover every rest place in a circle of white blots.
Henties Bay is a little retirement village of country hicks who love wind, cold and fishing in the surf. A hamburger cost exactly double of its cousin in Swakop, 75 km away.
Late in the afternoon I turn the handlebars inland, along the dirt road heading to the gem mining town of Uis. Fairy rings are waiting for me somewhere that way. Directions I received from a bloke I met a couple of days ago in a supermarket were clear enough: turn towards Uis, about 10-20 km inland you will come across a stand of fresh bright green saplings that sprouted after the last rain. Don't touch them, they are poisonous. All around there you will see the rings on the ground, both sides of the road.
I had my doubts about the distances involved. According to other sources, fairy rings grow in the grass belt, on the inner edge of Namib desert, at least 40 to 50 km inland. Either way it was not far to go. I stepped into pedals and rode into the desert. I know it was crazy. I was heading into one of the most inhospitable areas in the world, armed with a two day old faint rumour of fairy rings 30 or 40 km away. But it was better than riding 120 km into the desert armed with a two weeks old rumour of rings much further away, my next best lead.
Moon came out and hid in the clouds. In the diffused light I kept pedalling along a good dirt road. Not a blade of grass, but I startled a brace of desert antelopes. What do they survive on in this waste? After 20 km of flat slowly rising plane I camped in the sand, sheltered behind a small brick pump house, gentle hum of the machinery my only entertainment.
At first light we continued. Country is rising, but so gently that you notice it only on the way back, freewheeling down hill. Bits of gravel, moderate corrugation. I reached the edge of the coastal fog and the boundary of Omaruru District. I found the way point, the stand of young green saplings, the only splash of bright colour on this whole trip. There could be no mistake. There were no other green saplings anywhere, near or far. I possibly saw the rings themselves but I am not certain. I explored every patch of thin grass, every patch of bald ground, every discoloured ring of dirt. I could explain away some of them as alluvial tongues of gravel wash from the ancient rains. Some were not circular but oval. I was armed with photoshopped images of the best specimen taken in optimal conditions, from an overhead helicopter. What I found or not found on the ground could not compare in quality. People told me that they are hard to spot. Rings are delineated by the surrounding grass. This time of the year grass was thin and sparse. There was little to delineate the rings with.
I climbed every dune, every hummock, every rise and ridge, and I saw, maybe, faint rings. I am not sure. Late in the morning I turned around. There was no point continuing, without a good cover of grass I will not do any better. I coasted downhill in the blazing sun, quietly content. The outcome of this foray into desert ended in a typical African ambiguity. Did I find the fairy rings? I don't know. Maybe. Possibly. Quite likely. But I am not sure. The Footprints of Gods remained as elusive as the gods ought to be themselves.

Chapter 6: Agulhas

"Abnormal waves of up to 20 metres in height, preceded by deep troughs may be encountered in the area between the edge of the continental shelf and 20 miles seaward thereof." – So much the HM Hydrographer of the Navy, a generally sober source not given to exaggeration. The troughs in front of the abnormal waves are so steep that full size cargo ships were known to careen down into this trough and when they hit the wave itself, they did not rise on it but continued downwards, literally sailing under and foundering. We are talking about Agulhas Current, as manifested between Durban and Port Elisabeth on the South African Coast. That is also the image that average sailor has of the South African coast. South westerly gales, 20 metres high freak waves devouring ships, stormy rocky shore devoid of harbours you can seek shelter in, fog, dense shipping, you name it. It sounds scary and I know sailors who were so put off by its reputation that they abandoned a round the world cruise rather than to face a passage around Cape of Good Hope. I met a Japanese couple in the Philippines, experienced middle aged sailors on a strong

fibreglass 40-footer. They sailed across the Indian Ocean to Seychelles, heading for Suez and Mediterranean, but they discovered that Red Sea was closed by Somali pirates. Their only option was to sail around the bottom of Africa, but they were not game enough to try it so they turned around, and headed home. I told them it is not always that bad. I told them about a Russian sailor who rounded the Cape of Storms in a 17-foot tub that he built on a balcony of his high rise flat. "Abunai," they insisted. Dangerous.
Tactics employed by local sailors only add to the confusion. When hit by a SW gale, they run inshore, out of the strip of killing swell, they try to hide inside the current, hugging the coast. With all respect to their experience, I think it's a crazy idea. On the Wild Coast, between Durban and East London, axis of the current runs about 10-15 miles from land. To get out of the current means staying only a few miles from a potentially lee shore. A smallest misjudgement can put them on the rocks, and it often does. Every long term South African skipper boasts of surviving at least one shipwreck. No, mate, in a blow you want sea room, you head offshore, into the open sea.
I remember the last time I was in Durban, 20 years ago, two cruising yachts were lost along the Wild Coast while they chose to sail as the locals do. A French Canadian family, with 8 years of Pacific cruising behind them, left Durban, hugging the coast. They got so seasick in the confused swell, that they neglected watches and when the SW change caught them, they were blown ashore. Their boat did not sink, strong steel hull ended washed up on a rocky ledge at the bottom of the cliffs. Their boat leaned on such an angle that the batteries tipped over, acid spilled out and hydrogen filled the bilges. First time they tried to cook, hydrogen blew up and the boat burnt out. Family scrambled to the top of the cliffs without hurt, but from the boat they salvaged nothing. The other yacht was an older French couple who sailed out of Durban, also heading for East London, and nothing was heard of them again.

Freak waves are no joke. Few boats survived the encounter and the rare photos they captured are awesome. A vertical wall of water as high as a 7-storey building, breaking at the crest, with a deep steep trough in front of it. Small boat can't ride such a wave, angle is too steep. Wave will bury you under a mountain of water, most likely for good. Large ships sometimes straddle the monster wave and its neighbour, but many of them can't withstand the stress on the hull. Suspended by their front and aft with nothing supporting the middle they break in half and sink immediately.
Freak waves are created by a gale force wind blowing against a very strong current. In South Africa they occur only when three conditions are fulfilled at the same time: a strong south westerly gale encountered in the centre of the current flowing faster than 3 or 4 knots. To run into a possibility of a freak wave you have to fulfil all three requirements. Prudent mariner can simply avoid that combination. At most times in most places current does not reach the maximum speed. The core of the current is only about 20 miles wide, inside and outside of this ribbon conditions moderate to a marked degree. It is easy to stay out of the strongest current, if you suspect a SW change approaching. SW gales are not the prevailing weather, and not every SW front brings on gale force winds.
South bound shipping takes advantage of strong current, and around 100 fathom line, in the strongest stream, traffic is dense. 10 miles seaward it starts to thin out, and 20 miles from the edge of continental shelf there are only few stray ships to be encountered. In here current slackens off as well. My own tactic was to stay 20 – 30 miles out from the shelf. When I got hit by a SW change, I hardened sheets and headed further out, into the open, away from the current and shipping. In a 2 knot current, with wind no more than 30 knots, conditions were tolerable, definitely not threatening and no need to heave to. A day later SW blew over and we continued on our way, still staying wide off shore, to avoid the shipping. I consider collision with a ship my chief danger, much more acute than any weather.

A few years back powers to be finally scrapped that hypocritical rule which gave the right of the way to sailing craft over the powered vessels. For the past 50 years it was an absolute nonsense, and only idiots tried to enforce it by shouting from their puny cockpits up at a bridge of a large tanker that nearly ran them down, completely oblivious to their presence. For decades the only rule applied in practice was that the big ships have the right of the way over small ones. I know there is a set of clearly defined rules to avoid a collision at sea, but unfortunately few masters know them and even fewer obey them. I've seen in busy lanes near the coast of Japan and in Singapore Strait how large ships flaunt even the basic rules of traffic separation schemes, going wherever they pleased. What chance a small sailing craft has against them? None.
The only people to evoke the ancient right of sail over engine were inexperienced fools, and even they changed their mind after their first collision. No smaller sailor than Chay Bligh retired down below in a safe

knowledge of having right of the way, only to be run down and sunk by a steamer during a broad daylight. How many were not so lucky, and went down with their ship? From the famous names I recall Joshua Slocum, Alain Colas, Gvozdiov, as a sample. How many unknown sailors perished without a trace, ran down in the nights? Remember, a small sailing craft has NO rights at sea. Period.
I heard an arguments saying that the introduction of AIS will protect the sailing boats from collision, as they will be clearly seen on the display of a big ships monitor. Bullshit. They will be seen on the screen, alarm bells may ring, but if no one is watching the screen, what use is it? It's a common practice for the crew on a night watch to turn down the alarm bells and instead of staring at boring monitor screens, they watch porn on their videos. I know enough able seamen to say this aloud. And what of small tramp steamers? A Pakistani master of a cargo boat I spoke in Colombo assured me that at night they click the autopilot on, put their trust in Allah and all go to sleep. What good is your up to date AIS system?
In busy shipping lanes, like around South African coast, you have a better chance of meeting ships with manned bridge, and I have seen twice how a large cargo vessel altered her course to avoid me. Jean Louis had the same experience off Cape Agulhas. In less busy areas, when at night I see two white lights vertically above each other, and green and red on sides, I alter my course sharply and run down wind for at least a half mile, to make clear where am I heading.
Obviously you have to know what those navigation lights mean. Don't laugh, I have met a young Russian who had no idea, even after he's been run down once. A rich computer nerd with money to burn and no experience of sailing whatsoever, he bought himself a little plastic tub in the States, and he was crossing the Florida Straits alone, heading for Havana. At night the wind died, so he started his engine and motored on. It was his first night at sea, ever. He didn't really know what to look for. Suddenly he noticed a pair of lights approaching, one green, one red, getting brighter and spreading further apart. He had no idea what they meant, so he stopped his engine to wait till they pass him. Whammo! Supertanker ran him down, direct hit on the starboard bow, never mind his navigation lights, radar reflector and IMS. Two months of fibreglass repairs in Hemingway Marina in Havana. He was lucky that he bought an older boat, built like a tank. I asked him if he noticed two white navigation lights before he was hit, one above the other. – "What white lights? No. Only green and red." – People say that ignorance is a bliss. I believe there is a limit how far your luck will see you through.

Summer is the suggested season for rounding the Cape. From November till February, sailing from Indian Ocean to Atlantic, you often get three or four days of favourable wind, blowing from SE and E, perfect to run to the next harbour. Then follows an abrupt wind shift, a SW blast of varying strength, lasting 36 to 48 hours. And another window of favourable wind. Not every SW change brings gale force winds with it, often it does not top 25 knots. Standard tactic is to leave the port with the last of dying SW, motor in the calms, then pick up the favourable slant and run for the next harbour. Coast does offer plenty of protection, every main port is a safe bolt hole open to yachtsmen. Richards Bay, Durban, East London, Port Elisabeth, Mossel Bay, Cape Town area and Saldanha Bay. The worst conditions can be expected between Durban and Port Elisabeth, where the Agulhas Current runs close to the coast, its axis only 5-10 miles from the beach. Even the longest exposed stretch, from Durban to East London, is only 255 miles, nothing to frighten an experienced skipper. You sit in the harbour and wait for a favourable forecast. Radio, half a dozen websites offering their forecasting models, weather maps printed out and posted on yacht club bulletin boards, local gossip, sources are many and they often tally. With a window of good weather opening, you leave and park your boat in the strength of the current. Adding 2-4 knots to your speed, even a short two day window is plenty to arrive without dramas in the next port. In the summer you can get four or five days blowing from easterly quarter and many skippers chose to skip some of the harbours and push as far as the window allows them. Weather comes from West, depressions and fronts travelling at 25 knots, and sailing against the approaching weather, apparent window will shrink in length. That's when a sailor gets caught out, pushing his luck. Hopping from one harbour to the next you will be perfectly safe.

Agulhas Current does not appear out of nowhere. It is the direct continuation of the Mozambique Current, which itself is a southern branch of the great trans-oceanic current powered by SE Trade winds. When Agulhas rounds the Cape of Good Hope, a large section is incorporated in the north flowing Benguela Current, heading across the Atlantic to Brazil. I was riding on a continuous escalator belt of currents that merge into each other.
Like every self respecting current, Agulhas does not run in a simple straight line along the prescribed 100 fathom line. It meanders, kinks and twists unpredictably. The variations have nothing to do with topography or configuration of the sea bottom. Kinks spring up on their own from the internal dynamics of

the current, a fancy way of saying that we do not know why and how they form. They can throw the centre line of the current 10 or even 20 miles out in a day. Two or three times a year large meanders can move the core of the current as much as 100 miles offshore. These big meanders themselves move downstream at a rate of about 10 miles a day. There is no way of predicting them, or printing a current map of them. A simple look over the side helps, though. Even without GPS you can tell when you strike a strong current. In a 3-4 knots current the sea is boiling, swell ties itself in irregular knots, best hardened crew is seasick, short waves break under their own weight. As always, my advise is – head out, offshore. Near headlands and in large bays current throws counter currents and eddies, often reinforced by contrary winds. Between Richards Bay and Durban currents spin in all directions, not correlated to other forces. One more reason to make a good offing and stay wide offshore.
In the strength of the current water is deep ink blue and warm. A line of low cumulus often hangs over the core of the current. Occasionally a strong wind blowing from the shore across the current will push the water out, creating upwellings of very cold water on the inshore edge of the main current.
West of Port Elisabeth current widens, it spreads across Agulhas Bank and it looses its ferocity, seldom running at more than 2 knots. Coast changes direction as well, going from east to west and sailing tactics become no different than in any other area affected by passage of depressions. No more freak waves occur. Cape Agulhas is the southernmost point of Africa, and rounding it at a safe distance is no problem. Cape of Good Hope, terminating in a Cape Point, is much worse. If it's blowing 20-25 knots in the open sea, Cape Point is registering 40-45 knots. Fortunately the prevailing wind in the summer is SE, which is in the right quarter. Just about everyone gets hit by a blast of SE when nearing Cape Town, and down draft from the Table Mountain increases the wind even further. I heard many horror stories about entering one of the marinas near Cape Town, be it Hout Bay, Simons Town or some other sheltered place. I avoided this whole stretch. It was nearing Christmas, marinas were full and charging arm and leg. So I went wide, rounded Africa with coast unseen and fetched up at Saldanha Bay, 50 miles north of Cape Town.

On the way home from Namibia after my Kalahari Ride I could not resist the temptation and I rode my bike through Lesotho, Golden Gate NP, Drakensberg and Zulu Highlands, another 1000 km of the most spectacular mountain scenery that I saw in Africa. Large herds of gnu, kudu and zebras were grazing in hoary frost, I could easily rave for another chapter about the trip, but this is supposed to be a sailing book. You go and check it out yourself. Lesotho and Drakensberg mountains are worth it.
After two months on the road I rode into Richards Bay marina in fine drizzle, first rain on the whole bicycle trip. I was told they had some serious downpours while I was riding in the sun across the desert interior. At sea level weather was warming up after the stormy winter. About four of five days after I got back the first long window of favourable wind opened, and several yachts left down the coast, south. I wasn't ready to leave, yet. My boat was ship shape, all the stores were aboard, but the most important ingredient was missing: I was not ready in my head. I decided to wait for the next window. It took three and half weeks before it presented itself, but I didn't mind waiting. Embarking on a long passage, the most important thing is skippers frame of mind. You have to be mentally ready. You have to be eager to drop the mooring lines and head out. There must be no doubts in your head.
It took a week to get over the culture shock of being on a boat again. 5400 km in the saddle, riding day after day for two months, encountering new stimulation every hour, seat of the pants approach to coping with ever shifting surroundings, all that changed the way I dealt with things, how I talked to people, how I behaved in general. Back in marina I was home in the suburbs after a harebrained expedition to the wilds of Africa. The few permanent inhabitants on the board walks wanted to hear about my adventures, but I had nothing to tell them. As soon as I started raving about the ride, their eyes glassed over and my rant went right over their heads. Our frames of reference were too wide apart.
During November Tuzi Gazi marina filled up with forest of yellow flags demanding clearance. With Red Sea closed by the fear of Somali pirates, entire round the world fleet has to pass via South Africa so yacht traffic around the Cape tripled. Marinas along the coast were full, Cape Town area booked several months ahead, everyone making reservations by phone or Internet. Tuzi Gazi was not built to take vessels over 40 feet, and when it filled to capacity with 50-footers, it started to break up. In a gale all the anchoring chains stretched, grating against the deep keels of moored yachts. Combined windage of the visiting fleet was huge, and the entire tangle of plastic pontoons and walkways meandered, drifted, buckled and swung around with the wind. Every SW gale snapped one or two flimsy stainless joins between the pontoons and structure would drift apart until Xalani the maintenance man came with a piece of chain to bridge the new gap.
At 31 feet "Kehaar" was the smallest vessel in the fleet. Level of seamanship was abysmal. For all their

bow thrusts, variable speed props and what not, many arrivals berthed with a sickening "crunch", ramming hard the jetty as they miscalculated the strength of the wind, crews madly scrambling for fenders, after the impact. Every boat a plastic, not one single steel hull or timber. Owners of big white tubs have enough room inside the cabin, they do not have to spend time in their cockpit, so you only meet them as they hurry along the board walk, dropping their gaze as they pass my boat so they do not have to acknowledge me. When we were getting ready to leave, many were secretive about their plans, never admitting to me that they were leaving the same day that I was. Were they worried that I may want something from them? It was weird.
Aside from me and one Aussie surfing couple who arrived from the west coast of Madagascar, everyone else sailed south of that island, and copped at least one serious depression. Every second yacht arrived with damaged foresails, some torn to shreds completely. Mike, a 76-year old Pom, was towed in after battling two days to enter the harbour in a contrary gale. He had a few drinks in a pub and put his boat up for sale. He did all the sailing he ever wanted to do, he said, no need to push it further.

I do not do electronic chart plotters, I use paper charts, and when I can't get hold of a chart, I navigate by a photocopy. I was charted up until the Caribbean, but somehow I missed a St. Helena sheet. Not that I particularly wanted to stop on St. Helena, but it was an option on the Atlantic crossing, and I felt a chart may come handy. I went around the marina looking for someone who could lend me their copy, so I could photocopy it. I had a surprise. Amongst 44 yachts there was not a single paper chart to be had. Not even large scale charts as a back up. Everyone relied on a chart plotter, even though many of them had no idea how to reboot crashed software or what to do in case of a glitch. I was aghast. What if they loose their power supply? One lightning strike, one stripped cable shorting the main fuse box, and what then? There is no way to crank up electronics without a reliable 12 volt power supply. I am not paranoid. Time and again I met skippers who had their entire wiring wiped out by a lightning strike. What then? One elderly American I met in Guatemala described his position: "I had no charts. All I knew was that Central America was north of me, so I headed north." Fishermen guided him to the only safe harbour in Pacific Guatemala. He trucked his boat over the mountains to Caribbean, but frightened by the ordeal after the lightning he never left his marina. Ten years later he was still in Rio Dulce.

My prepaid three months in the marina ended in mid-November and management wanted me to pay high season daily rate from then onward, like everyone else. There was no way I would pay $25 a day, so I moved out, to the public wharf, amongst the wharf rats. I was entitled to one month stay free, so there was no fuss. And I finally met the other end of the cruising spectrum, people like me.
It was good to talk to people who used the same language as I do. In Marina it was affluent Anglo's, with a few Germans, Dutch and Scandinavians. On the free wharf it was French, Italians, Spanish, Estonian. Finally I spoke to people openly about things that I was thinking, not just a polite chit chat between suburban neighbours. I've been struggling with an answer to question people keep throwing at me all the time: Why am I so obstinate in refusing to use GPS on my boat? Why do I insist on sextant shots every day when GPS is much more convenient and accurate? Deep down I know the answer, but I could not formulate it in words. Not in English. Yet the first time we talked about it with a couple of French sailors, answers came pouring out. They understood my motivation and we could define it with ease. It had nothing to do with fluency in a language. We may be nominally speaking the same language but still do not understand each other. My colloquial English is better than my French; problem is the world view underlying the language – Anglo's picture of the world is alien to the way I am looking at life, while the French get much closer to it.
I have nothing against using GPS on a delivery, as a part of my job, I have used it on other people's boats, but I wouldn't have it on "Kehaar". Why not? I can marshal a long string of logical arguments against GPS, all lucid and perfectly valid, but deep inside I know it is not about logical arguments. With a bit of ingenuity I could steer around most of my objections, if I wanted to. The real reason is something visceral deep in my guts, something irrational but powerfully compelling that says NO, not on my boat. It is not the intrinsic technology that I am raving against, it's what it does to the user. Electronic gadgets took completely over the mind of an average sailor, replacing what little seamanship he may have had.
I don't go cruising because it is a cheap way to travel, I go out there because I get something out of a long passage itself. I cannot qualify that something in simple language, it is a raw first hand experience that I crave, immersion in my watery surroundings, and quality of that experience depends on how many filters I impose between myself and the sea, how immediate the contact is, how close to primal conditions of the sea I get.

There is a clear distinction between the "science of navigation", as it is practised today, and the "art of navigation", as it was done in the past. Ancient Polynesians successfully settled the vastness of Pacific, and they regularly navigated between the far flung groups of small islands. – "They developed a keen sense of interpreting what they saw, heard and felt, alert to all conditions affecting the progress of their vessels," Milton B. Moody writes. "They were one with the sea. With advent of every new gadget the navigator became more dependent on dials while he lost his ability to read the messages of the nature." More electronic gadgets you screw over your chart table, further away from the sea you sit. You become deaf and dumb to its voice, divorced from the very medium you came to experience.
I have a clear idea how the heavenly mechanics work and why I am doing this or that with my sextant. With clock, charts and a sextant I understand how they function. When my implements don't work, I know how to fix them or how to get around their failure. For me GPS is a thin wedge of complex technology that I neither properly understand nor I can control. And I saw how addictive electronics are. They are like drugs, once you taste them, you want more and you will never give up. I have never met anyone able to wean himself off them.
Davey from "Smoke" likened the noon chart plot to a ritual. I see the traditional navigation as a sign of respect, the daily ritual of pulling out the paper chart, spreading it on the table, plotting the sextant shot, then walking the dividers over the paper to measure the distance we covered in the past 24 hours. With GPS position constantly updated and displayed on the screen, I am missing that moment of peaceful contemplation, that communion with the chart and the world it represents. For me the sea remains a mystery, even after four decades of sailing, and old fashioned navigation is an attitude that I bring with me. Attitude of wary respect, almost religious awe of the sea, where your competence as a seaman is tested every time you make a landfall after an offshore passage, every time the land appears where you expect it to be. You have to keep alert and on your toes, the exact opposite of lazy complacence that the GPS navigation compels you to be. The sea is totally impartial, it does not care weather you had a pleasant passage of if your boat sinks to the bottom.

One of the itinerant Frenchmen in Richards Bay was Jean-Louis, an older professional fisherman. A short, sparse, soft spoken Breton with a tattoo of Indian "Óm" on his forehead and 40 years of sailing experience. His boat, "Balaka", was a mystery to me. A cement boat built without any steel reinforcing. Instead of reo-bars and chicken wire, concrete was supported with timber lattice glued together with epoxy. Built about 30 years ago in New Zealand, she was solid as a rock. Jean-Louis bounced a hammer off the exposed hull; it rang like a bell, not what you'd expect from a 30 year old concrete boat. I searched the breadth of Internet but found no information about the technology.
Jean-Louis agreed with me on the modern navigation trends. When he was working, long-lining tuna in Pacific, he used every electronic gadget he thought may help him in his task. On "Balaka" he restricted himself to a hand held GPS and a depth sounder. He did not have a computer at all, and he wrote letters in longhand, mailing a fistful from every harbour.
Like me, he was navigating on paper charts. I borrowed his St. Helena copy, in return he copied my Capo Verde chart and the Azores. The way I remembered navigation used to be.
We were all waiting now for a decent weather window, and when it opened, after three and half weeks of variable and unsettled winds, 14 yachts left Richards Bay on the same day. In the dying SW, as the wisdom said we ought to, we started down the South African coast.
Jean-Louis towed me through the breakwaters, so I did not piss off the pilots bringing in the large bulk carriers through the narrow entrance channel. He dropped me off at the fairway buoy and around that buoy I drifted in total calm for the rest of the day. The monstrous current that we all worried about does not reach the entrance of Richards Bay harbour and I made zero progress that first day.

From Richards Bay it's only 90 miles to Durban, but I was not stopping there. 20 years ago I spent three months in Durban sitting out a cyclone season, and I hated the place. 1994 was not an easy time for the white South Africans, I understand, but the way they were taking it out on everyone else, they deserved the hell they were living through. Mandela won the election, apartheid was dismantled, nobody knew which way the country will turn, whites were shitting bricks. Many cashed up, sold their investments and bought big flashy yachts on an off chance that they will have to run. Scared, they held fort in Yacht Clubs, turning the sailors' establishments into bastions of intolerant white supremacy.
That time in Durban I had no money at all. I left Darwin with $600 and that was long gone. I was picking up bits of work around the waterfront, fixing timber joinery on charter boats, scavenging anything I thought I could turn into money in Madagascar. After hours I was hanging around with the "Hooligans of

Indian Ocean". Yacht Club management summoned a surveyor on me, and tasked him with condemning my boat as not seaworthy. A cup of coffee on "Kehaar" and a friendly talk with the surveyor killed that idea. Next they sent a chap to condemn me as an incompetent sailor. That fell flat on its face when the guy asked me to teach him little dirty tricks with a sextant that I figured out by myself. Club's nabobs then approached the Harbour Master, asking him to bar me from leaving the harbour until I upgraded my vessel to their specifications. I had no quarrel with Capitan de Port, and he agreed to let me go, as long as I did it quietly. I ruffled too many feathers roosting on the Mahogany Reef and the yachting establishment tried to make my life as miserable as they could.
I did not suffer in silence. I still have the newspaper clippings where the surveyors reported on our skirmishing. These feuds leave behind scars that smart for decades, twenty years is not enough time for people to forget. In Richards Bay I was assured that memory of my boat and myself is still vivid and raw in Point Yacht Club in Durban. Even in Richards Bay itself I met guys I have never seen before, but they have heard all about my boat and our escapades around the Indian Ocean two decades previously. Durban was definitely out.

In the evening of the first day out of Richards Bay fair breeze picked up, we were ghosting offshore. I mounted my compass on deck, after it went haywire inside the cabin in Mozambique Channel, but sky was covered in dense cloud, no stars to swing the compass by, so I was practising "parasite navigation" I learned from Asian fishing boats. They attach themselves to a shipping lane running in a known direction, following cautiously like a bunch of remoras.
Passing abreast of the Durban breakwaters we were flung out to sea at a rate of 5 knots by an offshore eddy of the current. On the second night stars came out and I aligned my compass to rising Orion. Alnitak, the middle star of the Orion's belt, rise from the sea exactly in the east and sets exactly in west. Keeping 15-20 miles from the coast, shipping was minimal.
Third night out we copped a SW change. That whole first day that we wasted rolling in calm in front of Richards Bay cut our weather window a day shorter. Meanwhile I myself have advanced 250 miles against the approaching weather, which chopped off another 12 hours. We hove-to through the first blast, but soon the SW settled into 15-20 knots, we dragged more sail up and pointed offshore. Current was barely making the movement of the boat uncomfortable. 24 hours after the front, wind shifted to south and we continued on our intended course.
Bleak grey cloud, haze, patches of fog, drizzle, very light breeze, visibility maybe 3 miles. Unrelenting current carrying us in the right direction. A large car carrier anchored in the outer roads of East London lifted its anchor as I was watching it and it pointed the port entrance for us. I noted their compass heading just in time, before the dense fog, drizzle and calm stopped our progress. Rain squall cleared the air and we found ourselves half a mile from East London breakwaters, in shallow green waters, with whales breaching on all sides.
I ghosted to the condemned Latimer Landing and tied up to a concrete wall next to it. "Balaka" was anchored in the middle of the river. I did not feel particularly tired after the passage. I went for a stroll, sent a note home, then cooked a meal and stretched on bed for a short nap.
I woke up 17 hours later. On a tricky passages single handers can't afford proper sleep. In busy shipping lanes you stay up, alert, watching the navigation lights of the approaching ships. I try to cross the shipping and run alongside the lane, on the outside, with a chance of an odd stray, but not the main stream. That way when you feel drowsy, you catnap, an hour's sleep is about longest I take, when I feel no shipping near us. I wake up, stick my head through the hatch, look for ships, evaluate the weather, check our course, trim the sail if needed, sniff for anything unexpected, then drop off for another nap. In total you may even get your necessary 8 hours of sleep a day, so you don't turn into a brainless dazed zombie, but the stress accumulates, waking up and watching conditions even in your sleep. The first day in a safe harbour I pass out for as long as my body dictates.

East London is a river port. Harbour is a narrow funnel angled across the prevailing winds, so the SW blows down river and NE up river. Deep river valley shelters the waterway, the worst of the gale force winds blow over the top of the hills. Anchorage is good below the bridge, port authority laid a string of moorings along the derelict Latimer Landing for the visiting yachtsmen, and you can tie up along the concrete wall as well. Like elsewhere in South Africa, you get one month free on the public wharf. In every port. Out of 14 boats that left Richards Bay the same day, only three stopped in East London, the three single handers. I assume everyone else pushed onto the next port.
Large industrial town with Mercedes factory on the hill overlooking the harbour. East London does not

export raw material, it export Mercedes Benz. Sydney yuppies drooling about their marvel of German technology have no idea that their Benz was wholly produced in South Africa. Down town port is a black area, with their favourite supermarkets, so there is no coffee on the shelves, no bacon, no mince meat, no butter or sauerkraut. Outside street vendors are hawking their wares, rap dancers performing on the pavement in front of music shop, vibrant circus of real urban Africa.

Watching the whole sky covered in hooked cirrus cloud we knew another front was moving in. We were going to sit it out snug in the river. I looked around the boat, what needed fixing. I was still not happy with my steering arrangements, so I bought a box of stainless steel welding electrodes, plugged my welder into a wharf socket, and welded shut a knuckle join I built into the tiller in Darwin. It's held good ever since. Next to us a 105-foot steel schooner "Argo" tied up. A sort of a training ship, not for seamen, but for students of sea-related subjects, oceanography, marine biology, that kind of thing. Students have to do 3 months' tour of duty out at sea to get their points for exams. 30 young kids crammed below the deck, two experienced young sailors directing the crowd. On the way from Durban the skipper attempted to fix his recalcitrant water maker, and in process he lopped off his big toe. Now he was hobbling around on the crutches, but continued in command undeterred. That evening a bunch of kids came over to "Kehaar", an interesting mix of Yanks, Canadians and Malaysians, they were curious about my way of sailing around.

The front had passed, Jean-Louis picked up my line and towed me out. In the entrance we were overtaken by a large fishing tinnie, yelling at us that marine police is about to chase us back into port, because we did not notify them about our departure, harbour master was upset that we did not contact him by radio. We kept motoring. In South Africa you have to clear in and out of every harbour, but rules vary between places. In Richards Bay it meant a whole day running around, six stamps from six different offices, Immigration, Customs, tax, harbour master, marina, marina police and I don't know what else. In East London we ducked into a cop shop on the waterfront and told them we arrived. They didn't seemed at all interested in us. Neither of us has a working radio to contact the port authorities, so we asked the third singlehander, Sverker on a double ended "Nanuk", to report us as well, when he called over. Fishermen were not impressed by my explanation: "Police procedures were put into action. You shall return. That's the Law." I motioned to Jean-Louis ahead to continue motoring.
"Balaka" dropped my towing line and we soon picked up the current which runs very close to the coast. Forecasted easterly materialised and after a day of glorious sailing I raised Bird Island light house at its extreme range. In an accidental gybe I broke my boom, the bottom batten that I held in place with a preventer, a two-inch diameter aluminium spar snapped like a matchstick, clean across. The only damage to my boat on this coast. Strong current flushed me out of the bay and at day break I was looking at a light house of Cape Recife drifting in and out of fog. Once again a large ship nosing its way into port showed me the right direction and we ghosted into Port Elisabeth, sailed right through the harbour to the very end, then turned right towards the masts of Algoa Bay YC.
Friendly, helpful and accommodating place, cheap and easy going. About 50 berths, limited to 50-feet in length. The only place free was on a concrete wall, which is what I always look for – rickety marina pontoons give no confidence. Algoa was even flimsier than Tuzi Gazi. Swell rolls into the Club, and a few years back the entire pontoon area broke away, crumbled and sunk most of the yachts tied up there. I prefer a solid wall, that's why I have a steel boat.
On a Sunday the down town Port Elisabeth was dead. Restored colonial centre consists of clean bland reminders of nostalgic past. The only shops were fashion boutiques, designer accessories, perfume dens. Closed on Sunday. No supermarkets, no food shops, nothing to interest an itinerant sailor. – "Champs Elysee," remarked Jean-Louis. Like every Yacht Club in the country Algoa Bay is inside the fenced off port security zone, so every trip to a shop means security clearance at the gate, explanations why I do not have a security pass, why I want to leave the harbour area, then a detailed inspection of your bags, both ways, in and out.
Port Elisabeth exports manganese, loaded from large heaps piled up upwind from the yacht club. SW gale blew the fine black powder into the rigging, settling on every rope, in every crevice, every non-skid grain on the deck, smearing everything with thin coat of pervasive black pigment. And it stayed there. Even a crossing of South Atlantic was not enough to clean my rigging ropes from the black soot. Australian aborigines used to make their black paint out of manganese powder, on Groote Eyland, and it endured for millennia on the walls of the caves.
Departure paperwork was taken care of by the Yacht Club, and to contact the port control I strolled into the commercial harbour the day before. I managed to talk my way into the control tower itself, but the guy

in charge would not tell me if the entrance to the port was going to be free of traffic or not. Scared to take any kind of responsibility whatsoever, panicking, he tried to palm me off to marine police, then to port security, to anyone else, wriggling like a worm, anything but a commitment. I made him write down my visit in the official log book. View from his tower was great.

With a forecast of 6-7 days of favourable weather I dropped the mooring lines at first light and ghosted out of the harbour into light SW. I started early, in light SW, so I could round the Cape Recife without tacking. In freezing cold and low fog we slipped into the current which weakened considerably since it was roaring at 4-5 knots outside of Durban, running here at 1 to 2 knots parallel with coast. Wind shift followed wind shift, very light breezes. We crawled offshore. Light rain and low cloud obscured the sky. When it stopped raining, thin fog enveloped everything. I dug up all my Tasmanian woollies, it was so cold, in the middle of summer. After two days of light head winds we got a day of glorious sailing close hauled, then another day running with sheets loose. I passed the last safe bolt hole of Mussel Bay and went for broke. 30 miles directly south of Cape Agulhas we got becalmed under a clear sky, with sea boiling with fish, dolphins and sea birds.
We rounded the southernmost point of Africa, long way offshore, with land unseen, and only an occasional stray ship heading east. The calm spell brought a SE wind shift with it. I had no intention of pulling into Cape Town or any of its outlying marinas. I have heard far too many macho stories of narrow escapes when blokes tried to enter these ports in full SE gale that's customary around Cape Town. I was heading for the next port down the coast, sheltered Saldanha Bay about 50 miles further north, in the Atlantic. "Windguru" on his weather web site was forecasting 40-50 knot off Cape of Good Hope that night and he got that right. They don't call it Cape of Storms for nothing. If it's blowing 20-25 knots along the coast, Cape Point will read 40-45 knots. Barrelling in front of the gale under very short sail, I was pushing the old girl hard. I saw no point in hanging around any longer than necessary. With full moon low on horizon, we could not see the glare of Cape Town and we were too far offshore to catch a sight of a light house. My wind vane does not like starboard tack with overpowered sail, so I was hand steering the whole night. Huge swell throwing the boat around, one big wave picked her up and dropped her on a beam end, mast in the water. The morning after the knockdown I was picking up kitchen cutlery from gaps between books on the other side of the cabin. Temperature dropped even lower. Wrapped up in all my winter gear, I was still freezing. We entered the cold upwelling of the Benguela current.
By morning the gale blew itself out. Green-grey water, no shipping, fog. No residual swell, so I surmised we must be in the lee of the African mainland already. I shot a position line through the foggy sky and in the dropping wind we close hauled, aiming for the shore. Wind died completely, absolute flat calm. Large flocks of seagulls were hanging around "Kehaar", hundreds of them bobbing on the flat water of the calm sea. Expecting filleted bones, I guess.
In the evening light breeze sprung from NE, the very direction we were heading for. Only 40 miles from our goal, Saldanha Bay, we had little option but to close haul and head inshore. Dense fog of the cold current obscured everything, a dinkum pea-souper. Benguela current flowing our way, hissing in a light swell, telling us something about its strength. Flickering lights from a fishing fleet. That means big ships will keep a look out for them. They may see me, too, at the same time.
In the first light of the morning I woke up from a short nap, I looked through the hatch, and what do I see? Heavy surf breaking on the rocks half a mile away, upwind from us. With visibility down to a mile and no reference points, I tried to match the shore to my chart. What at first looked like an island turned to be a prominent headland; two bulk carriers anchored further around the corner. At first I though Robben Island with Cape Town beyond, that was the direction I was heading the whole night, but topography did not match. If it's Cape Town, where is the Table Mount? That flat little hill over there? No. We closed in with the rocks, rounded the headland, and the landscape looked very much like Saldanha Bay entrance. The current swept us 25 miles north in one night, and once again we fetched the exact place we were aiming for! My guardian angels working overtime.
In a very light headwind I did not feel like tacking through the busy entrance into Saldanha Port itself, so once inside the spacious bay, I headed south, down wind, anchoring in front of Langebaan YC, six and half days from Port Elisabeth, 550 miles made good.

Naming of Saldanha Bay was a result of a double blunder. Antonio de Saldanha (Tony from Castilian town of Saldaña), was in command of a Portuguese fleet sailing around the Cape of Good Hope to Indian Ocean, some time around 1503. Not the brightest of navigators, he miscalculated his position on several occasions, and ended up bashing his way down the west African coast against the current and wind. Suspecting he

was close to the bottom of the continent, he anchored in an unknown bay where Cape Town today sprawls and he went to do a bit of sure-fire navigation ashore. He climbed and named Table Mountain, saw from the top that he was still a bit short of the mark, took on water and continued tacking south towards Cape Agulhas. For the next 100 years Table Bay, future Cape Town, was known as Saldanha's Watering Place. The second bungle came in 1601 when a Dutch cartographer mistakenly moved Saldanha's name onto a large bay 50 miles further north. His mistake was copied on all subsequent charts and Saldanha's Watering Place was renamed Table Bay.

With wind forecasted to shift south, the next day I ghosted across the bay to Saldanha Bay YC and we stayed there on anchor for the three weeks it took to prepare for the Atlantic crossing. Three weeks of strong south and SW winds, sometimes dropping to light breeze overnight. To make sure "Kehaar" did not drag her anchor in my absence, I laid two picks in a line, one behind the other, separated by 5 fathoms of chain, then another 50 fathoms of chain. In 8 ftms of water she held like a mooring. Cold Benguela current hugs the coast, lowering the temperatures about 10°C from what it ought to be. Fog and mist dissipates as soon as it cross the land, but it's cold and inhospitable even in the middle of summer, very much like the weather in Swakopmund I saw 1000 km north, on the Skeleton Coast.
Jean-Louis was anchored in front of the Club, he arrived two days before me. He intended to leave his boat in Saldanha and fly to Europe for three months holidays, but moorings in all the marinas were outrageously expensive, so he changed his plans, continuing to Capo Verde Islands in north Atlantic, hoping to leave his boat there.

My love flew into Cape Town from Manila and caught a cab to Saldanha. I had a complete crew for South American leg of the journey.
Saldanha is another ore exporting harbour, this time iron ore that comes by a single purpose railway from the mine on the edge of Kalahari desert, 800 km inland. In shallow waters inside the bay large areas are given to rafts of mussel and oyster beds, salmon hatchery and other aquaculture projects. In the mornings curious seals swim between the moorings, lying on their backs, washing their faces, tame and unafraid. Perfect camera targets, like cute water dogs. They even bark like dogs. Days of sealers are gone, today the whole southern part of the bay is a National Park to protect the seals.
There are three yacht clubs in Saldanha Bay. Langebaan in the south is more a fishing and drinking club, friendly, but with windy crowded anchorage untenable in a strong southerly. Beaches of Langebaan are a popular summer vacation spot with lots of small hotels, pensions and guest houses.
In the middle of bay lies Mykonos YC, part of an ambitious real estate development surrounding a casino. From a distance it looks like an island town in Greece. When you come closer you see a suburb drawn by someone who once saw a postcard of a Greek town, but haven't actually been to Greece himself. Greek village on steroids, whitewashed two storeys villas full of arches, alcoves and covered yards, climbing the hills overlooking Marina. One day I took a bicycle for a ride to Mykonos, about 15 km from Saldanha. All the waterfront is fenced off as private land, no public access to the beach, uniformed guards everywhere. Billboards advertising "own a piece of Greece of your own", but the reality is dismal. Most units are empty, the few that are occupied are surrounded by high walls topped with razor wire. No feeling of a neighbourhood, no pedestrians, sterile new villas, the only sign of life was mad barking of Doberman watch dogs trying to get at you through the fence. Retirement dream? In a concentration camp?
Saldanha YC is a friendly low key establishment full of retired Afrikaners, nostalgic for the lost past, but pragmatic enough to adapt to the changes. The first week you can use their facilities for free, then you pay a reasonable contribution. Like every white compound in South Africa, Yacht Club is fenced in with guarded electronic gate in the front. And they do take their security seriously. Windswept town itself is tiny, walking distance from the Yacht Club, surrounded on all sides by dry hilly scrub verging on desert, beginning of the arid strip that runs along the Atlantic shore of Africa, becoming the Skeleton Coast and Namib desert.
From cosy Saldanha we made two day trips to Cape Town, in quest of Brazilian visa, a 100km ride through desert. An early morning bus drops you off near the railway station, in the centre of Cape Town, in the afternoon you catch the same one back.
I like Cape Town, sprawling at the foot of breathtaking Table Mountain. With its population being a mixture of every race imaginable, it has an easy going atmosphere of a true cosmopolitan city, something you cannot say about Durban or Johannesburg. Down-town has been spruced up, notorious traffic jams diverted to new highways, public transport upgraded, old city turned into a tourist attraction, clean, safe and welcoming. Cafe's, restaurants, leafy treed avenues, we even found an Indian wholesalers' and stocked up on spices that lasted us for the next three years.

Saldanha is no longer a Port of Entry. You can't clear in or out of the country in Saldanha, you do it in Cape Town. You have to bring your boat physically into busy Cape Town industrial port and tie up at a visitors' jetty in a fancy Yacht Club. From Saldanha to Cape Town it's 50 miles down the coast, against a 2-knot current, against the stiff wind, sailing in the busy shipping lane, in dense fog. I came up that way and I did not fancy going back in that direction just to get a piece of paper.
I checked it in the Cape Town yacht club itself. Secretary never lifted her eyes from her computer screen as she fired monosyllabic answers. Yes, I have to bring my boat to their Club to clear out. No, there are no exceptions. No, they do not have room for me. No, I can't book a berth. All possible berths have been booked out. Yes, I still have to bring my boat in. Merry Christmas, hose-head.
Back on "Kehaar" I fired up my old laptop, opened the Photoshop and cleared us out of the country. For a few cents a girl in a print shop ran out three copies of my clearance for Brazil. With a favourable weather forecast we beat out of the bay into foggy Atlantic, two days before New Year.

Housewives' Ocean

Trade Wind South Atlantic is a house wives' cruising dream. A bit of a Bullshit Ocean, really. No storms, no cyclones, no squalls, steady light to moderate winds, slight favourable current, insignificant swell, sporadic shipping, no fish, so no fishing boats either. Leaving Cape Town you make a good offing first, so if a NW gale moves in, it won't blow you ashore. Then lay course for St. Helena down the SE Trades, skirting the calms of South Atlantic hight. As the wind backs to ESE, run before it towards Brazil. In the summer the last three days the wind will curl to NE.
After the first few days, as you untangle yourself from the South African weather pattern of passing depressions, wind settles to 5 – 10 knots S to SE, sometimes whipping itself to 12 knots, but never over 15, not once. Yacht race from Cape to Rio must be a real bore. Imagine a 3000-miles ocean race where wind does not top 15 knots. Sailing back from Rio you have to go around the bottom of the stationary anti-cyclone, first down the South American shore, then across in 40° S, approaching Cape Town from SW. That part can be rather lively, and my friend Dima encountered crosscurrent running at 7 knots down there, but Trade Wind round the world sailors seldom venture that far south.
For small time racing nuts there is another boring event. Right after Christmas Simons' Town Yacht Club organises a rally-race from Cape Town to Saint Helena. After a few days partying on the island most boats get lifted onto a freight ship and ferried back to South Africa as a deck cargo. I am not kidding.
Cold Benguella current that envelops you as soon as you round the Cape of Good Hope looses its bite about 150 miles offshore, but it cools the passage all the way to Brazil. In the middle of summer at 10° S it was still a blanket at night. Benguela current is the reason why there are no tropical cyclones in the South Atlantic. Water is too cold to power a revolving storm, you need it at least 26°C before a hurricane can develop. Normally on a tropical passage I count on about 4 litres of water a day per person. We were using only 5 litres a day between the two of us, it was so cool.
I could see why all the cruising folks are raving about the South Atlantic. You drag the rags up the mast, click in the windvane and then you wait till you get there. I was a bit disappointed. I read all those excited accounts of long oceanic swell… well, it may be different in the winter but most folks round the Cape in summer, and a 4-foot swell is not what I call "long oceanic swell". I've done most of my sailing in the tempestuous winds of monsoon areas, in much more lively conditions. On an ocean crossing I like to average 100 miles a day or more, but in South Atlantic we rarely cracked a 100 miles at all, daily runs averaging 90 miles over 3500 miles passage. For a standard rig it's a big MPS or a spinnaker all the way to Brazil. With unsteady fluky breezes many yachts arrive with torn light weather sails. "Kehaar" carried the full sail right across, all hatches open, something that hasn't happened on a long run before.
And the Deep Ocean is dead, an Indigo Desert, just like the Indian Ocean was. Away from the coast we only came across one school of juvenile doradoes and they were so hungry they fought for my lure the moment I dropped it over the side. When I cut their bellies open, their guts were empty. I pulled out several of them, one a day, but after they left we saw no other fish at all. "Kehaar's" wake remained barren. An odd bird every few days, a lonely migrating whale a couple of times, a thin sprinkling of juvenile flying fish. Not one fishing boat, either. Pelagic oceans have been plundered, fished out, completely. Two years later, crossing the North Atlantic, the story will repeat. Not one fish to be seen.
In those six weeks in the open we didn't face a single squall, we had no rain, broke no gear, lost nothing overboard, my crew got over her sea sickness after the second week and before it could get boring, 39 days from South Africa, we fetched Port of Cabedelo, Brazil, in the mouth of the Paraiba River, at 7° S. Brazilians know the place as João Pessoa, which is a big town full of sky scrapers about 10 km south along

the beach. In yachting guide books, look for Jacaré, 5 nautical miles further upstream. Anchor in front of Jacaré Marina Village, anywhere, depth is about 4-5 metres, holding excellent in sandy mud.
Sitting on the very tip of the South American bulge, Jacaré is one of the focal points of long distance cruising. Only 1500 miles from Capo Verde Islands, every day someone sails in after crossing the Atlantic from Europe. Most of Trade Wind sailors coming from Cape Town also stop in Jacaré, to stock up, to fix dead electronics and patch up torn light weather sails. From here the weather and currents allow you a choice: sail NE to the Caribbean or alternatively south, down to Rio, and Patagonia. A fast turnover of people, a good place to pick the brains of more experienced sailors, scribble down in the notebook fresh gossip and rumours, or hitch a ride as an itinerant crew.
Jacaré is a carefree oasis on a barbaric coast. No hurricanes, no malaria, no problems with theft, muggings, robbery or con, a fresh Trade Wind keeping the insects away. Tie your dinghy at the pontoons of the marina which is owned and operated by a bunch of French sailors. With French yachties only sailing to places where French is spoken, Jacaré felt like a French retirement village.

Chapter 7: Carnival in Brazil

We arrived in Brazil in time for Carnival. We barely caught it, too. Brazilians like to start their partying with a good run-up. Carnival was originally a promise to abstain from eating meat, "carne-vale". It commemorates beginning of Lent, "one of the more morbid rituals of the death cult known as Roman Catholic Church", to quote from the blog of my convent educated mermaid.
Every place runs its Carnival at a slightly different time: in Rio it goes on for 6 days, starting on a Friday and ending on Ash Wednesday, 46 days before Easter. Rio carnival is public holidays, and the entire country of 200 million people stops for six days. In the North they begin a week before everyone else and carry on for a few days after. In Olinda it was a huge disorganised street party raging for 11 days straight. The form differs greatly between regions. Famous revelry in Rio and São Paulo is a paid spectacle, a competition of local samba schools which culminates with a show at a Samba-drome. For the main event you pay an entrance fee and watch other people having fun.
In Pernambuco and Paraiba in the north-east, where we stayed, it's free, informal and participatory, right there on the street, more like the original carnivals in Portugal and Madeira. It costs nothing and everybody can join in everything.
In João Pessoa, our nearest big town, it was a night-long procession of "trios electricos", massive decorated semi-trailer trucks topped with high platforms where the musicians play and professional dancers spin in the harsh lights of halogens. 12-foot tall speakers hang down the sides of trucks, bone-conducting bass shaking your guts, 200-decibel "axè" music hurting your ears. Half a mile from a truck is about comfortable distance to maintain, if you want good music without vibrating intestines. Individual trucks slowly creep down the main drag, leaving wide gaps between them, a 5 km long parade of stop and start dancing. Every vehicle is surrounded by its fans, at a slightest provocation everyone starts dancing, first bar of a song is enough to get everyone shaking and stomping, any age, weight, shape or colour. "Dancing the length of carnival" means exactly that, several hours of performance, following the trucks from the centre of city to the end on the beach.
Troops of Military Police are marching between the music trucks up and down the street in full riot gear, bullet proof vests, helmets, shields, batons, Uzi machine guns, with casual brutality roughly manhandling gangs of passive skinny teens, searching them for hidden drugs. Nobody seems to notice the violence of cops, or at least pretends not to notice. Brazilian military officially surrendered the rule to civilian government decades ago, but they continue de facto ruling the life. There is no appeal against their bullying.
One morning we caught a bus ride two hours south to Olinda in Pernambuco State. Olinda Carnival went on in the heat of the day, not at night. In the middle of summer, 7° from Equator, tropical sun was hanging directly overhead. Yet it was such a cosy and intimate atmosphere with very little organisation and no pattern to human beehive. Carnival was happening on the hill of the old town, everywhere, in the open, on the streets. River of people flowed towards the historical centre the whole day, people joining in and departing as they felt like. Bands and crowds in costumes stumbling up and down the crooked cobble stones of the narrow medieval streets, pastel coloured three storey houses done each in different hue. Under the blazing sun bare skin counted for costume as well. Everybody dancing to the rhythm of passing music, dense mob of humanity slowly flowing up and down the steep hills, in both directions at the same time, mostly young people from south. You step in and join whoever you like, music and grog fuelling the fun. A lot of brass bands were blasting local styles like "frevo", which means "to boil". If you are good

enough, you can join in as a band yourself. It can be as simple as a single bloke with a triangle, beating the rhythm. Another guy passing by picks up the rhythm and bursts into song. Two beats further a whole crowd around them is roaring the song, within few seconds the whole street is shuffling the steps of the dance. No lead singer, no trained vocals, truly spontaneous music of the street.
Some bands consist of drummers only, no other instruments, but man, what drumming! First you hear their rumble at the other end of the street. I couldn't figure how they made the bass beat so powerful without making it too noisy. When they passed us, I saw it – 12 drummers were belting out the bass alone, and another 12 on assorted smaller drums supplied the frills. Soul-stirring emotional "ngoma" straight from Africa. Bands of ochre painted "orixa" dancers, discreetly puffing on joints. In Brazil nobody rolls their tobacco, ready made cigarettes are so cheap. So when my love sits down on a curb to roll her smoke, many straight middle age people frown in disapproval, thinking it's ganja. In Olinda one never-do-good sat next to her and asked for a puff. He inhaled deeply, stopped to consider, then burst in indignation: "There is nothing in it!" He was sure Nat was rolling a joint. Few beers under her belt, my love laughed in his face.

Carnival dancing craze grips the country. People shake their ass anywhere, anytime, at a slightest provocation. Everyone. Waiting in a queue in a bakery I watched grandpa and grandma standing in front of me, trying to entertain their bored 4-year old grandson. Grandpa started humming a samba tune, gently drumming his fingers on the handrail. In a second grandma picked up the rhythm, wiggling her ass to the tune, clapping her hands in front of the youngster. In no time at all they were shuffling the dance steps, all three of them, right there in front of the cashier.
Sometimes it felt like Brazilians do not need an excuse of Carnival to keep on dancing. Bella, a cleaning lady who came every day to do the laundry for the Marina, turned up the music on her smartphone, grabbed a broom and started dancing with it as she was sweeping sand from the restaurant hall. She does not like to use a vacuum cleaner. You can't dance with a vacuum cleaner.

Second week in the country I finally completed the clearing in. Bureaucracy is bloated in Brazil, petty rules barely comprehensible, but they have their priorities right. The first time I tried to clear in, right after we arrived, nobody felt like doing anything, and they politely showed me the door: "Please, be so kind, and come back AFTER the Carnival." Carnival comes first, papers can wait. Nobody comes to your boat. The only two countries on the whole circumnavigation where officials boarded "Kehaar" was Cuba and Australia. And Cubans were polite and efficient.
A new Brazilian law insists that you hire a registered agent to clear you in, like in most other south American countries. Brazilian agent will cost you $100 plus all his expenses, but in Cabedelo the authorities allow yachtsmen to do their own clearance. Nobody expects you to clear in immediately, a few days delay is fine. At the Immigration expect 2-3 hours wait, then front a young sneezing grimacing moron who logs off his computer every time he finishes typing in a line, then waits while his machine boots up before he types another line.
Next day catch a train to Port of Cabedelo to do the Customs. You bring with you a print-out of an electronic goods declaration that you typed into Internet. You declare your boat as a hand luggage. Nobody speaks any English at the Customs, but they are a friendly bunch, as long as you have nothing to declare except a boat in your luggage.

With prevailing winds from easterly quarter and a strong current pushing you west, trip further along this coast is usually described as one way, from Brazil to Caribbean. I have met two guys in Jacaré who did sail the other way. Such masochists have two tactics to choose from. A 32-foot Swiss sloop tacked for a month from Martinique to Jacaré. To avoid the contrary current, they went inside it, sailing by a depth sounder in 5 metres of water, long tacks close inshore, crashing into the Trade Wind, sailing blind in murky water. Coast is broken up by a number of river estuaries, offshore shoals and sandy islands, so careful navigation 24 hours a day is important. Skipper described in awe how the monstrous tides in the mouth of Amazon first sucked them in, then spat them out a few hours later.
The other option is to go wide, outside of the main current. A Russian catamaran, a 47-foot Catana, did just that, first a long tack from Trinidad, out, past Barbados, then close hauled south. Both boats were heading for Rio, and both had to pull into Jacaré with serious rigging problems. Russians came in with one halyard remaining, all the rest broken. They ripped out from the deck both jib sheet blocks and every one of their sails needed mending. They pushed their boat hard and all the interior lining of weather fore cabin caved in from constant bashing by the waves. The list of damages sustained was impressive.

Our original plan was to cruise leisurely along the north coast of Brazil towards West Indies, stopping first in Fortaleza, then for a month in the old city of San Luis, leaving the boat in a yacht club in Belem to catch a steamer up the Amazon to Manaus, learning Portuguese along the way, that sort of thing.
News we heard in Jacaré was grim. The very week we arrived in Brazil, three armed robberies of yachts were reported from the north coast alone. In Fortaleza a large Australian schooner "Windjammer" arrived to clear into the country. Late at night they anchored in front of Marina entrance, awaiting the daylight. An hour after they dropped a pick, local boat with three thugs armed with 10-inch knives attempted a boarding. Luckily one of the Aussies was still on deck and he saw them approaching. He summoned the crew and they fought back with wooden spars, boat hooks and their own kitchen knives. Second piece of luck, bandits carried no guns, so they were beaten off. Sailing into marina at daybreak they reported the attack. Manager told them that a French yacht was boarded at the same place the previous night, and their boat was stripped. They were robbed of everything valuable.
A day later we heard much worse. An elderly Dutch couple were anchored outside of San Luis Yacht Club, the very place we were going to spend a month. Thugs came in on a punt. This lot carried guns and the skipper was shot dead on his own boat, before the bandits fled.
Three attacks in the week we arrived was really bad statistics. Afterwards the things calmed down, at least judged by the silence on the Internet, but I am not sure how true that was. Internet is dominated by Americans and a large portion of cruising scene that does not speak English as their first language completely ignores their sailing websites. Cruising the Caribbean I kept meeting guys who were robbed at gunpoint along the north coast Brazil, but not being Anglo's, their stories never made it into cyber space. Gathering the rumours in Jacaré I was scratching my beard, thinking. I accept thieving as a risk of cruising in wilder areas, and I lost a lot of gear over the years to sticky fingers, but armed robbery is something else.
Leaving the boat in Belem also posed a problem. Yacht Club marked in all the cruising guides no longer exists and there is nowhere safe to leave your vessel unattended if you want to go upriver on a steamer. What more, reports of violent boarding came down from the Amazon estuary as well. A year before Anton Bushuyev, on his Russian flagged "Scallawag" was robbed at a gun point after he left Belem, as he was anchored off the Mosqueiro island. And the story of Peter Blake, shot dead on his boat anchored at Macapa, is well known. I know, attacks are spaced apart in time, but they are rare because very few yachts call in. Sailors who cruise this coast avoid large towns, stopping only in small fishing villages and on remote reefs.
I am fairly sceptical about dangers reported in sailing circles, but this sounded too rough for comfort. In Darwin I built a steel grill to fit into the hatches at nigh, to make stealthy boarding more difficult, but going over it in Jacaré, we thought: why force our way where we are not welcome? There are so many other places waiting ahead, without this sort of hassle. Certainly, there are small villages along the Brazilian coast where yachties stop in peace, and we tracked down some of their whereabouts, but we were more interested in people, culture, local art, and for that you need larger towns.

Northern coast of South America is so shallow that 20 miles from the shore you'd be lucky to measure 10 fathoms of water. About 40 or 50 miles offshore, at the edge of continental shelf, runs a mighty escalator, a narrow band of Guyana Current hurrying west. Following the coast along the 100-fathom line, it is a northern limb of the Trade Wind Equatorial current that crossed the Atlantic from Africa and split into two branches when it hit Brazil. In the open ocean it does not amount to much, less than a knot, but when it is squeezed against the coast, it speeds up. Around Fortaleza it was running at two and half knots, with us, across the mouth of Amazon only a touch less. On the days when the wind dropped to a whisper and veered to NNE, current accounted for half of our daily runs.
My love called the current a "Travelator", after the moving pavement she loved at the Changi airport in Singapore. You step on and you are moving, no need to do anything else. Guyana Travelator comes with a catch, though. Any sort of wind over 5 knots blowing across the 2-3 knot current is bound to create a mess of a swell. Sailing close hauled is like bouncing in a Jeep across a potato field. Hobby horsing over the waves tied into knots, every couple of minutes a short brick wall that stop the progress of the boat dead. Add to that mysterious "upwellings" reported both by Admiralty Pilot Books and by the delivery skippers I spoke to, and you get a boat lurching from overfall to overfall like a shipwreck. Irregular movement doesn't give your body a chance to adjust. My crew was sea sick day after day, easing off only when the wind dropped below 5 knots. The only other place I have met such a mess was crossing Bonaparte Gulf in north Australia, the difference being that Guyana Travelator went on for 1600 tedious miles.

River Amazon, unlike her big sisters, Mississippi, Nile or Ganges, does not have a growing delta of accumulated mud expanding into the sea, even though it carries an immense amount of mud in its water. Quite the opposite, Amazon estuary is in a wide bay. The river mouth is extremely shallow, full of shoals and sandy islands, but the shoreline remains stable, no new land is being formed from the deposits of mud as it does in other big rivers. Why is that, I have no idea.
The scale of things on Amazon is mind boggling. Marajo Island, that separates the two main arms of Amazon, is size of Switzerland. Mud carried out by river can be detected in the water 70 miles out at sea. It took us three days to sail obliquely across the estuary, which is roughly 150 miles wide. Staying with the Guyana current, we cut diagonally cross the mouth of the river, keeping about 200 miles offshore, so we saw no mud, but we sure felt the effects of the river even that far. A stretch of diabolical overfalls continuing for hour after hour, incomprehensible violence of swell coming from every direction, hollow troughs breaking over "Kehaar" for no reason, 20 miles of utter misery. Naturally it came at night, as all the misery afloat does. Balancing in the hatch in pitch darkness, I couldn't understand where it all came from. Weather was mild, 15 knot wind blowing at right angle across one and half knot current. It did create messy seas, but we've been sailing that way for a week now and we were used to them. This new tangle was on altogether different scale, crazy dance of short steep rapids defying laws of gravity. "Kehaar" was twisting, bouncing, jerking and falling down the waves in every direction, for hours on end. It was exhausting.
Conditions eased around day break, and after I shot the meridian passage at noon I was plotting the lines on the chart, when it occurred to me to extend the course of Rio Para seawards. It fit perfectly, and it made sense. 200 miles from its mouth the southern arm of Amazon was powerful enough to create a fantastic tangle when it collided with a current at right angle, with wind blowing from yet another direction. On a same passage two years later I stayed about 60 to 80 miles closer to the mainland, just inside the 100-fathom line, to benefit from the strongest current. Going 3 months later in the season, wind was much lighter and effects of the current not so dramatic. In a flat calm, about 100 miles from the northern mouth of the Amazon, I drifted into an awesome phenomenon, the actual line where the mighty river joins the sea. It is a clear sharp divide, and waters do not mix. In blazing sun and not a puff of wind I was chipping and painting rust patches on deck, when I noticed a meandering line of turbulent water slowly approaching on angle from the mainland, stretching like low surf as far as I could see in both directions. Light blue water of Guyana current butted at a right angle into murky brown green of the river, full of weed and plastic rubbish. Boiling whirlpools, overfalls, kinked line of brown foam meandering from horizon to horizon. I lost the steerage and "Kehaar" spun like a top in the eddies where the two currents met. For some reason in absolute calm "Kehaar" will drift with the current, pointing transom first. Number of times I thought I could detect a bit of breeze, but it was only apparent wind sliding down the sheeted sail, wind generated by our own drift with the 2-knot current. Every time I thought wind was picking up, I played with the trim of the sail, with the rudder and trim tab, after 10 minutes of wizardry I had the boat pointing in the right direction, I sheeted the sail, and "Kehaar" promptly turned around, facing the wrong way. I would look over the side and that squashed plastic bottle with red top was still there, floating right besides us. Yet in flat calm we made 91 miles in 24 hours, transom first, in the right direction.

All along the Travelator fishing is excellent, dependable, every day, tuna, mackerel, dorado, from Fortaleza to Tobago. Deep inside the Brazilian economic zone, you do not see plundering foreign factory ships, only local 20-foot wooden fishing boats, working the whole width of the current, two men and a few ice boxes in each. Some of the vessels are traditional sailing rafts, with the yard twice as long as the boat. Drop a lure and put a moratorium on everything else, for in a few minutes you have a fight on your hands. Dream fishing. Hand line with a simple rubber squid lure and a big hook. For the first time in 90 000 miles of sailing I was living on fresh and freshly salted fish, for three weeks, twice a day. I stopped only when I ran out of salt. I use about a pound to cure three big dorados.
It takes me three days to eat a 3-foot dorado. Not having refrigeration, I cut up the meat into chunks, right away, salt it well and put into a basket in the sun to dry. Meat can be eaten at any point of the drying process. After three days I drop a lure again and process repeats. Some of my dorados had deep gashes along their bodies, large flesh wounds, and I watched a sward fish ripping through them the way they rip through a school of flying fish.
Dolphins and solitary whales chasing the abundance of fish, sea birds picking flying fish on the wing. Butterflies, moths, flies, midges and land birds get blown offshore 60 or 80 miles, then hitching a ride on your boat. Some arrive with the fishing boats.

Floating on the surface of waves like gaudy plastic toys, bright orange and purple ribbed sails of stinging jelly fish. And fat thick patches of sargasso seaweed like ochre and green islands, many times size of my boat. Floating in narrow bands stretching down the prevailing wind, they create a fine swishing sound when you plough through them. North of Amazon delta water change colour from blue to brown, then to dark Champagne bottle green and it stays that way all the way to Caribbean. Water is so thick with silt, that depth sounders routinely report no water below the keel, while you may have more than 100 fathoms there. If you wander too far offshore and water beneath your keel turns back to clear blue, you know you fell off the Travelator, right into the Equatorial Counter-current. My own experience shows that's a bad move.

As we were sailing past the last miles of Brazil, I was thinking about what happened to our planned cruise of the north coast. OK, three skippers were murdered in one week, but is the place really that dangerous? Or was I getting old and paranoid, reading too much Internet bullshit? I didn't think so. I have recently cycled through a nightmare of a failed state, Zimbabwe. Cops there didn't carry guns, they were armed with short wooden sticks. For all the poverty, the country felt all right. Before that we lived for years in southern Philippines, a notorious pirate area where yachtsmen were kidnapped and murdered for no reason at all, but I never considered abandoning a cruise because of it. In Brazil there was a lot more that put me off. Brazil felt wrong, and it seeped to the surface in unlikely details. Indomitable colossus of Brazil getting trashed in the soccer world cup by a difference of class, 7:1, was just one reflection of it. Democratically elected president, a former guerrilla hero, impeached for massive corruption. Then I remembered macho brutality of Military Police shaking down the young kids in João Pesoa, groping teenage girls everywhere under the pretext of body search. Cops wearing Uzi machine guns is not a sign of a happy country. Brazil parades as a rising super power but their rulers behave like plain thugs. People fear them but do not respect them. I did not feel I could relaxed in there, that's what it came down to. We were better off moving along.

Chapter 8: Guyana

Guyana? As a cruising destination? You are joking, right?
Most skippers are extremely conservative when it comes to choosing their cruising grounds. With imagination of a tram they follow the well worn rails around the world, never deviating from the Milk Run. French hop from one French-speaking oasis to the next, Anglo's follow the hallowed Trade Wind route pioneered by Hisckock's in the 60ies. I met guys who went round the world three times, every time repeating their itinerary, not branching into any unsafe exploration. Until about 10 years ago they had a choice at one point, Suez or South Africa, but now, with Somali pirates making the Red Sea too risky, everyone is set in the exactly same track.
There are three Guyanas, formerly French, Dutch and British. More adventurous French have been stopping in "their" Guyana for a while, because it's French, so people speak French, and there have infamous ruins on the Devil's Island, and a supermodern space rocket launching centre that you can visit. Some Dutch stop in their former colony of Suriname, but most of them I heard complaining about dirt, polluted river and nothing to see. Of the third Guyana, until 1966 British, you hear nothing, besides a brief morbid footnote about the Jonestown religious Massacre in 1978.
There is one more Guyana, formerly known as Spanish Guyana. Today it is the easternmost and largest province of Venezuela, everything between Orinoco River and Roraima Plateau. That's the Guyana of Sir Walter Raleigh and Alexander von Humboldt, that's where you find Jimmi Angel, the highest waterfall on Earth. Here lives the tribe of Guyano Indians. Grub Street etymology of name Guyana that you find in the guide books translate it as "Land of many waters", alas never specifying from which language it is supposed to come from. Oldest manuscripts all state that Guyano was a name of a tribe living on one of the southern tributaries of Orinoco.
For the past 200 years, since their independence, Venezuela claimed that "their" Guyana extends all the way to Essequibo river. They still demand it today. That would chomp a half of British Guyana and it would make Bartica a Venezuelan border post.
Number of yachts that visit Guyana would not fill one finger of an average Caribbean parking lot. Around a dozen a year, all coming down from Trinidad in the hight of the hurricane season, in August and September. Otherwise no one. Yet Guyana is a perfectly safe country, sparsely populated, with no paperwork hassles, 80% covered in pristine jungle, and what few people there are, they speak English and play cricket. Only 300 miles south of the hurricane belt, sporting one of the mightiest waterfalls on Earth,

government of Guyana has been actively encouraging yachtsmen to drop in, going as far as to set up a port of entry specially for them, 40 miles up a remote river. Nope. American cruising guru Chris Doyle actually posted his excellent cruising guide to Guyana free of charge on the web, to encourage more visitors, but trams are trams and rails have not been laid to Guyana, yet. And I have heard the tram drivers demanding marina, beach bar with free wi-fi, travelift, ship chandlers and a bevy of specialised mechanics to maintain their trams, before they will consider coming in for a look.

Guyana is a land of white man's legends and myths, filling the Guinness Book of Records with superlatives. All those exotic names and words that I remember from my boyhood reading of adventure and travel pulp became real objects of my daily life in Guyana. Anaconda, El Dorado, vampire bats, toucan, Victoria Regia lily, lignum vitae… From here comes the word "cannibal", from Carribal, a Carib, one of the main tribes of Guyana. Fishmonger in the Bartica market sells piranhas for grilling, in a lumber yard I bought a 20-foot length of greenheart to replace my broken boom, a herd of peccary pigs woke us up in the middle of night when they bumped against our dinghy as they swam across the river. Howler monkeys start their racket at dawn, vultures with 6-foot wing spans patrol the rubbish dump, blue morpho butterflies wobbly hover over the dirt road leading out of town into the forest.
For centuries academic geographers laughed at Sir Walter Raleigh report in which he placed El Dorado, the fabled City of Gold, in the Guyana Highlands, after he explored Orinoco river in 1595. Theoretical geology said there can't be any gold in Guyana. Today raw gold accounts for half of all Guyana exports, about 15 tons a year, won by hundreds of small dredges scattered across the mountains. Out bush everyone is obsessed with gold. It is the only reason anyone will venture into the forest. As I walked and hitchhiked 500 km through the hinterlands, I had no trouble hitching a ride with 4WD Bedford trucks carting diesel to the mines. Everyone assumed that I was a Brazilian hobo looking for illegal work in a mining camp, so they picked me up. When they found out that I was not, they discreetly dropped me off at the next road house or a river ferry.

Coastal plane of Guyana is flat and so low, that it lies below the high water mark. There are no sandy beaches in Guyana. The first overlords, the Dutch, built a system of dykes along the shore, drained the swamps during the low tide, and they planted sugar cane. In the 1600's they imported African slaves to work it for them. After British take-over and abolition of slavery, blacks refused to work the plantations and moved inland to start their own settlements. It was too hot for the Brits to work the land themselves, so they brought indentured labour from India on a large scale. Till today sugar cane and rice are the main produce, grown along the coast and up the Barbice River in the east. Together export of bauxite and gold they hold the economy together.
In daily contact people are friendly, open, generous and funny, ready to crack up laughing at any minute. Boatmen smoke pot openly on the river landings, Rastaman waving small plastic bags of ganja in your face as you pass him outside the market place. Underlying racism is sly, hidden and widely prevalent, especially amongst the poor.
Indians from the Subcontinent form about half of population. Another third are West Indians, descendants of black slaves. The rest are native Amerindian tribes with strong facial features reminding of Asia, and mulattoes, with a thin sprinkling of Brazilians and a few whites. Altogether there are no more than three quarters of million people, a third of them living in Georgetown and the rest in a narrow belt along the coast. Inland is virtually uninhabited, and 80% of the country is the original virgin forest. Another half a million Guyanian's live abroad, mostly in Canada, States and Britain.
Everyone observes religious festivals of everybody else, and with Indians being both Muslim and Hindu, Christian blacks of various denominations, an odd Bahai and Chinese, it's a surprise anyone gets any work done, for all the holidays. It sounds peaceful and tolerant; racism shows only when you look closely how people relate to each other. I've seen black mamas speaking to Indian shop girls in a manner they would never do to their own kin. Races also vote for their own political parties.
People don't see themselves as South Americans, but as a part of Caribbean. They drive on the left, play cricket for West Indies, and they play it well. Guyana is the only country in South America that speaks English. Officially. Daily life runs in Creole, which is based on English, but differs in versions from one place to the next. Crude English stripped off all its grammar, and all the formal, polite and nice sayings. Vocabulary is slashed to 500 words. What's left are bare bones of communication. Familiar terms are used in endearing and unfamiliar way, but the whole speech sounds rude, aggressive and baiting. "Thanks you", "Please" and "Excuse me" have no place in Creole, but "Good morning" is religiously insisted on. On the opposite side, the Queen's English of newspapers and government is good enough for a purist; literate,

educated and grammatically correct. Both main political parties maintain a large stable of paid scriveners, who flood the newspapers and electronic networks with clear and articulate Letters to Editor, apologies and elucidation of everything that's happening in Guyana. Interesting reading.

Looking at the low profile of the coast with absolutely no landmarks I could see why the first cruising yachtsmen waited until invention of GPS before they ventured to Guyana. You can't approach land too close because of extensive shoals, with their drying sand banks, fishing nets and fishing traps hanging from thick timber poles. In the Essequibo river itself both Admiralty paper charts and electronic files are out of date after two years. Sand banks shift with seasonal flooding, aids to navigation there are none. The fairway buoy marked on all the charts does not exist. Finding the Ship Channel leading into Essequibo River will challenge the best navigator.
Approaching the coast at night we were guided by the distant glow of Georgetown, which lies in the mouth of Demarara, the next river east from Essequibo. Around midnight, still a long way short of Georgetown, I measured 10 metres of water with my lead line. From a messy swell I could tell that we were in the mouth of a river, but in the dark there was no way to tell where exactly, the estuary is over 20 miles wide. 20 minutes later the line said 8 metres, at mid-tide. I dropped the anchor then and there, in the open sea, about 12 miles north from Georgetown. Through the haze I could just make out the flashing red lights of its radio towers. With moderate swell, and the wind below 10 knots, you can anchor pretty much anywhere. We rolled horribly, laying side to the river current, but I let out a lot of rode and the anchor held all right.

In a fresh breeze it took an hour to winch up the ground tackle in the morning. Quarter of an hour later I sighted ahead the first line of poles sticking out of water – fish traps. Just like in South East Asia, they run at a right angle to the river stream from shallows into deeper water, ending when it's too deep to plant more poles. Following the southern edge of the fishing poles we rounded the extensive shoals north of the Shipping Channel and in mid morning we slipped into the river itself. The bar across the mouth of the river carries between 8 and 10 feet of water at low tide and fishing traps can be found at any place. Most poles have no nets stretched between them, so you can meander in between.
In such a flat landscape, Essequibo is tidal all the way above Bartica, with 8-10 feet tidal range. Two days after new moon, at spring tide, we were pushing against a mighty ebb, but with the wind dead astern, flying a full rag, we were moving even when the current reached 4 knots over some shallow banks.
When the estuary narrows so you can see land on both sides, you know you found the river. Soon after you come to Parika, a spread out river landing on the eastern bank, connected by bitumen to Georgetown, Parika is a long strip of river sand covered in beached ships, tugs, barges, and ocean going fishing boats, all lying slightly inclined on their sides like suicidal whales. Some are being repaired in makeshift tidal dockyards, some are being broken up for scrap, some look like they were salvaged after a spell under the sea, some were abandoned, decaying into heaps of rust. Upstream from the dockyards saw mills line the river bank.
The best way to proceed up the river is by parasite navigation; you follow closely the commercial traffic. The estuary is wide, filled with several large islands and heaps of smaller ones. Above Parika Essequibo River is between one and two miles wide, but the shoals and sandbanks narrow the navigable channel. Shipping favours the eastern side of the river, staying no more than 50 metres from the bank. A large ferry boat sails from Parika 40 miles upstream to Bartica every day, returning in the afternoon. Barges carting ore, sand, gravel, stone and timber, small fuel tankers, about a dozen larger vessels a day, plus scores of taxis, fast timber speed boats powered by huge outboard engines bashing into the short wind driven swell.

Sailing up a big river without an engine is a rewarding experience. With no swell you can sail much closer to the wind than in the open sea. Tides change every 6 hours, like on the coast, but the current lags behind and ebb lasts much longer than the flood. If you manage to sail up a river without an engine, you can always make it back down, floating with the current. In the murky stream you can see nothing below the water, and reading the surface for the signs of underwater obstacles is an art. Mark Twain wrote about it beautifully in his book about Mississippi, a perfect reading for a river like Essequibo.
A number of things were missing. There weren't any mosquitoes. Even when the rainy season came bucketing down a fortnight later, very few mossies came on board. Sleeping on the ground in the jungle, in the open, I didn't hear any, either. Walking the jungle trails, everything damp, wet and dripping, there are no leaches in the bush. Not that I missed them. No stands of mangroves along the river bank, mangroves do not like fresh water. Banks were draped in vertical canopy of creepers, climbers, lianas and roots

dangling down from the sky. Only seldom, in narrow back channels behind the islands, did mangroves appear, a single file forming a narrow ribbon.
No wading birds, nor specialised fish eaters hunting from the banks. Fish there is aplenty, but no herons, egrets, cormorants, pelicans, not one. Water is so murky that they couldn't see any fish. People assured us that until the boom in gold dredging operations started about 20 years ago, water in the river was much clearer, fish more plentiful, and birds everywhere.

Ideally you'd want to sail with a making tide, so if you do hit a sand bank, you'll free in a few minutes, but if you move up and down the stream regularly, you grow complacent and end up using the fair current, even if it's falling.
Above Parika shipping channel squeeze between numerous long islands, all clad in dense green. An occasional house on the river bank with a dug out tied to a little pier, an abandoned jetty, dilapidated sheds of a former saw mill, ruins of a Dutch fort. Chris Doyle's way points I was roughly following were sufficient, but we met several obstacles not marked on my mud maps, and even bumped a shoal in the middle of shipping channel about a mile below Parika.
We anchored above Laulau island for the night. On the second day, still hugging the eastern shore, we reached the more interesting part of the river. A big pile of white sand waiting on the bank for a barge looks from a distance like a roof of a resort, while the roof of an actual resort at Shacklands does not look like anything. Resort is closed.
A mile further a derelict shipwreck, ran nose-first on the bank, and abandoned. Tramp steamer "Mazaruni", about 120 foot long, it's been there longer than anyone can remember. Some steel plates already came loose, vegetation pushing out through the seems, invading roots preying the welded hull apart. Deck has been cut out to salvage the machinery, some side places were cut away as well. Hull walls are overgrown with shrubs and small trees, hanging roots of a fig tree dangling over the side, saplings sneaking out of burst port holes, lianas swinging from the bridge. Tall forest giants form the background on the hill behind. A complete jungle story with no one to furnish the details, so you can make up your own.
Above the locked Shacklands resort something bright orange sparkled on the water line in the distance. Another beached ship? Surrealistic pile of white gable roofs peeked from the greenery. Two tiny islets, really only big rocks covered in vegetation, about quarter of mile from the river bank, were joined by a white masonry foot bridge. The southern islet was built up to house a large pretentious mansion. Vertical retaining walls painted bright orange with white trim are rising from the water like some tropical Venetian paiazzo, small patch of manicured lawn, several mature strangler figs partly hiding a three-storey gable roof extravaganza. Bridge leads to the other rock, where caretaker's house and a few sheds nestle between the trees. On the mainland opposite several old barges are rusting in the reeds, testament to the building stage. A narrow dirt track sneaks uphill to a set of camouflaged army barracks with a Guyana flag fluttering on a pole. Not a soul in view, no vehicles, no boats tied to the little pier, no sign of life. We freely and at length speculated and we got it all wrong. Two Brothers, as the islets are known, together with the gable-crazy mansion, belong to Eddie Grant, local musician who made his name in the 70ies in London and then retired to Barbados. Military on the hill is a seldom occupied Coast Guard station, not connected to the reggae-man.
On the third day Bartica roofs beckoned on the horizon. Shipping peels off the eastern bank and ventures between the extensive shoals that formed at the confluence of two rivers. Some of the beacons marked on my mud maps were missing, and after two days pushing upstream without a mishap I misread the topography and piled it onto a sand bar, a short mile from Bartica itself. Tide was racing out and as "Kehaar" settled on a 45° angle, we hopped into knee-deep water for a glorious scrub. After three weeks at sea all this unlimited fresh water felt like blessing from heaven. Bath, hair wash, laundry, dishes, you just drop a bucket over the side and lift it full of fresh water. In Bartica, 40 or 50 miles from the sea, depending on how you define the "sea", there is no trace of salt in the water, in spite of 8-foot tides. Stream turns into flood two and half hours after low water, so we were stuck on the bank for a good while, in the plain view from houses on both sides of the river. In the next weeks when we introduced ourselves it was enough to say we were from the boat that got stranded on a sand bar and everybody could place us.

Bartica, population about 10 000, is a small gold mining town on a confluence of three major rivers, Cuyuni, Mazaruni and Essequibo. Laid out on a square grid, seven avenues cross nine streets. Most of commerce happens on the First Avenue, a deeply potholed one-way street running parallel to Essequibo River, that starts at the Landing, public wharf berthing a daily ferry and numerous speed boats plying the river down to Parika. Tiny one-room post office which is besieged by crowds on the remittance day every

month, large Police Station that incorporates a room with Immigration Officer, a Customs' office across the road, on the second floor above the Churches' Chicken take-away. As you walk south, you pass a bank that does not change foreign currency, several bars and general stores that do change US dollars, then noisy rattling power plant painted dark blue, belching black diesel smoke from oversized exhaust. Big green roof of the fresh produce market with a wet section selling fresh fish and frozen chicken. Water to keep the place clean is pulled up in buckets from the river flowing right under the market's floor boards.
Two fuel stations, each with a long timber jetty reaching out over the water. Flat bottomed river taxis pull up and pour the fuel directly into the tanks, 200-litre plastic drums. Further down the First Avenue you find a little cubicle of "Scarter's Butchery" that sells excellent cuts of locally raised beef. Brazilian restaurant, deteriorated into a seedy hangout of taxi drivers, a new two storey pink monstrosity promising to sell ice cream in near future and you are at the edge of town. Huge derelict sheds of abandoned saw mills with their own crumbling river landing, two beached steel barges overgrown with lush vegetation, a rusted-through pontoon barge covered from gunwale to gunwale in squatters' shanties, another fuel jetty and that's all that First Avenue can offer.
As every frontier town, Bartica changes fast. I read a blog post from a yacht that visited exactly two years before us. Of their preferred places, not one was operating. Their favourite supermarket went bankrupt and closed down for lack of customers, "Cool Breeze", listed as a bustling bar and boat landing ramp, was abandoned, its wharf collapsed, dinghy landing pontoon washed up under somebody else's wharf. Brazilian Internet Café had no signal, and Pizza Diner turned seedy and sloppy. We found our own thriving places which will be gone long before you get to read these lines.
Town started as an Anglican Mission in 1840ies. Gold was discovered up river shortly after that, and together with logging it's been keeping the place afloat ever since. All the old buildings were timber, many of them still leaning on all sorts of angles here and there. Recent boom in mining is transforming the street scape, fast. Old timber dwellings are pulled down, replaced by gaudy three-storey concrete mansions painted bright pink, or purple or lime green. Insane palaces in the middle of jungle, each occupying an entire building block, from fence to fence. They are owned by Indians and they all look the same. Ground floor hosts some attempt at retail, frequented by no-one. Large cavernous supermarket stocked up with all sorts of Brazilian imports, selling to their own employees, but no outsiders coming there. The second storey, above the shop, is reserved for the owner's residence, 8 or 10-room apartment with tiny windows, balconies, dormers, overhanging gables, concrete embellishments and a dozen air conditioning machines. Top floor is a hotel, again, patronised by no-one. Millions of dollars invested in the most insane location you can imagine, an ephemeral grab-and-run mining town.
Every second house advertises licensed gold buyers, "We buy gold", in English and Portuguese. The ones actually doing business are easily singled out by young thugs with assault riffles pointed to the ground, wearily scanning their surroundings from the doorways. "Kassim's Hardware, Dealers in Dredging Equipment and Interior Transportation" employs three of the gunners, one for each exit door, level of security otherwise unseen in this placid town. Neither banks nor money changers have any security arrangements, only the rich gold miners feel the need to protect themselves. Bartica airstrip is too far from town for security, potholed access road presenting too many handy ambush sites, so the rich fly in on private charters that land on Baganara Island Resort 5 miles from town, with resort manager waiting in a speed boat to run them to town. I watched one guy on a chartered flight as he landed on the strip right next to where we were anchored. A middle aged Brazilian with a pencil moustache and an ornamental mistress in tow, he stepped out of the plane, strolled to the edge of the tarmac and pulled a slim flat hand gun out of his pocket. From another pocket he fetched a clip of bullets, with a practised flourish he slipped them into pistol, clicked the safety on and stuck it behind his belt, covering it with loose shirt. Now he was ready to ride to town.
Not having anything to do with gold, I felt perfectly safe in Bartica. Locals say, "you walk free in Bartica". Violence visits town very seldom, in unpredictable bursts, at random, but when it comes, it makes headlines. In February 2008, one rainy Sunday night, a gang of heavily armed bandits, led by a renown gangsters escaped from the nearby jail, descended on town. The only way in is by a boat, so they arrived in dark in two speed boats, around 10 PM. About 20 masked men armed with assault riffles brazenly landed on the public wharf, a gang of blood thirsty psychopaths set loose. They found six local boatmen hanging around the place, smoking joints, the crews of the boats tied to the piles at the landing. Gang made them lie face down on the wooden jetty and shot them through the head. Five blokes died instantly, the sixth one on his way to hospital.
First building outside the wharf is the Police Station. Gunmen attacked the cop shop, killing all three constables on duty, and wounding another two who tried to escape, leaping in their underducks out of the

windows. Breaking into the gun safe gangsters looted the police armoury and found the keys to the police Land Rover. Driving the Paddy wagon down the First Avenue in the rain, they shot at anything that moved, heading for the residence of a prominent gold miner living on the Third Avenue. Bartica's stroke of luck was that on that rainy Sunday night streets were nearly deserted, everyone was home watching cricket, otherwise the carnage would have been much worse. At a petrol station a cab driver was taking on fuel. He was shot dead in his car. Bandits broke into the gold miner's' mansion with a sledge hammer, shot dead the aged security guard and dragged away two safes. At another miner's further down the road they were not that successful, though. After nearly an hour's rampage in the down town mansions murderers returned to the wharf, got into their boats and sped off into the night, without being challenged once. They left behind 12 dead and 7 wounded.
It was clearly an inside job. They knew exactly where to go and what to take. Just the fact that they managed to navigate the sand banks and shoals around town on a pitch black night in driving rain spoke a local river pilot. The whole Guyana was outraged. Bartica Massacre came three weeks after similar attack on a small community 80 km away. That one left 11 dead, all work of the same gang. Police and the Army, stung by the impotence they displayed in the face of attack, mobilised all the forces they had, and in the ensuing months pursued the gang across the country. Army snipers picked them off one by one in shoot outs as the bandits moved deeper into the jungle. At one point cops recovered the diary of the gang leader and pieced the whole story together. After six months pursuit they finally shot dead the ring leader and his deputy in a stand off in the forest. Five surviving bandits got long jail sentences, rest of the gunmen were all dead.
After that night the Bartica gold dealers laid off decrepit family guardsmen and hired properly trained and well armed young professionals to look after them. Nobody else needs to worry.

After a week anchored in front of the noisy Bartica Power Plant we moved another 5 miles up the Essequibo river, dropping the pick in front of Baganara Island Resort. One of the rare places where yachtsmen are not resented, it became our base for the next weeks. Once a week, when we have eaten ourselves out of fresh food, we ghosted "Kehaar" down with the tide to Bartica to do the shopping at the market, returning with the afternoon breeze.
Baganara is an enchanted place. An exclusive resort built in the 90ies, originally as a private retreat for the company executives, it is owned by the Guyana's oldest airline. It has a well maintained airstrip bisecting the island, flying charters to the Ogle Airport in Georgetown.
Northern half of the island is a low swamp, most of the ground submerged at high tide, so the loggers could not get their machinery in. They took what they could as far as their cables reached from the barges, but in the centre of the island they left some magnificent mora trees standing. Oak of the Guyana forests, mora is the dominant species of the swamp forest. With its massive buttress roots anchoring it in the soft ground, it rises over 100 feet tall, with a bole three feet diameter or more. Table roots are vertical twisted nightmare in three dimensions, bottom of every tree a unique sculpture 20 feet wide and 15 feet tall, like convulsions of tectonic upheaval, multilayered snakes from Geigers' acid trips.
Jungle is such a dominant feature of Guyana that it feel like it's all there is to the country. Even along the roads greenery is irrepressible, pushing out to reclaim the slashed ground. Every palm, every mature mango tree, every ornamental backyard sapling, every abandoned telegraph pole, everything is smothered with bundles of orchids, bromelias and other epiphyts, many of them flowering. The word "jungle" came to English from India, ultimately deriving from the ancient Sanskrit, where it means "dry desert". Don't ask me, I have no idea how.
On the island the resort maintains a nature walk, a mile long loop twisting through the remaining forest. Domineering buttress roots of mora are easily accessible, some other species of trees are even identified by weathered tablets. I was assured there are sloth, monkeys, turtles, pythons and any number of rodents. Above all rodents. While Africa is dominated by large slender legged ruminants, and Australia runs on marsupials, tropical America is teeming with big juicy rodents. Shaped like guinea pigs on steroids, they are strong swimmers, excellent climbers, nocturnal burrow dwellers. They come in all sizes up to a capybara, which dwarfs the local bush pig, the peccary.
From all the weird New World animals it was a sloth that took my fancy and I made it my goal, to meet a sloth in the wild. I didn't think it would be too hard, sloth is so slow, that even some plants get away from it. It spends most of its life in its one favourite tree, munching on leaves. A host to entire ecosystems anchored in its fur, male and female look so similar that many a zoo bought a wrong sex of sloth. Solitary nocturnal animal, it produces one offspring every year, if it bothers looking for a partner. If a young one falls off its mother, it usually survives the fall without hurt, sloth is so tough. It may die never the less, if

the mother finds it too much of a bother to climb down for it from her tree.
Vulnerable only when it climbs down once a week to have a crap and piss, it moves so slow and so high up in the trees that it's seldom seen. I spent many a morning walking down the path in the jungle, craning my neck, searching the kaleidoscope of green overhead, combing the crowns of cecropia trees, looking for the elusive sloth. I saw no sloth.
Trouble with observing jungle animals is the jungle. Good thick forest is impenetrable without creating a lot of noise. The only way to move silently is to follow a clear path. Clear path means that someone has recently walked along this path, keeping it open. And the main reason man ventures into jungle is to bring some of its inhabitants home for dinner, so areas near the path will be devoid of wildlife. You are more likely to find local fauna as dressed carcass in the meat section of the market place.
After six weeks of futile search for sloth, Lincoln took us along in the resort punt, to watch the teeming rookery of migrating martins on the Parrot Island. On the way he pulled up along the jungle edge, killed the outboard and pointed into a tree above us: "Three-toed sloth." Twisted grey rag about three feet long was hanging from the tip of a branch overhanging water. Spindly long limbs seemingly devoid of any muscles, long emaciated body, tiny little head coloured yellow and white, black slit for mouth and two black beads for eyes. It was hanging upside down by its stretched back legs, clinging with one front leg to a lower branch, the other foreleg infinitely slowly picking off buds at the tip of the branches. Three long curved nails, black and yellow, were clearly visible curled around a branch. It reminded me of a sleeping fruit bat hanging in a tree. Size of the head didn't speak of great intelligence, but sloth is no evolutionary dud, most species are abundant in the wild.
Next day I hopped into my dinghy and rowed back to check that section of forest. Now that I knew what to look for, I found more sloth. One was swarming up a tree trunk, like a big grey caterpillar slowly undulating up a grey bark, blending into its background, except for its tiny yellow face. The other one was draped around a stout vertical branch in a tree top, it limbs wrapped around it like lianas, body flat against the bark, arms and legs stretched along the branches. It looked more like a large termite mound grown around a branch, but again, bright tennis ball face size of lady's fist was the thing that gave it away. During the day it seemed to be asleep, but it was not completely motionless. Like a sleeping cat that you try to draw on paper, every time you glance at it, it moved some part of its body a fraction, and by the time you finished your drawing, its whole position is quite different.

We dropped down with the current and anchored off the Schoonahara Island, to get closer look at the wildlife. Next day, rowing back to "Kehaar", I noticed something big rusty red in a crook of a Cecropia tree near the river bank. Cecropia, the favourite feed of the sloth, has bare spindly branches arranged like a Jewish candelabra, huge lobed leaves at the end of branches and red clusters of developing new leaves at the tips. The red-brown ball that I noticed looked like a large termite nest. Next time I looked up, there were two of them, each in a crook of its own. I quickly picked up the binoculars from "Kehaar" and rowed back. The creatures woke up. There were four of them now. For all their leisurely nonchalance they were moving far too vigorously to be sloth. They were stretching languorously, grabbing the branches with their prehensile tails, slowly walking along the tree, head down, retreating with dignity. Monkeys. Howler monkeys. Red howlers. So far we only heard them, now I finally got a look as well.
Another one of Guyana's superlatives, howler monkey is listed by an Irish Brewery Book as a noisiest animal in the world. The book is talking of 3-mile range they can be heard from. In a forest a half a mile wide buffer of vegetation will swallow rattle of a petrol generator, a chainsaw is muffled from a mile away, so imagine voice cords that carry a yell for three miles. They may be called howler monkeys, but their yells sounds more like hoarse roar dragged from the bottom of the barrel, sometimes followed by deep hollow bark. At first we thought it was some industrial machinery operating on the far bank of the river, but when we heard a similar noise from the trees on the island, we switched on that it was howlers. On the anchorage we were surrounded by three different troops, separated by river and miles of forest. A bit like a distant speedway on a drag night, or a landing jet plane applying reverse thrust. They start the racket every day at dawn, and then again for short spells in the afternoon. They are big bright coloured fellows, some yellowish gold, most darker red brown, males growing to three feet, plus tail longer than the body. Books say that they build conspicuous nests but every time I found them, they looked like big fat balls of rusty brown fur draped around skinny branches in the sun, monstrous cats curled up in the tips of the boughs, as high up as the tree would support them. Watching their silent, stealthy descend, I saw the futility of trying to spot the wildlife from the forest floor, quiet, camouflaged, and during the day for the best part asleep. The only way to find them is from the outside, from the river. Track them down by their roar, anchor your boat opposite their favourite feeding tree and watch silently.

Sometimes it took us a while to figure out what was what. From the first day on the river we noticed an unusual number of unhappy puppy dogs yelping from the shore in a plaintive voice. After several days hearing them from the trees, a long way from a nearest dwelling, I concluded that they must be birds, not puppy dogs. It took six weeks before I caught one in the cross hairs of my binoculars. It was a great big toucan! I was stumped. What we called "puppy dog bird" was such a common sound it meant that the place was teeming with toucans, yet it took me six weeks to see the first one. After that first sighting I had to agree; toucans are as common as crows. I was excited again. For a sickish kid who grew up in grey Stalinist suburbs in Eastern Europe seeing a semi-mythical bird like toucan in the wild, as part of my ordinary day, that was an incredible experience. I always dreamed of travelling to exotic lands, and I settled in one of the most exotic places, tropical Australia, but I never expected to see so many cliché exotics all around me, as I did in Guyana.
As kids we thought of toucan as something far removed from reality, something out of our colouring books, not out there sitting on a branch. They are majestic birds, nearly two feet long, with an enormous colourful beak, yellow at the top, sky blue at the root. White breast, black back, blue patch of bare skin around the eye, short stumpy wings and crimson red feathers around its bunghole which were exposed as it was twitching its tail up every time it yelped. I did find out the scientific name of this particular species, but I don't want to sound like some bird-watcher.
On one stroll, walking along the tidal sandy beach down the river, I spotted a two-metre anaconda, maybe four inches in diameter. He was slowly undulating along the sandy bottom, completely under water, a few inches from the shore. Light brown with large black spots on its back and a small diamond shaped head, he must've felt the tremors I caused by my walk, for it gradually slid deeper into the river until it disappeared in the murk. It never stuck its head above the water, not while I was watching it.

One day boys working on Baganara resort took me along, 12 miles up the Mazaruni River, to clear the tourist walking track leading to the Marshall Falls. I got a guided tour of the Bartica neighbourhood, for free. Rounding Bartica you turn left into Mazaruni River and soon you are facing a tidy spread out settlement on the opposite bank, what the 19th century travellers used to call "The Settlement", their euphemism for Penal Settlement. A jail. It is the Guyana's high security jail until this day, with a jetty and several rusting sunken barges tied to it, and a derelict tug boat.
A couple of miles further up, on Duck Island, a Bartica gold miner is building a 38-room Arawai Resort, on the site of a previous defunct resort. Three-storey yellow building with red roofs, lots of support structures, manicured grounds, 40-foot speed boat anchored off the jetty. A commercial gold dredge is sifting through the river sand at the tip of the island, waste sand is pumped out to create an artificial beach. Same thing as Baganara did. Natural sandy beaches all disappear at high tide and resorts have to manufacture their own. With every businessman here involved in gold dredging, they have all the equipment they need. What puzzles me is how they expect to fill this new resort. There are already six resorts around Bartica, all closed. Baganara Resort was running empty on most days, serving as a transit point for its airstrip. There are no tourists around. In two months we saw only two white faces in Bartica – one was a Jehovah Witness missionary and the other an official UN observer for the approaching general elections. Even the ubiquitous white ex-pats are rare. A couple of yachtsmen did drop their picks permanently in their jungle hideaways not far from Bartica, but they seldom venture out into the open. An American jazz singer looks from her window at a 30-foot section of her mast sticking out of water. Her yacht sank in front of her house opposite Kaow Island.
Besides overpriced excursions into the jungle, Guyana has little to offer a tourist. No major airline flies into Guyana, only local Caribbean carriers. The only foreigners we regularly saw in Guyana were Brazilians, and they do not come for holidays, they come for gold. Most are working their small mines illegally, siphoning the gold across the porous border back to Brazil. Locals do not like them, and periodical purges by government try to reduce their number, but more come every week. Where there is gold, men will come to dig it out.

About 5 miles further up river suddenly narrows to something like 40 metres and strong current flushes through the first set of rapids. We forced our way through into the wide river above, only to face even narrower gap shortly after. Barely 25 metres across, even at high tide the river formed a 4 foot high step. At low tide it would've been much steeper. Current was racing through in turbulent waves, boat-swallowing troughs forming in the fastest ribbon, large whirlpools swirling below, cascades on the far side hiding submerged boulders. This is as far as Mazaruni River is navigable. From here onwards rapids continue for the next 100 miles upstream, before river opens up again.

Lincoln, the resort's manager, stopped the boat just below the rapids and observed the flow. Before he started working at the resort, he was a full time river captain, and even now, in his time off work, he takes boats up the river to the mines. Commercial speed boats are built with round bottom, to make them easier to handle in the unpredictable turbulence of rapids. With high curved stem, they are planked in ¾ inch timber of light springy silver-balli wood, to survive accidental impact with rocks and constant slamming into the waves. On the transom twin 200HP outboards. One would be enough to push the boat up anything the captain will dare to attempt, but in the most violent rapids with water boiling in the cascades, fast spinning propeller may grab a pocket of air and start cavitating, loosing its drive, throwing the boat to the mercy of the current. At that point the second engine continues to push the boat up. Many a boat capsize never the less, many boatmen drown every year.
Different kind of river boat comes down the Cuyuni River from Venezuela, illegally. While Guyana speed boats are all built out of thick timber planks, Venezuelan fuel carriers are plated in 2.4mm steel, shaped like a traditional dug out. They come in two sizes, about 30 feet, and 60 feet long. The big ones are about 6 feet wide, and 3 feet deep, round bilges, truncated transom to hang the outboards from. Very light frame to distribute the weight, cargo being 200-litre plastic drums ferrying illegal diesel to the mines up river. Drums are laid on their sides, stacked four high, so they leak, diesel preserving the steel from rust. Boats are greasy and spreading rainbow stains over the water. Many dents attest to the rocks that they survived in the rapids.

Satisfied with his survey of the rapids, our captain started the outboard, a measly 75HP. He gunned the engine and run the resort's aluminium punt diagonally across the flow, flat bottom of the boat slamming violently against the mad turbulence. Right at the far edge of the current, a couple of feet from the rocks of the shore, he swung in, straight up the cascading flow, skirted the hollow whirlpool in the middle and emerged in the calmer water on top. He told us later that these rapids here are nothing compared to the big mothers about half way up the river, where the drop is anything up to 20 feet. I can see how a smallest hesitation on the tiller could loose it. The ride was a thrill, easy to see why the experienced boatmen love to go again and again. Also easy to see why their wives insist they change their jobs for something less hair rising.
After a breath of calm air we dropped back down through the chute and tied our punt at the bank. The track we came to clear starts just below the rapids. Accessible only by a river boat, it follows an ancient logging trail, over a higher dry ground, across a shallow ridge, a swift half an hour's walk to the point where a small tributary forms a 20 foot waterfall. Nobody else but the Baganara guests come to visit, so forest is peaceful and quiet. All the big tree has been cut out, but even the secondary regrowth is a magnificent chunk of greenery. Waterfall spills over a bench into a deep gully, its black water foaming brown in the pool below. Tinted by tannin and humic acid from rotting vegetation, stream water is so dark that at certain angle of sun it's purple-black. It tastes clean, though, nothing unpleasant and you can see deep into it, in spite of its colour.
Creole language divides all the streams into two broad categories – "black water" and "white water". Black water is acid. It flows from poor white sandy soils, so it carries few suspended clay particles within it. White water starts on richer clay soils, it is colour of café-au-lait, murky brown, and dense with suspended clay.
Jungle is a mad patchwork of green when looked from the outside, from the sunny wall on the river. Seen from the underneath, from the inside, good dense forest is dominated by browns and greys in the lower levels, with sprinkling of green above it as thin spindly saplings are desperately pushing up, towards the distant sunlight in the crown. Broad leaved shadow loving plants spread their rosettes wide, drinking the diffused light. Jungle floor is shaded by the crowns, and the ground around the immense roots of large trees feel moody and brooding. You don't get a sunburn walking in the forest. In the dense undergrowth you can't see even 50 metres ahead through the tangle. Without a constant reference to compass you loose the sense of direction before you cover those 50 metres. With all the dominant trees logged out there are no landmarks in the secondary growth. In the swampy areas especially, one puddle of water looks like the next one, no sun to take a bearing from, no big tree to aim for, orientation is hopeless, you meander around the fallen trunks following the path of least resistance and you are lost in ten minutes.
As the guys went back to start slashing at the beginning of the trail, I sat down under the waterfall. Suddenly a brilliant speck of bright blue flitted through the air. That rarest of colours in the forest, clear blue, flitted in jerky flight above the water. Morpho butterfly, a male 7 inches across, with murky brown underside showing two huge fake eyes.
Legendary morpho, once a status symbol of butterfly collectors, gracing the curio rooms of the richest, is

common in Guyana forest. Every time you go for a walk in the jungle, you are guaranteed to see at least one, even in the outer suburbs of Bartica. Solitary and fiercely territorial, butterfly only lives for two or three weeks after it broke out from its cocoon. Not all the species of morpho show so dazzlingly blue, and females are mostly dull brown. Morphos are not really blue, their colour does not come from a pigment. As the sunlight passes through several layers of microscopic scales arranged on their wings, it creates an interference pattern in your eyes and you see it as blue. That's why their colour does not fade with time. As long as the tiny scale are not disturbed, they will create the same pattern again and again. Today they raise morho on farms, and use their wings to make fancy jewellery.

Some of the legendary timbers come from Guyana, species in the same class as teak and ebony. Greenheart is endemic to Guyana, it grows nowhere else. Dense heavy wood that does not float, it does not rot when set in the ground, and neither insects nor marine borers will touch it. Olive green in colour, it is a stiffest timber known. Science came up with some unit to describe how elastic particular wood is, and while good hardwood clocks several thousand units on their scale, greenheart shoots off the scale with elasticity of over 3 million of whatevers. Two strongest wooden ships ever built, Nansen's "Fram" and Shackelton's "Endurance" were both sheathed on the outside with a layer of greenheart to withstand the pressure of polar ice surrounding them. Georgetown cathedral, arguably the tallest timber building in the world, was built entirely out of greenheart, and it stand sound today, after 120 years of exposure to tropics, termites and periodical flooding.
Greenheart seems to be plentiful and it is sold like any other hardwood, US$1.50 per board foot. I bought several lengths from a lumber yard, to replace my 19-foot long boom that I broke in South Africa, to renew the rotting handrail on deck, plug the annoying whistle of hollow aluminium battens, shape a spare tiller, that sort of things.
Best timber I found under the jetties of old sawmills, either greenheart or similar looking mora, just as durable. I did score a magnificent slab of purpleheart, a chunk of seasoned 12" by 2" that I turned into indestructible chopping board, christened "hernia board". I carved a new euphroe for my rigging out of rock hard nugget. Some days the deck of "Kehaar" resembled a carpentry workshop, as I sorted out the salvaged timber before I stowed it away in the bilges.

After a month anchored off the Baganara Island Resort, my love was invited to come along to Georgetown, to stay with one of the resort workers during her week off. The Resort staff was working for a month straight, then had a whole week off to compensate for weekends they were made to work.
Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, lies below the high water mark, town centre is seven feet below the sea level. Water can drain into the sea only at low tide. System of dykes, canals, kokers, drains and pumps is supposed to keep the water at manageable level. The whole caboodle was designed and built by Dutch a long time ago, and original Georgetown was apparently a magnificent little place full of canals with Victoria Regia lily growing in them, shaded by trees, a little Venice in tropics. Drainage was calculated to take up to two inches of rain, when everything was working. Which is not. Canals, choked by garbage, were taken over by squatters, drains are overgrown with weeds, kokers are blocked and silted over, four out of six pumps are broken down. While we were in Baganara, Georgetown copped five inches of rain in five hours and the whole place disappeared under water. It would take a lot of money to clean up the system, and with rising sea levels even that will not be enough. Georgetown is doomed and some smart brains are asking if it wouldn't be better to spend the maintenance money on building another capital city on a higher ground, much further inland.
Those five days that my love spent in a housing project was an eye opener, and it explained some puzzling statistics which made no sense when looking at the country as a tourist from the pristine, undeveloped forest.
Georgetown centre has been cleaned up a bit, but the bulk of population lives in the "housing projects", abysmal suburban wastelands build on converted cane fields between the drainage canals. Every "project" is a conglomeration of tiny house lots laid out on a grid in a flat plain, 500 or 1000 or more dwellings at a time. In dry weather water table lies a few inches below the surface. Septic tanks are only partly buried, sticking out of the ground like beached leviathans. When it rains, water table rises to the same level as the ground, and toilets overflow. The whole suburb turns into a quagmire of mud and shit, and the houses that have only one storey become dirty stables. Piped water is available daily, from afternoon till early morning, when every household fills up their tanks. Municipal water is not safe to drink, and many households catch their own rain water. Not that they drink water. When they call for "drink" to go with their meal, they mean soft drink. Coke sells cheaper than bottled water.

There is nowhere to dispose of the garbage. Fresh offal, like fish guts, are dropped down the dunny and it is hoped that they will rot before the next rain will float them up. Everything else is collected in a garbage bag and the top is tied with a string. There is no garbage collection and nowhere to dump it. Idea of recycling bottles or plastic is not comprehended. Thankfully, every housing project was built on former sugar cane fields, which are combed by drainage canals. There is a handy canal a short walk from every household. Garbage bag is carried to a canal and flung as far into the water as you can throw it. Hopefully it will float until the river and then down to the sea. Most of the time it will snag on something on the way, clogging the canals.
Housing projects are nightmare of noise. Radios blasting from day break, not ending until late at night, Jamaican reggae, stirring "soka" of Carnival, self opinionated talk-back shows, all that combined with domestic squabbles and fights, which culminate in vocal quarrels every night. Lying in bed at night, it sounds like every household in the neighbourhood is going through their round of domestic fighting. Emotional, petty, manipulative and vengeful, same quarrels are repeat day after day with no desire for solution. Jealousy and accusations of greed are the main fuel for the fighting. There is no escape from it. Every household in every housing project is fighting, arguments, quarrels, crying, screaming, banging, violence. Every day, every night. You starting to see why the Guyana has the highest rate of suicide per capita in the world. There is no escape from the hell at home, wherever you'd move, it would be same.
Sex is permeating the suburban life. In dress, in music, in human behaviour, in their quarrels, it's all about sex. Every woman going to "Town", that is, downtown Georgetown, will get dressed up like a doll, in far too tight and far too short rags. She will spend hours and untold money on her hair, getting extensions or expensive wigs. Even if the goal of the trip is nothing more grand than the main market placet. First purchase after receiving pay packet is a dozen bottles of cheap Chinese nail polish and a new flashy hand bag. It's all about show and flashing it around. What little money is left goes into junk food and Coca Cola.
I will not detail all the stories that my love brought home from the housing project, she is writing them down herself, in her own way. Under the veil of easy going Caribbean happy-go-lucky population is a seething volcano of self made misery, bitterness and discord. Money and jealousy are the main reasons. It will take some enlightened policies to improve the situation and it will not happen any time soon. The new President, a retired Army General, turned his back on the social problems his people are facing. He is building a strong Army instead, to counter the perceived threat from the neighbouring Venezuela. He is just copying the Yanks. Every time their social problems look like erupting out of control, they start some meaningless idiotic war somewhere, to distract the folks at home from the real problems.

The main tourist attraction of Guyana are Kaieteur Falls. You can't open newspapers, magazine or tourist leaflet without seeing two or three aerial images of it. It's in every add, every invitation. It is engraved on the face of the finely crafted 20-dollar bill, worth 10 American cents.
"Teur" means "falls" in one of the local languages, so Kaieteur is "Kai's Falls". There are two stories about the origin of the name. The noble version presented by tourist bureau speaks of a selfless tribal chief Kai who paddled his dugout over the edge of the falls to sacrifice himself for the peace of his tribe. In the vulgar version it's a grumpy old man Kai who was put into a dugout by his own people, and shoved over the edge, so his tribe could get some peace.
Kaieteur belongs amongst the ten grandest falls on Earth. Potaro River, about 100 metres wide at that point, tumbles over a vertical step in the landscape, 250 metres down, a solid square curtain of water. Kaieteur is right in the centre of the country, about 300km from Georgetown, heading into the jungle. Everyone flies to the Falls, an hour on a six-seater from the domestic airport near Georgetown. They give you about two hours to walk around and fly you back the same day. Flights are not expensive, some cut-price airlines advertise US$150 return. With our boat in Bartica it would be cheaper and more convenient to fly directly from Baganara, $250 return each.
I prefer to travel over the ground. Nothing to do with a carbon footprint. It's about that soul that can travel only at a pace of a camel. Guide books mentioning that adventure outfits in town offer an option of an overland safari to the Falls, 5-7 days, with a four digit $ tag attached. So there is a way to get there overland.
The only map I found was an A4-sized colour painting in the "Welcome to Guyana" tourist brochure. I call it a painting, not a map. The artist gathered his background information by listening to tall tales circulating around the Georgetown drinking holes, then used his imagination to spread his meagre facts evenly across the Guyana territory. Towns are shown a long way from their real places, non-existing highways cross major rivers on non-existing bridges, then stop abruptly in the middle of nowhere when the artist got distracted by a phone call. But it was free and I held it in my hand. It will be good enough. I never forgot

the story of a Ghurkha soldier who escaped from a Japanese prison camp in Burma during WWII and made his way across the jungle to India. He followed a small map he tore out of an encyclopaedia. When he reached the British India and showed his tattered map to his superiors, they scratched their heads. It was a map of London Underground.

I spoke to people in Bartica. By compiling a list of recurring place names I gathered that there is indeed a way to get to the Falls by land. First step is a mining settlement of Mahdia. For the remaining 30 miles above Mahdia it was rumours and hearsay, nobody really goes to the Falls overland. Important thing was: everyone agreed that Mahdia does exist, it is a real place, you can buy food there and there is a road leading to it. From Georgetown you can catch a mini bus directly to Mahdia, 300 km, 10 hours drive during the dry season, roughly US$50. Theoretically it's possible to go to Mahdia directly from Bartica, along a poor 4WD track. There is even a semi-regular bus running up that way. No, it's not a bus, it's a 4WD Bedford truck taking fuel to the mines. It leaves every other day from the Second Avenue. Where on the Second Avenue? Anywhere. And no, it does not go to Mahdia along that bad 4WD track, it crosses Essequibo River first, about 20 miles above Bartica, joins the main highway from Georgetown to Brazil, then re-cross the Essequibo to Mahdia. The way mini buses do.

At that point I stopped gathering any more confusion. I wrote down the few crucial place names that everyone agreed on, I packed a sleeping bag, warm jumper and a raincoat, bought a packet of biscuits and a can of sardines and early one morning I caught a ride to Bartica with Baganara Resort punt. I caught a mini bus driving to the limits of town and started walking south, heading for something called Sherima Crossing, right below the first set of rapids on the Essequibo river. I had no idea how the vehicles crossed the river, but that wasn't really my problem, was it.

The first car driving along gave me a ride, an overloaded 4WD pick up turning up the Mazaruni River after a few miles. Track got worse right away. Deep potholes, long patches of soft sand, travelling speed below 20 mph. With high clearance, wide tyres and a lot of experience you could get through in a normal car, but when the weather turns wet it is definitely a 4WD. I walked along in the cool of the morning, awaiting the next car. After half an hour a Government Land Cruiser pulled up. I mentioned the only locality I knew – Sherima Crossing. He nodded his head: get in. Hitchhiking was as easy as that, two cars, two rides. This was the only time in Guyana that I rode inside a car, every other time I ended up clinging to the load of diesel drums or a stack of timber on the back of a truck.

We barrelled down the sandy track, road meandering along a low wooded ridge. Bloke was coming down from some mining camp deep in the interior, taking to Georgetown broken down parts of machinery. At Sherima Essequibo River is still about a mile wide, swirling between the sandbanks, studded with tree covered rocks and pretty little islands. At the crossing there was a ferry boat waiting for us. Guyana highways cross the rivers on Government ferries. Boats are all identical, made in England, modular steel pontoons that can take nine cars at a time, or three monstrous six-wheel drive trucks. Leisurely operated by crews of Rastaman, ferry runs from 6 in the morning till mid afternoon. Trucks like to drive at night, it keeps both the engine and the driver from overheating, so on arriving at a crossing they all have to wait for dawn and the first boat. Busier crossings sprouted little bars and eateries with wide verandas where the waiting truckies can swing their hammocks for the night.

Every crossing and major road junction have a police station. All passing traffic has to report at the cop shop. Driver walks into empty weatherboard building, leans in the doorway, holler something in Creole and receives a grunt of acknowledgement from somewhere deep inside. Check in completed. Foreigners are supposed to write their passport details in a book, but I left my passport on the boat, so I did not bother climbing down from the truck. Nobody cares.

On the other side the river is shallow and the ferry can't come all the way in during the low tide. Vehicles have to ford the last stretch by themselves. After another 20 miles of bouncing I found myself on the junction with the main Trans-Guyana Highway, a wide strip of potholed corrugated dirt that leads from the coastal Atlantic to Manaus on the Amazon river. All the way from Bartica I haven't met a single vehicle driving in the opposite direction.

Driver dropped me off and turned north, towards Georgetown. He told me to continue south, another 100 km, until I reach Mabura Police Station. Traffic was sparse. Only two sorts of vehicles passed by. Minibuses from Georgetown, crammed to the roof. They leave from the terminal when they are full to capacity and they can't fit in any more passengers, so they can't stop to pick you up. The dominant vehicles are ex-British Army 4WD Bedford trucks overloaded with drums of diesel, creeping over the hills to the mine camps in the interior. Amount of fuel trucked along the road was staggering. Every 20 minutes a truck loaded with 10 tons of diesel crawled slowly past me, day in day out.

When they stop to give you a lift, you climb up to the top of the load and yell to the driver that you are all

right. There is nowhere really to sit down. Usual crew is an African driver and his Indian offsider in the small cab and a young Amerindian kid clinging to the top of the load, checking that none of the straps had parted. Access hatches on large welded steel tanks have no proper seals so they splash diesel out on every pothole, which means continuously. Surrounding the tank are two dozens of 200-litre plastic fuel drums stacked lying on their sides. Rubber seals are gone, replaced by plastic bags attempting to seal the bungs. Every drum is leaking, the whole truck is smeared with diesel. Old Bedford will get anywhere, but it does it at its own speed, it is not geared to drive faster than 20 mph on the flat ground, and a good deal slower uphill. Climbing out of deep potholes only to descend into the next set is like rocking on a camel, throwing you from side to side as you cling to the slippery drums high on top of the load.

By evening I reached Mabura Hill junction, where a branch road turns to Mahdia. A solitary sign post announced it's another 82 km. Two bars, busy eatery, small shop, fuel station, police outpost and that's about it. I had a good feed and set off down a narrow dirt track heading in the direction of thickly wooded hills, with misty outline of real big mountains in the distance.

A string of rides with local traffic got me away from the drunks at the junction. A Ford automatic with no suspension, a true hard tail, crowded with a mob of dark quiet Rastamen heading home. A pair of stoned Indian mechanics searching for a broken down pick up that was reported by a phone to wait for them in distress, somewhere. A gold miner carting home four drums of diesel. I ride in the back with the drums. Trays on pick up trucks are used to lug around greasy bits of broken down machinery and drums of diesel, so they are all floating in oil, fuel, grit and greasy dirt. Squatting in the tray, balancing on the rough road, you soon smell like a refinery monkey.

About 10 miles out of Mabura the last of traffic died but I kept walking through the forest that is crowding the road. A lot of rain fell recently, sections of the road were graded, bright orange puddles of water contrast with dull red road surface. No road signs, no idea where the cross roads are branching off to, no idea about distances involved, walking blind, on every major fork I chose the fork with more tyre marks. Solid wall of green jungle on both sides, sometimes closing overhead like a tunnel. Small scale logging operations are sometimes discernible, but mostly its undisturbed pristine bush.

I continued walking after dusk, deep into the night, craning my neck to take in the wonders of jungle. Along the Essequibo River, as we sailed upstream, we marvelled at the green wall of jungle. At Baganara we paddled around the island in rapture. It's only when you get a long way inland, and meet the real pristine forest, you realise that what you saw downstream was only secondary regrowth. Around Bartica and below it has been systematically logged for more than 200 years and the jungle we so admired is only uncontrolled regrowth. In pristine jungle there is yet another storey of green above it, the dominant forest giants that were cut down in more accessible places. Slender trunks with a clean bole reaching 70, 80, 100 feet in the air, small crowns lording it above the lower two storeys. Entire botanical gardens hanging down from the individual trees, with incredible little details straight out of sci-fi fantasy illustrations. A candelabra of plants and flowers hanging down on a slim five foot long string, clusters of aerial roots dangling straight down 60 feet, only to stop a few feet above the ground, covering blanket of lianas, themselves overgrown with climbers, orchids, bromeliads, beehives, termite nests, canopies and creepers. The tops of tree crowns tower like castles in the air, a cumulonimbus of green imagination.

Late in the night, under bright stars in a cool air free of mosquitoes I stretched on the ground for a nap behind logs stacked along the road. An hour later I noticed a bright torch sweeping the bush a few metres away from me, a lone voice talking in a casual manner. Man was neither approaching nor retreating. He was stationary, talking on and off, sometimes checking the trees with his torch. Baffled, I packed up and moved on, just in case. Another mile further I ran into the same phenomenon, a lone man talking aloud into the forest, turning his head as if listening, then talking casually more. Witchcraft? No. They were miners who climbed to the road on the ridge from their camps in the gullies to get better reception on their mobile phones. I passed in silence a man sitting on a stump, a three foot long cane stuck in the ground in front of him, a phone hanging from the stick, and man talking at his stick: "I can hear you love… can you hear me?" He didn't notice me walking past.

Howler monkeys roaring in the distance, cicadas screeching like their life depended on it, noises that I can't even begin to identify coming from all directions. In the night several Bedford trucks loaded with diesel passed me thundering laboriously along the narrow track. At dawn one gave me a ride to the river crossing. Rocking on the camel from pothole to pothole, we passed two blokes hiking along the road. Short squat Amerindians, shod in olive grey gumboots, tattered shorts, one had leftovers of T-shirt covering his chest. String around their foreheads was supporting a load slung across their backs. Stocky, deep-chested, muscular and fit, with strong Mongolian facial features, each carried a bow and arrows in his right hand. Very business looking weapons about 5 feet long, freshly cut from green saplings, slender arrows as long

as the bow, about four of five each. They fit into the landscape perfectly. And why not? A gun requires a licence, which means money to pay for it, and constant supply of fresh bullets, that's money again. Economically the guy may seem to be on the bottom of the heap, but their hunting implements cost them nothing, and they are controlled by no-one.

On the ferry at Mango Crossing I talked myself into a battered local minibus going to Mahdia. Driven by weasely Indian fellow loaded to the gills on speed, we first stopped at the outskirts of a village where he scored two fat sweet smelling joints that he eagerly smoked before we continued. His driving improved after that.
Nearing Mahdia we passed many small jungle clearings worked by very dark West Indian Rastafarians, recent immigrants from the poor islands of St.Lucia and Dominica. Faded flags of Ethiopia draped over the gate posts, their huts are crude shanties covered with cheap tarpaulin, humpies no different from the shacks you see on copper engravings of Guyana gold fields from 1880ies, when canvas tarps made a house just like it does today. True pioneer crofters, they survive by growing manioc, which is poisonous to wildlife, until the cyanide is washed away during the cooking process. We picked up two Rastaman as passengers, slim, quiet, polite, communicating more by gestures than by speech. Mahdia population is evenly split into three groups – Patamonas, the original Amerindian tribe, Coast Landers, both African and Indian, moving in from the lowlands of Guyana to work the gold, and immigrants from the other areas of Caribbean, who are the true settlers, working the land.
The last mile to Mahdia is one continuous field of potholes, negotiated at slower than walking speed. Driver struck a conversation with a pedestrian who slowed down so we could keep up with him. General elections being only two days away, talk turned to politics. – "They should bring the President here, to see this road," started our driver. – "Ay," answered the local, "President was here yesterday, for a Rally." – "They should have taken him down this road, then." – "They did. It's the same road as goes to the airstrip." – "So they will finally do something about it." – "No," was an emphatic answer – "What do you mean, no. How do you know?" – "Same President came here four years ago, at the last elections, and nothing happened." – One of the passenger piped in: "They allocated funds, but somebody pocketed the lot before it got here."
Mahdia was never laid out as a town, never properly surveyed, it grew organically around the first few grog shops as the need for more facilities arose with time. A few crooked narrow muddy streets with shops and bars on both sides, a good modern supermarket, a few eateries, four whore houses, sleepy girls with heavy white mascara on their faces, hiding from sun under umbrellas, smart phone to their ears, fencing with the lewd idlers clustering around every doorway. Mark up on merchandise is about 100% above what you pay in Georgetown, but meals in eateries are fresh and big serves. I talked to a number of locals and figured out the next steps of my way. It's only 2-3 hours walk to the Potaro River, a tiny settlement of Pamelo, where you catch a boat upstream to the Amatok falls. You climb a trail around the falls and catch another boat to a small village of Tokai. In Tokai starts the final climb up to the plateau from which Kaieteur hurl itself in its glory. I got the prices that locals pay for the boats, and armed with two packets of biscuits stepped smartly onto the narrow track to the river, hitching a ride with another fuel delivery.
Pamelo, on the river bank, was a couple of houses on stilts, a few aluminium punts, a dug out or two, and very little interest in anything. Boatmen were lounging under a veranda of the upper house, drunk already and getting drunker. Joining in conversation I got the feel of the situation. There is no trail through the jungle. The only way further is by a boat. There will be no boat today, it's too late in the morning. Tomorrow it's Sunday, so there will be no boat either. On Monday it's the Election Day, so no boat. On Tuesday a party of tourists booked a boat upstream, so if they turn up, and if there is a room for me, I could join them. Price is a flat fee – US$200, one way. Take it or leave it.
I was stunned. Locals pay a fraction of the price the bloke was asking. I don't mind paying "skin tax", but this was outrageous. I didn't let on that I was shocked by what the drunken boatman was charging, and we continued negotiating. There was no discount to be had. He had a game sawn up and he knew it. It is probably possible to walk along, but you need to know where to look for the trails. Without a guide I would get lost in the jungle in five minutes.
US$200 one way, if and when a party gathered together, in a few days' time. I was stuffed. Even if I wanted to pay the extortion rate, I did not carry that sort of money on me. I try to support local business, but this was no business, this was extortion, US$200 for a 10-mile ride. I'd spend several days here, waiting for this drunk to make up his mind when he feels like going, I pay a fortune for the privilege, but what about the return trip? He'd have me over the barrel then, completely. I have heard of one white man who flew up to the falls in a plane, then walked for two days down all the way to Mahdia, but he had a local guide. Without a local knowledge I'd never find my way back.

I sat on the bank of Potaro for a while, staring into murky water in gloom. I hefted my little rucksack. With heavy heart and gathering clouds I walked back to Mahdia. I have heard this sort of stories about Guyana tourism, now I was seeing it for myself in the field. Never mind. We can always fly to the Falls from Baganara. My love already booked a seat for herself. I will join her.
Saturday afternoon, Mahdia was dead. There were no minibuses leaving for Georgetown, they all leave at day break. I had one more feed of roti and chicken curry in an Indian eatery and I started walking along the road back. I got lucky. I caught a ride with a pair of enterprising carpenters carting some machinery parts from a mine, all the way back to a workshop in Georgetown. They stopped at several places along the way to pick up stolen timber they stashed in the scrub on their way up. Late that night they dropped me off at the junction leading to Sherima Crossing. In the night it started to rain. The next day was Sunday and there was no traffic at all. I walked in the rain the whole day along the deserted track, finally at dusk catching a ride with a fuel truck for the last three miles to Bartica. Rain did not stop. Rainy season arrived, and it went on bucketing for a month, every single day. I also booked a flight to the Falls with the resort airline and we waited a whole month for a first available seat. Then we waited a bit more. It never happened. Guyana tourism.
I was sore about it until the day I heard the story of Russian rock climbing expedition that came to Guyana last year, intent on climbing the Roraima's spectacular sandstone walls at the headwaters of Mazaruni River. All their papers were in order, they had all the permits, they made their laborious way to the end of the dirt track, where they were met by native forest rangers: "You pay us 10 000 US dollars and you can start climbing." – Guys did not have that sort of money and no amount of negotiating would lower the price. They had to turn around and head back to Russia. Guyana tourism.

Fool and his money

If you use e-mail, you must've received at some time or another a spam from West Africa, most likely from Nigeria or Ghana, offering you in atrocious English some unbelievable deal involving either improbable megabucks or a large lump of gold. The offer is so obviously a scam, that no one in their right mind would even open their e-mail to read the details. Have you ever wondered why they continue to sent out those millions of obviously bogus offers? Are they really hoping to catch some dumb greedy moron? Have you ever met a trusting fool who would fall for one of their scams?
I will tell you a true story which I helped to unravel in the West Indies. It's about a sailor I will call Jaroslav, a pleasant nondescript rich from one of those little Slavic countries that sprung up in Eastern Europe after the Evil Empire fell apart. Boring as a door knob, without a speck of imagination, he fitted out an aluminium hull, to go and see the world. He does not enjoy sailing as such, but he does not pretend that he is a sailor. His yacht, a well appointed 40-footer, is his house. He likes to travel, and he prefers to drag his house around with him, instead of living out of a suitcase in daily changing hotels. On principle he motors whenever he can, avoiding winds over 20 knots and all the headwinds. Self-opinionated, deeply judgemental and bigoted, jaded by thousands of sights which did not touch him, he is hard to surprise or amaze. He even wrote and self published a book about the first 9 years of his travels, the most bloated I-me-mine account that I had my misfortune to lay my eyes on. He does not say what he does for living, but he has money to burn. More money than brains.
Earlier this year, island hopping around Caribbean, he got stuck for 4 months in Miami, Florida. Something on his boat broke down, he had to order new parts from Europe, repairs were not successful, second round of waiting in a giant sterile marina, frustration of not being able to move when he wanted… Recently divorced, lonely and miserable, he logged onto a respectable American dating website. Well-kept middle aged man with money and his own yacht in Florida is a tempting prospect, and he soon found a charming dark lady who called herself Mary, from France. E-mails, phone calls, Skype, wazzapp, virtual relationship developed fast. They were arranging physical meeting, talking of their new life together on his boat. Few discrepancies sneaked in, though. Mary turned out to be not quite French. She lived in Accra, in Ghana, in Africa, in a small house with her mother. Now and then she started mentioning she'd appreciate some money for food. Jaroslav ignored the requests. If any warning bells rung in his belfry, he didn't let them interfere with his pursuit of happiness.
The story developed depth. Mary's mother died after a long illness. Mary asked for money to organise her funeral. Jaroslav again refused to send her any money. A while later they agreed to meet in Dominican Republic, destination where he was heading from Miami. Mary asked for money for the plane ticket. Jaroslav refused to send her cash, but he offered to buy her ticket himself, on-line. Next thing, he received an e-mail saying Mary bought herself a ticket to Miami, flying to the States the following week. Copy of the

ticket and front page of her passport came as an attachment to the e-mail. Also a page purporting to be Medical Examination that she needed before she could apply for US visa. Mary asked Jaroslav at least to pay for the Examination, about $160. She was doing it for him, after all. He sent her the money by Western Union. When he asked where she found money for the plane ticked, she claimed she borrowed it from a friend in Accra.
On the day of her flight Jaroslav received an e-mail from someone signed "Officer Dominic", from Accra airport. Mary was arrested in Ghana as she tried to take out of the country 10 kg lump of gold. Gold was confiscated until she paid export duty and a fine of US$ 5000. Would Jaroslav help out? Officially looking reports were again attached to the e-mail. Frantic exchange of e-mails followed. Mary claimed that gold belonged to her deceased father, and with her mother now also dead, it was hers to dispose of. She was taking it to the States, to sell it. Jaroslav refused to get involved. No more was heard of the fine and export tax.
A week later Mary sent him a copy of a new ticket to the States that she bought herself and soon afterwards she e-mailed from Virginia, where she was staying with an old friend. On the following day Jaroslav received a phone call from Ghana, originating from Mary's phone. Girl called Mercy said that Mary left her the phone, because it would not work in the States. From then on Mercy would call now and then, confirming the story that Mary was dishing out.
Mary wrote asking if Jaroslav would be willing to fly to Virginia, to help her sell the gold. Jaroslav was too busy fixing his boat, he didn't have time to chase someone else's gold. He declined.
Next e-mail from Mary came from London, UK. She wrote that she flew over to England to see her ex-boyfriend who was more experienced in dealing with gold. She was staying with yet another friend, named Annabel. Few days later Annabel herself contacted Jaroslav. Now he was in touch with three Ghanian girls, Mary, Mercy and Annabel. E-mail, Skype, smart-phone apps, all sorts of exchanges, cross referencing each other, re-enforcing the story from within.
In London Mary entrusted her gold to her ex, who was a crook. He decided to swindle an insurance company, pretending the gold was stolen. Mary didn't like this turn of events and she dobbed him to London Police. Her ex was arrested and gold in their possession was deposited with a Public Trustee company accustomed to deal with gold. As always, Mary forwarded copies of statements, deposit slips, police charges, addresses of companies involved, their contacts, everything. Jaroslav still has all those testaments on his computer.
Next e-mail came from distressed Annabel. Mary was in a serious car accident somewhere outside of London, Annabel's own husband was driving. Driver died in the crash, Mary was in coma. Three days later she died of her injuries. Annabel asked Jaroslav to chip in for her funeral. Jaroslav wanted to see Mary's death certificate, first. A couple of days later copy of the death certificate duly arrived by e-mail and Jaroslav send the needed money to a bank account in UK, with Annabel's name on it.
A few days after the funeral Annabel started to discuss the fate of the gold lump sitting in the Trustee safe in London. Mary racked up debts of about US$ 30 000, but she had no known relatives, at least nobody who knew about the gold in England. Jaroslav and Annabel decided to sell the gold, pay Mary's debts and split the rest in half. At the current price they'd get about US$ 130 000 each. Annabel didn't feel right about gold sitting in UK, she worried that someone will come up claiming to be Mary's relative and take the gold. She suggested Jaroslav moves the gold back home, to Eastern Europe. Jaroslav was not happy about it, he didn't really wanted to stick his neck out, but Annabel insisted. They found a company specialising in transport of gold across Europe. Their first quote was reasonable and Jaroslav agreed to pay for the transfer. Before he could send the payment, another quote from the same company arrived, ten times higher, and with it announcement that it was not 10kg they were moving, but 70 kg.
Jaroslav pulled back, demanding explanation. Where did the additional 60 kg of gold came from? The following morning Annabel wrote him what she discovered. They were both victims of a scam, the transport company they hired was bogus, she was withdrawing the gold from the Trustees, keeping it in her home. They decided to bypass the expensive middlemen and ship the gold themselves, hidden in an old computer monitor. 10kg of gold comes to a lot of money, but as a physical object it is not a big piece, gold is incredibly heavy and 10 kg block wouldn't be too hard to hide. Annabel's lawyer had a friend in DHL who would arrange the shipment with minimum of questions.
Jaroslav was still in Florida on his boat, all the intrigues unravelling in the cyber space. He forwarded the money to send the parcel with the computer from London to his home town, where his son would take the delivery. The box dully arrived, son picked it up, but there was no gold in it. Receipt stated that on departure the monitor weighted only 4 kg, so the gold never left London.
Annabel went to British Police. They raided the DHL office and found the missing gold in a locker of one of

the employees. As usually photographs of gold and police reports were attached to the e-mail that Annabel sent to Jaroslav. Tired of machinations, Jaroslav, stuck in Miami, bought a ticket for his son to fly personally to London and pick up the gold. That night a frantic e-mail arrived from Annabel: her son was in a serious car accident, he needed an urgent operation that night. Can Jaroslav help out? His contribution would be refunded when the gold was sold. Photos, medical reports, even phone number of the operating doctor were enclosed. Operation was expensive, but Jaroslav have spoken to the doctor and then he sent the money to London. That was the last he heard from anyone connected to the gang.
Checking systematically the evidence he had accumulated over the four months, he gradually discovered that most of the documents he received, if not all of them, were in fact forgeries, starting with the Mary's fake death certificate, right down to a bogus doctor operating on Annabel's son. All up he was taken for something like £15 000.
Jaroslav, straight, indignant and naïve, was typing up a long report he was going to send to British Police in the place where Annabel's bank accounts were located. He was hoping the English cops will catch the gang by following the money trail. Yeah. He was serious. He can communicate in English, on the street level, but his written statement was gibberish, it had to be completely re-written to make sense. He asked my help to do that, so I went through the entire Byzantine tangle, sentence by sentence, date by date, extracting the meaning from the convoluted tangle of subject-object-verb confusion. At the end of his epistle Jaroslav appended a guarded suggestion as a pointer for the Police investigations, that, maybe, none of the girls involved ever left Ghana, and that, possibly, there was no actual gold to start with.
It is a good story and I have a proof that West African gold scam works. £15 000 is a lot of money, in any country.

Chapter 9: Venezuela

Salto Angel, translated into English as Angel Falls, is the most famous tourist attraction in Venezuela, being the tallest waterfall on Earth, hurling down from the edge of a sandstone plateau of Auyan-tepui in a leap nearly a kilometre high. It is so remote, that even indigenous Pemon Indians did not know about it and did not have a name for it. For all the decolonisation efforts we got stuck with the name "Angel Falls". For those not familiar with the story, Latin America is full of place names venerating this or that catholic saint, but these particular Falls have nothing to do with religion. They were named after Jimmi Angel, a legendary American bush pilot who discovered them by accident in March 1935 while he was flying around, looking for a gold reef he believed to be somewhere there. He tried to land in the vicinity of the fall five times until finally in October 1937 he managed to land on top of the plateau, the first and last aeroplane to achieve that. On landing his Flamenco monoplane sunk its wheels in the swamp and it remained there stuck for the next 33 years. Angel and his crew took 11 days to descend from the plateau on foot and return to civilisation. In 1970 Angel's plane was lifted off the mountain with an army helicopter, and today the restored flying machine is gracing the front lawn of the Airport in Ciudad Bolivar.
Contrary to "expert" opinion, there is no way to get to the falls entirely by land, not even by walking along a native track. The only walkable trail is the last bit, about a mile from the campsite on the Churun River up to the lookout. There is no road up to the campsite, and there is no native trail. Nobody lives anywhere near there, Pemon people consider Auyan-tepui a bad place, and the whole region is now a National Park managed by the Pemon from Canaima.
To reach the Falls by land, your best bet is to start in Ciudad Bolivar on the Orinoco River. From there you fly a small plane for an hour to a jungle settlement of Canaima, headquarters of the National Park and the centre for the tours to the Falls. There is no road up to Canaima, and steep rapids prevent cargo boats going up the river. Small native canoes can get through the rapids during the five months when there is enough water in the river, but all the supplies arrive in Canaima by air. People come by a variety of airplanes from Ciudad Bolivar or Porto Ordoz, supplies are flown in by a giant Russian helicopter that can lift an entire truck.
From Canaima you take a dug out canoe for a 5-hour trip up the river, and walk the last kilometre on foot. From December to March there isn't enough water in the river to float a canoe, and the only way to the falls is by plane. There is no landing strip anywhere near the falls, true emergencies are lifted by that big cargo helicopter. Flight to the falls that they sell to tourists during the dry season really mean a few minutes overflight, a couple of pictures taken from the window of the plane, and a flight back to Canaima or Ciudad Bolivar. During the dry season the water supply shrinks so much that Angel Falls evaporate half way down the leap. Thin ribbon of water that jumped over the cliff reaches the ground as thin mist.
So plan well. In May, before the main rainy season, and in November, when the river is already drying up,

the 5-hour trip in a canoe may turn into a 12-hour nightmare, as the crew and the guests drag the 30-foot timber dugout over the boulders of partly dry riverbed, shooting the rock-thrown rapids in dark of the night. Agents in Ciudad Bolivar sell the tours without consulting people in Canaima, promising the trips that are physically impossible.
From June till end of October you should be all right. Tours on offer vary a great deal. For a fit person three days and two nights is a minimum you need if you want to enjoy the experience. Two days and one night comes only marginally cheaper, but you don't really get any time up at the falls. You arrive to the camp at dusk, take a quick look at the falls from the river, and you are racing down the rapids on your way back first thing in the morning. And then there is something called "El Full Day", an insane rush to "do" the Falls in a single day, starting at 3AM in Ciudad Bolivar, and if all the connections work out, returning to Ciudad by 10PM the same night. Good only if you are after bragging rights that you have been there. "El Full Day" is expensive, and it is taken only by masochistic Japanese achievers.

Venezuela has no railways, everything moves by road. Price of fuel is never entered into consideration about costs of transport. You get 10 litres of petrol for one Bolivar, local monetary unit. In the skewed socialist economy now in force, on the black market we were getting 600 Bolivar for one dollar. By the time we left, it was 800. That gives you 8000 litres of petrol for one dollar. Yes, 8 tons of fuel for a dollar. It has always been that way.
All the countries around charge normal world prices, so smuggling of ultra cheap fuel out of Venezuela is a lucrative business. Citizens of all South American countries can travel across their common borders without passports, only flashing their ID cards, as often as they feel. Caracas Government tries to minimise the smuggling by any means they can think of. In Venezuela you can't rock up to a petrol station with a jerry can and fill it with a take away petrol. Fuel is sold only directly into car tanks. So the taxis near the borders installed huge fuel tanks into their American caravels. Every morning they fill up with 150 litres, which cost them a fraction of one dollar, they drive a token passenger across the border to Colombia, and then siphon the petrol to their accomplices who sell it for enormous profit.
Venezuelan yachts are allotted a quota of subsidised fuel. 800 litres a month, regardless of type of the boat, motor cruiser or sailboat. Foreign yachts are not allowed to buy fuel from regular bowsers, they are supposed to tank up from regulated government outlets in marinas, paying an arbitrary price similar to what you pay in other countries. I have never met a yachtie who subjected himself to such an indignity. Names of friendly cab drivers circulate on the waterfront, guys who will deliver big plastic drums of fuel right into the marina. A workmen's dinghy from one of the marinas can also be persuaded to deliver cut price diesel discreetly to your boat.
I met Venezuelan fuel smugglers in Bartica, in the heart of Guyana. They were carting 2000 litres of diesel at a time, in 44gal plastic drums lying on their sides in welded steel canoes. It's an 18-hour river trip over some serious rapids, but with fuel for outboards costing virtually nothing, what they got for their diesel in Guyana was all profit.
With approaching parliamentary elections, standing on very shaky ground, Venezuelan President accused neighbouring Colombia with undermining his economy by smuggling cheap fuel across the line, he ordered the land border closed and flogged the situation to the brink of war. Simple calculation will show you that all the possible fuel smuggled out of the country is a drop in a bucket when compared with total domestic consumption.

Cheapest way around Venezuela is by bus. Lack of spare parts grounded most of the fleet, so competition for the seats can be fierce. Some bus companies put up their prices a bit, driving the fares out of reach of the poorest, but for us it remained dirt cheap. 300km trip from Puerto la Cruz to the capital, Caracas, costs a dollar. Dearth of vehicles means that many scheduled departures are cancelled. Buses leave early morning or late at night, during the day departures are rare.
There is an alternative to a bus: "per puesto", a shared taxi. In the towns on the north east coast they are great big American gasoline pigs from the 70ies and 80ies, rumbling dilapidated V-8 sedans seating six. Venezuela never manufactured entire cars, but several companies built assembly factories, bolting together imported parts.
Economical boycott orchestrated by USA stopped the flow of spare parts for anything manufactured in the States, so the old Chevy per puestos are repaired with wire, string, rough welding and anything they can cannibalise from grounded cars. Rusting shit heaps have no door handles, no head lights, windows do not roll down, bonnet protecting the vital engine is tied down with a padlocked chain. Dented panels are rattling loose on the frame, bald tyres screaming for a retread. Front wheel snapped off at the ball joint is

such a common sight that I stopped making notes of them in my diary. At the fare per puestos are charging (regulated by government decree) they can't afford to spend anything on maintenance, even if the parts were available.
Shared taxis travel on fixed routes and leave as soon as they are full, dropping off and picking up passengers anywhere along the route. In town a typical fare for 4 km was 20 Bolivar, about 3 or 4 cents. Long distance taxis start at Passenger Terminals alongside the regular buses. Cross country per puestos are better maintained, small Japanese cars seating four. On the trunk roads it takes only a few minutes to gather a full car and off they go. Fares are about triple of the subsidised bus fares, 300 km from Puerto to Ciudad Bilivar comes to about $3.

We left Marina first thing in the morning, walking at day break from the security gate to the main road, looking for a cab to the bus terminal. I wasn't sure what rate I can get for a cash dollar in the provinces, black market transactions being a bit of a hush-hush affairs, so I changed with my usual connections in Puerto all I though we'll need for the trip to the Falls. $300 in cash translated to over 200 000 Bolivar. Government steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the reality of black market and insists US$1 equals 6 Bolivar. Official minimum wage, what a primary school teacher earns, is 247 Bolivar a day (35 cents), or 7500 B a month. So in theory the biggest denomination bill in circulation, a 100-Bolivar, is big enough. It is worth 15 cents. Often you get bundles of 50ies instead of 100s, or even 10's and 20ies, so 200 000 is a huge brick of cash that no pocket can contain. Stacks of bills are tightly bound by multiple rubber bands. Individual bundles are seldom broken up or counted. Transactions are in bundles, not in bills. My shoulder bag was bulging at seems with cash and I was eager to offload it as soon as possible. I wasn't worried about carrying it around with me, just uncomfortable.
Security can be an issue in Venezuela. It all depends where exactly you are and what you look like. Crime rate is so high, that government prohibits publishing of statistics. Muggings are common, gunshots are heard every night. Cluster of safe marinas and hotels in Puerto where we kept the boat is surrounded by a wide belt of fishermen's slums. Walking down the road during the day is not a problem, but robbers are quick to spot the weak and over the years a number of more timid looking yachties were relieved of their wallets, especially when they were drunk. But it is not all one-sided. My Russian friend, a boat owner staying in our marina, got pissed off and frustrated with something one night, he had a few drinks and he went for a walk into the slums to relieve his anger with a good fight. A hulking shaved headed gorilla in his early forties, a retired professional enforcer without neck, as white as a white can be, he kept walking up and down the crooked lanes of the slums whole night, spoiling for a fight. He was watched from half opened doorways, but as soon as he got near, doors would shut. Nobody ventured out to cross his path. Waterfront slums are full of thugs, but they are not stupid, they can smell trouble waling down a laneway, right across the cultural wall. – "What's wrong with these guys?" the skipper complained to me in the morning, "nobody came out even to ask me for a cigarette."

Ticket seller at the bus terminal was closed, in spite of assurance he gave me the day before that they open at 5:30 AM. You are not allowed to buy a ticket the day before. We wandered outside, to the shared taxis and 20 minutes later we were ensconced in an old Mitsubishi sedan barrelling down a 4-lane highway south, with one another passenger and his desktop in a box sitting between us in the back, paying for the remaining fare.
Nobody enforce any speed limit in Venezuela, good bitumen roads support 140-150 kmh travelling speed and the boring flats of unimproved pastures known as Llanos were zipping past, hundreds of miles of perfectly good farmland laying fallow. No villages, no hamlets, no farms anywhere. Nobody grows anything, food is imported, paid for by petrol exports. Around El Tigre we passed distant smoking towers of oil fields and before midday we slipped over the Angostura suspension bridge across the brown murky waters of Orinoco. Until a few years ago, when they opened another bridge at Porto Ordaz, this was the only bridge across the entire length of Orinoco. There is no need for more bridges, so few people live beyond Orinoco. South of Orinoco lies the Selva, the Forrest, beginning of the Orinoco – Amazon rainforest stretching on for thousands of kilometres.
From the bus terminal in Ciudad Bolivar we caught a cab to the airport which sprawls in the middle of town. In Venezuela city taxis never cost more than half a dollar. Several tour agents organising trips to the Falls operate out of the airport. Three or four little offices, I recognised some of the agents' names from my gossip notes. Long spell of haggling started. A couple of stingy friends of ours went up to the falls a month ago, so we had a rough guide to the prices, but with Bolivar in a free fall against all hard currencies, prices rise all the time. When they do, it's in a leap, double or triple overnight, then they remain stable for

a bit while the dollar keeps galloping away.
With clear idea what is available we caught a cab to the old town, where you find all the nicest guest houses, called "posadas". A friend suggested we stay in Posada Don Carlos, a beautifully restored medieval mansion right in the centre of the old town.

About 15 years ago a young German tour guide working on Orinoco found a rambling half ruined Spanish colonial mansion in the very centre of Old Town. He decided to restore the place and turn it into a guest house for the tourists. His father invested a substantial bundle into the restoration, hoping it will become his retirement fund. Germans spared no money in fixing the place. Two storey main building encloses a spacious yard shaded by one leafy tree barely squeezed into the sunny square in the middle. Tile roofs are supported by massive timber beams, white-washed walls are broken up by sections of exposed brick and stone masonry. Floors are tiled, every level in a different pattern. All the doors and windows are 11 feet high, tall enough for a caballero to ride through on a horse. Windows facing the main street have cute masonry seats behind the wrought iron grills. In the olden days coquetting ladies would sit in the windows, observing the street life. Wooden shutters can close the windows for the night or against the rain. There is not a pane of glass in the whole posada.
The owners gathered an amazing collection of antiques that is gracing every corner of the posada. Several early upright typewriters, Zinger sawing machine, phonograph, daguerreotype photographic apparatus, crank powered phone. Old stuff is sitting on the antique cupboards, tables and dressers, out in the open, nothing is nailed down, nothing locked behind glass. Walls are covered in original watercolours of city streetscape, old prints, ethnic art, copper birds, interspersed with objects of daily use, kitchen utensils, bottles, pots and pans, all sorts of stuff. Furniture is timber period antiques, even a complete timber bar from some old drinking hole. Atmosphere is magnificent. You feel transported into a movie set created just for you.
The old man's plan to retire on the takings from his posada did not work out. Problem is not only a collapse in tourism and economic mayhem. Day to day management of the guest house is more at fault. Posada Don Carlos does not cook, bar fridge is empty, resident tour agent out of reach. Three dogs keep barking at anything suspicious walking down the street. Guests are allowed to cook, but pots and pans are all locked away at 6PM when the day staff goes home. It's a great place, if you are after atmosphere, but do not expect a hotel service.
All the posadas act as tour agents as well, but the owner of Don Carlos was not around, he didn't answer his phone, so we booked a room, left the swags there and returned to the airport, to do more haggling. I was getting tired of lugging 3 kg bundle of cash around the streets. Prices we were quoted in the morning turned out be out of date, some connections were not logistically possible, and on top of that airport in Ciudad Bolivar is closed on Wednesdays and Thursdays for maintenance. They are pouring new bitumen on the main runway, as the funds trickle in. Airplanes can only fly from Saturday till Tuesday. On Wednesday and Thursday they fly to Porto Ordaz, a large town about 100 km away.
In the end we cut a deal with a young Peruvian chap in his office. I had to throw in my spare $100 bill to buy the tour, but talking later to other people in our canoe on the way upstream, we paid a lot less than anyone else.
Relieved of the clumsy bundles of Bolivars, we sat down under the Jimmi Angel's airplane on the from lawn. Meticulously restored, it looks like a flimsy crate built by a crazy backyard inventor somewhere in the Mid-West. Boxy aluminium body, skimpy struts supporting tiny wheels, massive 9-cylinder rotary engine in the front. Those guys sure had guts. Angel was a star pilot of a flying circus before he got bored with barn storming stunts and went flying between the tepuis in Guyana highlands. In 1921 he met an Alaskan geologist and explorer J.R. McCracken in a bar in Panama. McCracken told Angel about a mountain in South America with a river full of gold. Angel offered to take him there for $ 3000, which was a serious pile of money in those days. To his surprise, the geologist accepted. As they flew over the jungle of Venezuela, McCracken gave verbal directions until they finally landed in a remote spot on top of a plateau, where McCracken hopped out and started filling his bag with gold nuggets. He only stopped when the pilot insisted on leaving, as darkness was approaching. Where exactly they were was anybody's guess. Forrest was neither explored nor mapped in those days. Obsessed with desire to find the spot again, Angel dedicated the rest of his life to this search. Even without maps Angel was sure they had landed on top of Auyan-Tepui. Over the years he tried to land on the plateau five times, but could not find an opening in the jungle. On one of his trips he discovered the Devil's Canyon and he saw a waterfall that nearly made him loose the control of his plane. The cascade fell from the sky and he was the first white man to see it.

In the morning the agent sent his sister to pick us up in the posada. Transmandu Air is flying all sorts of aircraft, and we were squeezed into a tiny six-seater. Four tourists, an overweight government official and a playboy pilot. Flying at 700 feet in the morning, before the clouds cover the sight of the ground, we had a clear view in all directions. Savanna with scattered trees gave way to thick forest that looked from above like a field of gigantic broccoli. We crossed the many-lobed lake of Guri Dam, one of the largest hydroelectric project on Earth. It feeds most of the country's grid. For all their cheap petrol, 75% of Venezuelan electricity is generated by hydro power; diesel generators are used only in emergencies. Further south we flew, fewer signs of human habitation we could discern, until all the tracks, cattle path and narrow trail disappeared in the jungle cover. First tepui appeared on the horizon.

The native village of Canaima sits on a spectacular lagoon of the lower Carrao River. River widens to over a mile, entering the lagoon by a string of waterfalls separated by small islands, all tumbling down the same wide shelf maybe 20 metres tall. Village itself is spread over a wide area, cluster of dwellings here, a tour base there, a few bungalows there, a stone church, large grounds of the High School, all set amid immaculate clean lawns and patches of parkland forest. Not a piece of rubbish anywhere, no plastic bags, no candy wrappers, no used disposable nappies, no garbage bags full of rotting fish torn apart by scavenging dogs at night, common sight everywhere along the north coast. Pemon Indians are proud of their country and they keep their forest spotlessly clean.

Canaima National Park covers 30 000 km square, and it is administered by the natives, Pemon Indians. Chavez gave it to them outright, as a freehold land. You can't wander around the park as you please. For one, there are no roads and no trails in the jungle, everyone moves along the rivers in canoes with outboard engines. For two, there are no maps to guide you in the wilderness. You'd get lost and stay lost. GPS position from your hand held is useless when you can't lay it on a meaningful map. In Canaima you are stuck with being a helpless tourist.

We were handed over to our guides, who quickly changed the arrangements that outsiders tried to impose on them. A host of companies is vying for a thin trickle of tourists who brave the paranoid rumours spread by western media. You end up with 20 tourists who were sold 14 different schedules and itineraries, but all going up to the same Falls. Pemon guides took a quick look and gathered together a canoe load of younger and fitter looking visitors and another lot of older Japanese geriatrics. Francisco, a young Pemon, took charge of our group. A student of architecture, he comes home to Canaima for the tourist season, taking people up to the falls. Quiet, polite, confident, patient and helpful, Francisco speaks impeccable Spanish and we could not have found a better guide to take us up. And we were told that we'll be going up the falls right now, instead of next day. We will have sandwiches for lunch on the way. Everyone agreed?

All the traffic up river goes in native timber canoes. (Word "canoe" originates in here, on the north coast of South America, with Arawak Indians). Carved out of a single tree trunk, Pemon pirogas are about 35 feet long. Spread open wider with help of fire, they are about 4 feet at the widest point. An extra plank 8 inches high rises the freeboard and widens the hull. Bottom must be about 4 inches thick, to take the impact of repeated collisions with river boulders when level of water drops. Flat plank on the transom supports a single 48 HP outboard, not much, when you consider the strength of rapids. Canoes take 10-12 passengers and 2-4 guides and boatmen. Some operators tried to introduce aluminium craft, but they found them too light. When racing up the steep rapids, boatman has to lift the prop out of water in the topmost bit, and his craft needs enough inertia to glide over the most shallow part without help of the engine. Dugouts built out of welded steel fare better than aluminium, but they rust.

Water level in the river has been dropping for the past two months, but there was just enough to ride through. Several sets of rapids are on the way, so our bags were all wrapped in thick plastic, stowed away down in the bilges of the canoes, at the back, and we were warned to protect the cameras from spray thrown up by the bow.

Around noon we sat down on wooden perches in the bottom of the canoe and the boatman fired up the outboard. A few miles of smooth ride up a wide river and we pulled up at a sandy bank. Mayupa Rapids, far too wild to ride with a full boat. We walked for about half an hour down a wide sandy path through an open savannah. A token Indian village of thatched roofs and souvenir trinkets for sale, majestic tepui rising their flat heads in the distance. Tepui are like remote islands on dry land. Flat topped high mesas, they are remnants of the previous geological eras, ancient sandstone plateau eroded away, leaving behind these improbable clumps of rock with vertical walls and level tops. Surviving in total isolation for millions of years, most of them host amazing variety of endemic life forms, plants and animals found nowhere else. Conan Doyle was inspired by tepui to write his "Lost World". About 800 tepui dot the Grand Savannah, and Auyan-tepui, the home of Angel Falls, is one of the largest ones. Covering about 700 square km, it stretches for 50 km. Like a deeply pitted crescent, gouged by two rivers into convoluted contours, its walls

are towering almost a kilometre high.
At the end of our walk we saw the Auyan-tepui in the distance for the first time, vertical walls of black sand stone rising like castles of giants against the clear sky. We had our sandwiches for lunch, and leisurely swim in the river. Carrao River is "black water", slightly acidic river, tinted dark brown, sometimes almost red, by rotting vegetation that discharge tannin into water. Fish does not like acid water and fishing in the black water streams is nothing to brag about. Mosquitoes do not like acid water either, so there is no malaria here. Black water is coloured dark but it's perfectly clean and drinkable.
We piled back into the canoe, without seeing the actual Mayupa rapids. On our way back the next day we had plenty of look, though. Running late, the boatman judged he had a crew adventurous enough and he plunged down the topmost set of rapids with a full boat. Large wave broke over our bow half swamping the pirogue, then another one as we flew through the turbulent waves. Boatman's offsider frantically bailing out with a plastic bucket. Everyone was soaked to the bone, but we were warned and our bags wrapped tight. No sooner we recovered composure than we barged into the second set, just as violent. A true white water rafting, thrown in free of charge. The bottom-most rapids were too rough to ride with a full boat and we were dropped off on shore to walk the third set along a foot path.
The trip to the Falls follows up the Carrao River for about 35 km upstream, vertical walls of Auyan-tepui about half a mile distant on our right. Two more sets of rapids, mild enough to power up with only a bit of water breaking into the boat. Turn up the Churun river changes the character of the ride. Only fraction as wide as Carrao, Churun is much more shallow, much steeper, continuous rapids for the entire 30 km to the camp site. The senior boatman left the outboard to his young helper and moved into the bows of the canoe, to pick the way through the rapids, and to help steering the boat in tight corners when the outboard was tilted up. Some of the stretches were so tight I would never think you can squeeze a 35-foot dugout full of people through the corner. In Devil's Canyon river squeezes between two huge boulders, stream narrows to two metres racing down against you, and the way at the top is barred by a third massive stone. Guys forced the dugout up the narrow chute, then kinked our course around the corner, frantically breaking off with the paddles, without touching a stone with the boat.
Sudden rain squall hit the boat, cold downpour obscuring the river. We wrapped the oilskins around Nat's camera to protect it from rain. Ourselves, we will dry in no time, we are not made of sugar.
Awesome sandstone walls of the tepui were slowly gliding past, every turn in the rives displaying different silhouette, dozens of nameless seasonal waterfalls, narrow ribbons of water leaping over the vertical edge into abyss, only to disperse into thin mist a couple of hundred metres lower, disappearing completely. It was like watching ruptured plumbing of an archaic castle. Then suddenly in the distance a fat streak of water appeared, falling from improbably high up in the sky. About top two hundred meters of the fall was clearly visible, dropping in a slow motion, lower part hidden behind a spur of the mountain. I was looking at the THING itself.
I have first read the stories of Jimmi Angel's exploits when I was 15. A year later I wrote a list of 54 places in the world that I wanted to visit one day. I have that thing about waterfalls, they fascinated me long before I have seen the first one. Out of those 54 places, four were waterfalls. Over the years I have reached some of those 54 places, I downgraded others, I gave up on many, but Jimmi Angel was always sitting there, waiting for me.
In the next river bent the Falls disappeared, only to pop up much clearer a mile further. River was very shallow now, outboard coughing and spitting. Finally we wrecked the prop on a hidden boulder and guys pulled into a quiet corner of the river to swap it for a newer one. Another couple of miles and we reached the camp at Isla Raton.
Eight different tour companies built their own visitors' bases on the bank of Churun River at Isla Raton. Hidden in the forest a few metres from the bank, they are separated by a discreet distance to keep the privacy. Besides us there was nobody in sight. We dropped the bags in the camp, and in evening light walked through the next two deserted camps to a fabulous lookout right opposite the waterfall. The whole leap opened into the view, barely a couple of miles away. I left the clicking of cameras to other people, not having one myself I had more time to take in the scene. I am not a poet and no matter what I'd write, it would do no justice to the majesty of the falls. Let's just say, it took me 45 years to get here, and it was worth the wait.
Kavac camp consists of two large corrugated iron roofs on slim timber posts, one roof to sleep under, the other as an open-air dining hall. No walls, two rows of sturdy hammocks hanging from the rafters, floor a patch of clean swept sand. In the diner two long rows of tables and benches. Small masonry lock up room where the guides store their gear while there is no one using the camp. Guys barbecued chicken for the dinner: served with rice and salad it was better meal than we were used to in the "civilisation". Small

generator runs lights from 6 till 9 PM, to charge visitors' gadgets, and we were all asleep by the lights-out, folded up in our hammocks.
Hammock is a brilliant invention. It also comes from somewhere around here. The word hammock is of Arawak origin, just like barbecue, savannah and canoe.
A well made hammock is comfortable, maintenance free, easy to transport and it keeps the sleeper off the ground where creepy crawlies may have their own ideas about warm bodies. We met no mosquitoes anywhere on this trip, but we slept under the mosquito nets, anyway. Hanging from the same beams as the hammocks, it made the camp look like a dormitory from Arabian nights. Hammocks may look uncomfortable, but once you slept in it, you will be a convert. Even people who forever complain about sore back from uncomfortable bed had no complain about the night in a hammock.

In he morning thick mist rising from the river enveloped the camp. You couldn't see anything. A quick breakfast, strong coffee, and we crossed the river in the canoe to the other bank. Sunrise burnt the mist and the falls were shining overhead. We followed a short stream branching from Churun River, leading up to the falls themselves. The stream was named Gauja in 1955, as it had no name until then. It may sound native, but it is actually a name of a river in Latvia. South America is full of unexpected stories. This one is about a Latvian explorer and adventurer Alexander Laime. He was the first white man to reach the foot of the falls. He bashed through the jungle alone and got there in 1946. In the late 1950ies he was the first man to climb Auyan-tepui to get to the top of the falls, going roundabout way. He also found the Jimmi Angel's plane stuck in the mud, with its cryptic message scribbled in the cockpit. As there was no convincing proof that Pemon had a name for the stream, he suggested Gauja from his native Latvia. Later he cut the foot trail along the stream, the very footpath we were following to the lookout, that was for a long time named after him, "Mirador de Laime".
Sandstone weathers into sand, so all the paths in a sandstone massive are sandy, and soil is very poor in nutrients. Resulting rainforest looks much thinner than the alluvial jungles of Guyana. Forests in Canaima have never been logged, we were marching through a virgin stands, yet it felt stunted, there were no trees wider than 18 inches, no lianas, few creepers, hardly any undergrowth. Lots of bromelias, orchids and hovering colibris, humming birds, and around the splash areas near water a profusion of ferns and moss, but on a whole the forest was nowhere near as thick as you'd imagine jungle to be. Trail meanders near the stream, steadily rising. You do not see ahead through the canopy of the trees, when suddenly the trail spits you out onto a big boulder hanging over a ravine, and craning your neck like a goose you see the falls, complete from top to the bottom. Two narrow ribbons hurl over the edge a kilometre above you. One is dashed on the rocks mid way down, while the left one falls in a slow motion all the way to the ground. I counted how long it takes for a drop to finish its suicide mission. Somewhere around 40 seconds. Plenty of time to think about things. Water forms jagged slow-motion waves in its fall, it spews clouds of mist that swirls around the main ribbon, white curtain descending gracefully to the foot.
There is no pool of water at the bottom of the fall. A kilometre high sandstone wall being eroded constantly by a mighty waterfall drops a lot of weathered rubble, which collects at the foot in a big heap of sharp stones. As it hits the ground, water crashes against the sharp rocks, spilling over, under and between the boulders of loose debris. About half a mile further down the stream forms into a conventional channel, only to leap almost immediately in a beautiful cascade about 10 or 12 metres high. At the foot of this little fall nestles "Happiness Pool". That was as far as we went, spending happy couple of hours splashing in the water. Sprawled on the warm boulder, hands behind my head, I was gazing at the Angel's Fall. I still didn't have enough of it. Habits of a sandstone rockclimber kept me searching for the possible routes of ascend. I knew that the first several attempts to climb the wall in the late 1960ies failed for various reasons, and only in 1971 the first ascend succeeded, 9 days of climbing and day and half abseiling down. I asked the guide. No. Nobody climbs the falls today. I am sure it is not for the lack of aspirants.
Turning over on the boulder, in the opposite direction, a magnificent vista opens over the deep valleys that River Churun cut into the Auyan-tepui, with dark canyons gouged by its tributaries. You can spot some mighty hight waterfalls down that way, too. End of September, weather was holding fine, in the morning you could see for miles.

On the way down we met a group of elderly Japanese doing the dreaded "El Full Day". Like frail desiccated mummies, wrapped completely against the sun in several layers of unravelling pastel rags, only two eyes were showing through a narrow gap between their facial scarves. One of the slower hikers was led by hand, she was so infirm. Francisco, our guide, had a lot of respect for the geriatric Japanese. Guides' only worry was that the Japanese may die in the night, of old age. – "If they wake up in the morning at all, they

will crawl all the way to the Fall," he said, "not like the young Caracas silicones." He was referring to the surgically enhanced beauty queens commonly seen in Venezuelan cities.
Shooting the rapids downstream, in the following current, canoe had much less steerage to meander between the boulders and shallow rapids and in several places boys had to spin a complete turn to line up the boat on a right course. Devil's Canyon with its narrow sluice of a washtub we hoofed over the land, while the empty pirogue slid down the cauldron with the engine lifted dry.
In Canaima we ended the trip on top of the Ucaima Falls, one of the cascades that borders the lagoon.

Next morning we walked through the village down to the beach on the lagoon. I stuck my nose into one of the little shops… and I was struck speechless. The rest of Venezuela is suffering from acute shortages of basic foodstuffs. Crazy system of massive government subsidies created a two-tiered market. The poor and the government employees, tied to a fixed rate of wages, currently 35 cents a day, are forced to shop in subsidised supermarkets, where the prices are kept ridiculously low by a Presidential decree. Queues in those shops are several hours long, each citizen is allowed only a limited amount of goods, two days a week, on a prescribed day determined by the last number on their ID card. Venezuela is one of the largest exporters of oil, and the oil revenues were meant to pay for the subsidies. When oil prices collapsed to a half what they were before, Venezuelan treasury ran into massive deficit. No more hard currency means no more import and what little country produce itself is snapped up faster than it can be replaced. Yet here, in the middle of jungle, accessible only by air, people had everything. Rice, sugar, flour, pasta, basic foodstuffs that you do not see on an open market, were piled up high on the shelves in the little store. And toilet paper! Butt of the jokes, yet unattainable goal of an average shopper, rolls of toilet paper were stacked in the corner. No queues, no speculators buying up the supplies to resell them with 400% profit. These people were living in a normal sane world. No wonder they were so peaceful, calm and friendly. Insanity of socialist experiment did not affect them.
Canoe took us in a wide arc below the several waterfalls dropping into the Lagoon, and we got off at the Wadaima Falls in the middle of the stream. A narrow path is leading behind the fall. At the edge of the fall brilliant green profusion of ferns and moss climbs the sandstone cliff, thin streams of water dripping over it, droplets shining in the sun.
From the bright sunshine outside you duck through the hammering wall that is the edge of the fall, and you find yourself in a narrow long cavern behind the fall. Several swifts built their nests in the peaceful quite corner beyond the rumbling watery inferno of the fall. A Pommie couple who were taken to the neighbouring fall by their guide saw a poisonous frog on the wall, black with bright yellow stripes. Some of the swifts (or swallows?) were feeding on the top edge of the cavern, where the water was dripping down from the overhang. The whole walk was more than 50 metres long, the full width of the fall, and we emerged on the other side, looking at the cataracts side-on. Floor of the cavern was humming from the impact of water on water and rocks and the natural power of the place kept everyone quiet or whispering.

Around noon we flew back in the same six-seater with the same pilot. Peruvian agent who sold us the tour assured us that we will be returning directly back to Ciudad Bolivar, for sure, no way around it, so naturally we were rerouted to Porto Ordaz, and found our own way back to Ciudad Bolivar. Return to "civilisation" was a sharp come-down. Strap your money belt on, watch your back, watch your bag, haggle over every penny, look under your feet so you don't slip on rotting garbage collecting on the pavement. An ugly scene on the bus terminal in Porto Ordaz where the haughty taxi drivers refused to give me a ride claiming I was too dirty for their shit heaps. Only when we agreed to pay the whole cab by ourselves, plus a fine, a rude cabbie ran us to Ciudad Bolivar, an hour away. Canaima was so peaceful, so green, so full of spectacular wonders removed from the urban jungles of the Caribbean coast, that I sat down and scribbled the story as soon as we got back to the boat, before the enchanted mood completely dissolved in the drab mundane life of socialist Venezuela.

It's difficult to pick typical details to describe the contemporary Venezuela. Two people visiting the same place only a few days apart may end up with opposite experiences. Places we found perfectly safe and friendly were murderous and violent to people we met a week later. The only thing everyone agrees on is that Puerto la Cruz, a large oil exporting town where we kept "Kehaar", is the bunghole of Venezuela. Anywhere else you visit it's bound to be friendlier, safer and more enjoyable. Unfortunately there was nowhere else safe to keep a boat.
Coastal Venezuela, where most of people live, reminded me so much of socialist Eastern Europe before the Berlin Wall came down, that I slipped effortlessly into a survival mode of the society I grew up in. But I still

think that if you shoot past Venezuela, you will miss a lot. One of the most bio-diverse countries in the world, it has everything. Coral reefs, sandy beaches, deserts, plains, savannah, huge rivers, untouched rain forest, tall mountains, permanent snowfields, waterfalls, you name it. You will feels like stepping into one of those magic coffee table books full of colour photographs, you know, Time-Life series. I used to drool over them in the libraries, now I am marching through them, unlimited vistas, intricate details, unearthly colours, moody lighting. Chapter after chapter, marvel after marvel.
Right now Venezuela is the cheapest country in the world. There is nowhere else that you can live like a king on the peanuts that you spend. Our main objective was to learn Spanish, and for that you need to hole up in a Spanish speaking country for six months and put your nose to the grind. We bought stacks of second hand books in the language and soon we were cracking the written word as well as yibbering in vernacular to anyone willing to listen.
Sailing into Venezuela is not as dangerous as the cruising experts make it sound. Sure, certain areas, especially the coast near Trinidad, are dangerous, and boats foolish enough to stay close to the shore are regularly attacked, but pirates operate in small skiffs powered by even smaller outboards and they never venture further than 5 miles from the beach. If they can't see you from the shore, they don't know you are there. Larger fishing vessels with inboard diesels that you meet further offshore do not engage in piracy, they have far too much to loose if caught.
Our Russian neighbour in the marina has been operating his charter business out of Venezuela for the past four years, and he was attacked exactly once – not in Venezuela, but in St. Vincent, supposedly yacht friendly island in the Windwards'. Local thugs with a sawn-off shotgun came at night in a dug out and boarded his anchored yacht. They picked on a wrong boat. From what I gathered, Russians agreed on all their demands, handed over cash, phones and other valuables, but bandits wanted more. When they started hacking off rigging ropes, slashing the fancy fibreglass hull with their machetes, skipper lost his temper. During the ensuing fight his yacht copped a bullet hole through a bimini, but after that first shot the three bandits were on the back foot and they were lucky to crawl to the hospital alive. They left a handful of bloodied teeth behind, on the floor of the cockpit. Russians in general are absolutely fearless, and two enraged Russian bears armed with winch handles is not something I'd like to face.

Cruising is supposed to be about a relaxed and easy going lifestyle, but many people are not capable of that, they need drama in their lives. If there isn't, they will make one.
There was an Italian on a catamaran, an unpleasant paranoid deviant, also staying in our marina. His rich family was paying him a retainer to stay out of Italy, so he was bumming around the West Indies, being progressively driven out of every place he visited. He sure made a nuisance of himself in our marina and in a huff he moved next door. He left a pile of unpaid bills behind. From the day one he got off on a wrong foot in the new place as well. Security guards finally got tired of him. They could smell ganja wafting from his boat every time he lit a joint, so they called cops on him. Coast Guard searched his boat, found the dope and towed his boat away to their base at the entrance to the harbour, across the channel from the marina.
In these cases the scale of the pay off that you are due is well known. If you pay immediately, before any reports are drawn up, U$ 500 will get you off the hook and you walk free that same day. US$ 2500 is the price if the papers were written up but not forwarded to the headquarters. If you are stupid enough and let it go to the HQ, hoping to weasel out of it without paying, it will cost you US$ 10 000. If you don't pay at all, it's 8 to 10 years in a can, regardless of the quantity of dope they originally discovered. Law says you are guilty because you did not pay up. Several boats are tied up along the marina wharfs in Margarita and Puerto la Cruz, owners doing time in Venezuela, when $ 500 could have made the whole problem disappear. At no point during the negotiations are you taken away and locked behind the bars. Right until the day of your court appearance you are under a loose house arrest, allowed to attend to your business, in hope that you will come up with money. Only when the judge's gavel hits the table and you are sentenced, only then you are locked up for the first, and final, time.
The Italian in question was always broke, always complaining about costs (in Venezuela!), but I am sure he had enough smarts to see he was in deep shit. For three days his boat was tied up to the Coast Guard wharf. He must've cut some deal with them, because on Saturday night he was still there, but on Sunday morning he was gone. He paid someone off, then did a runner.
It was interesting watching different reactions to his flight. The one and only American skipper in the neighbouring marina drew in a sharp breath through his clenched teeth: "How irresponsible of him! He will create a wrong impression of the whole cruising community. He should have got a lawyer and sorted out the whole thing through the legal channels. You have to leave a clean wake behind you, so the next lot of

boaters do not suffer because of you." He was indignant that after one illegal act the Italian compounded his offence by another illegal act. On the other hand, when the Russian skipper was having his coffee with us at the tables that Sunday morning, he approvingly nodded towards the empty berth in front of Coast Guard: "Finally he showed some guts, that Italian poofter."

Current Venezuelan government discourages foreign visitors. President openly declared on the TV: "Gringos, go home." Gringo is not an insult, it is a descriptive noun referring to all white people. Harassment takes many forms. Particularly worrying was the aberrant behaviour of some Coast Guard. In isolated outposts some of them turned to undisguised banditry. If you anchor in their domain, they come at first to check you out, then return at dark, boarding your boats, and taking money and booze. Testigos Rocks have that reputation, currently, and some cases from Puerto la Cruz were reported just before we left.

Petty officials in marina try to make the life unpleasant,. It's nothing big, deliberate little irritants, nuisance of pointless rules changing constantly, arrogance and incompetence in tasks performed, no sense or reason behind the rules enforced. We were parked for four months on the edge of waterfront development called El Morro, that sits on the ancient salt pans, filled and dredged during the 80ies oil boom, about 25 square km of canal estates, marinas, villas and gated compounds.

Seven or eight marinas are lined up next to each other near the main sea entrance, differing only in the services they do not provide and activities they prohibit. Some do not allow foreigners in, others want only motor boats, not sailing craft, some operate as large boatyards, others are only storage racks for weekend speed boats. All were absurdly cheap at the black market exchange rate, all providing reasonable level of security. Shortcomings were in services, general level of hygiene, Internet access and quality of work performed in the boat yard.

When we sailed in, in the middle of hurricane season, only TMO admitted they had any space left, so after three days of frustrating haggling, anchored in the access channel, I was allowed to drag "Kehaar" in, and tie up Mediterranean style, with my own anchor in the roads. No-one from the marina staff lifted a finger to help us, not even to tie up a line. Wharf power supply has broken down in our section, and it was never reinstated. "Kehaar" has no power requirements, and laptops could be plugged into the wall sockets in the restaurant. Every working day marina arbitrarily turned off all the power from 3PM till the knock off at 4:30, to help Maduro fighting his "economic war". Without power supply the Internet router did not work. Even when it did, only one gadget per boat was allowed, with password changing every week. I offered to pay extra, so we could run both our laptops, but that was not allowed. I offered to pay for a whole extra berth, so I could connect, moorings were that cheap, but that was also not allowed. I found a guy across the channel who sold me unlimited wi-fi access for half a dollar a month, fast broadband 24 hours a day. I had to climb the stairs to the roof of our restaurant, though, to get past the forest of aluminium masts blocking the signal.

The most despised man was the manager, a limp-wristed coward who ran away from any possible confrontation, taking his revenge in minuscule acts of petty annoyance. My love never tired of parodying his live-in mistress, a pale pink matron nearing her use-by date. Enveloping her own folds in yards of lacy crinolines, gliding along like a ballroom primadona, she never left a building without shading her nose, afraid that her cheap plastic surgery will droop and sag in the sun. The pair partook of their breakfast in the restaurant, which would clear itself of the other customers while those two were around. "Kehaar" was bobbing right in front of them, aesthetic blemish on their domain, a black reminder that his management dreams did not match the reality.

Boat yard was a pain. Lifting of boat with a travelift was dead cheap, and dry storage even cheaper, but labour rules were insane. By law, you are not allowed to sleep on your boat when it's out of water in the yard, you have to go out to town, looking for tourist accommodation. Marina was paying their workers the government decreed minimum wages, which were far below the survival needs, and few men agreed to work for that little. So yard was always short of labour, arbitrarily assigned to the boats that management approved of, the local powerboats. Some cruising skippers fell into disfavour, so when they lifted out of water, they were given no workers at all. You were not allowed to hire men from the street. All work stops at the whistle, even your own labour, and the yard is locked up at 5 PM, with savage guard dogs released on the grounds. Saturday and Sunday yard did not open at all. If you were lucky to have workers, they only did the work they liked, and even then moving like slow motion zombies. If they did not like doing something, they would say, "do it yourself, gringo", and they would retire to sit in the shade of the neighbouring boat. Some boats stayed in the yard for more than a year, jobs done so poorly that they had

to be ripped out and done again.
Other marinas did better job, but they only lifted two sail boats a week, if they allowed them in at all, and waiting list was several months long. I decided to give it a miss and wait till we come to an easier place.
Tides in the Caribbean are rarely more than a foot, pathetic sloshing of water in a tea cup, and why it is considered such a blessing is beyond me. Yet sailors have been maintaining their boats in here for centuries, careening them in calm bays to work on the bottom. Every stretch of coast in Caribbean has a place called Carenero or Carenage, a place to careen a boat. We may try it in the next port of call, I thought, and I did paint my waterline in Haiti.
My attitude was: "I am paying $15 a month for a marina. $15 a month! What do you expect for that sort of money?" If you intend to travel around South America, leaving your boat safely in a marina, Puerto la Cruz is a perfect solution. Boats are allowed to stay for 18 months.
Marina was not all hassles. Beatrice's coffee in her restaurant was very good, and her fruit juices were fabulous. Guava, passion fruit, pineapple, strawberries, water melon, cantaloupe, fruit of the day freshly pressed in front of you, with a dash of ground ice.
Entertainment came from wildlife. We have seen no wild animals in the jungle of Canaima at all, and none in the Andes either. The most interesting fauna congregated in the industrial wasteland of Puerto la Cruz. Iguanas were adorable, I never got tired of them. One of the exotic wild animals I hoped to see on this trip, I thought I had to wait for them until I sneaked into Galapagos. It did not occur to me that iguanas are common garden ornament all along the Caribbean coast. Six feet long, when you include their tail, light grey with greenish tinge, Mahawk style punk crest on their head, spine full of spikes, wobbling chin wattles, third eye in the top of their head and two penises, side by side, they look eminently ancient. When a young iguana becomes alarmed, it rears on its back legs and runs like a classical picture of a small dinosaur from a children's' book. They look frightening, but they don't bite, they have no teeth and their favourite food are frangipani flowers. Huge placid grass eating lizards lounged on short cropped lawns, awaiting banana peels and papaya scraps thrown from the kitchen of the restaurant. At first the colony was composed of 6 or 8 aged majestic males, and a swarm of 30 or 40 females and juveniles. Photogenic to a fault and tame like domestic cats, coming so close to you that you could grab them by the tail, the most trusting started to disappear when a new bunch of security guards was hired one day. Iguanas are a tasty morsel, and night duty is perfect cover for a bit of poaching. Luckily iguanas are prolific breeders, and they survive even in city parks.
Brown pelicans are common in Puerto. Their colour is really grey, not brown, with black pouches under their bills. They bomb dive for their fish, waiting patiently at vantage points over the water. Massive birds, they are powerful fliers, much more acrobatic than their white cousins. They are happy to perch on top of a flagpole, then hurl themselves down under water from 15 metres aloft. At the fish market half way to town about 40 or 50 pelicans congregated at any given time, waiting for their share of fish. Riding home from town on my bicycle, I had to literally push through a flock of pelicans squatting on the pavement in front of the fish vendors. A few hundred yards further along the shore a greasy tidal lagoon is a home of scarlet ibis. Bright-bright scarlet red, standing out from the murky brown desolation of the big harbour, an incredulous dash of primary colour in a boring washed out landscape.
The other wildlife awaiting their daily fish were three neutered grey tabbies, nominally belonging to the Marina restaurant. With the ease that comes naturally to the cats they enslaved the entire fleet of yachties, picking the best feed where they pleased, distributing their favours with a disdain of society ladies. Affectionate, clean, well brought up mongrels ruled the wharf, totally ignoring the yelping little dogs that seem to be de-rigeur on every Caribbean cruiser these days. If you are a cat person, you know what I am talking about.

History of Venezuela is a long string of misrepresentation, misuse of power and blatant greed. Their beloved Bolivar, celebrated as The Liberator, wrestled the country from the Spanish hands two centuries ago. His dream of unified Great Colombia fell apart during his own life when the squabbling nobility carved out separate countries of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia (named after him), Colombia and Venezuela. He was retiring into yet another exile, when he died from TB, already forgotten. After Bolivar Venezuela saw a century and half of petty tyrants, military dictators, megalomaniac do-gooders, not getting a whiff of democratic elections until after WWII. The first democratically elected president, a well respected writer, lasted 8 months before another military coup swept him aside, bringing more greedy nobodies into power. The big goons got away with murder, literally, because early in 20th century their country became the biggest producer and exporter of oil, with the reserves estimated to last for centuries, even at the current rate of exploitation. "Devil's excrement", as Venezuelans call the oil, will taint every regime foolish enough

to depend on it, be it as a producer or as a consumer. Easy oil money subsidised patchy development and high standard of living, at a cost of neglecting manufacture and agriculture. Chavez, the last of the petro-politicians, was elected by a popular vote 17 years ago and, advised by Fidel in Havana, launched a Bolivarian Revolution, a demagogic concept if there ever was one. Simon Bolivar, El Libertador, was born into one of the richest families in the country, and he remained a haughty aristocrat till his last day. His wealth came from large land holdings worked by slaves. To claim him as a spiritual father of a proletarian revolution is a total misrepresentation of history.

Chavez was a naïve well meaning idealist with a cookie jar full of petro-dollars. He never travelled, never experienced anything outside the military barracks, all his programs came from the limited imagination inside his head and his eclectic reading of theory. The core idea was to subsidise basic life necessities for the poor, lifting their standard of life, health care and education, the whole package paid for by the Devil's Excrement. It worked for a long time and the life of the poorest did improve markedly. People remember the level of poverty in the slums which bottomed just before Chavez took power. Stories I heard belong to war-torn Central Africa or famine in South Asia, not to a major oil exporting country. Chavez lifted the poorest out of their despair and he fed them well.

15 years into the revolution oil prices suddenly collapsed and the government coffers ran empty. Then the charismatic leader himself died of cancer, leaving his dreams and programs to the incompetent underlings. Socialism, like Christianity, is an example of a shrewd Cult of Dead. Deceased founder safely out of the way, his followers can twist the original doctrine any way it suits them, reinterpreting the ideas completely out of context. Christians swept away unorthodox Gospels under the blanket of heresy, Bolsheviks were periodically reissuing censored Complete Works of Lenin in fewer and fewer volumes, Chavistas are now putting slogans into Chavez' mouth that are contrary to his essential visions. New wave of acolytes is careful to hide behind the dead leader's image, not empathising their own role. Pope hides his face behind a Crucifix, in Prag Husak was sheltering behind pictures of Lenin, in Venezuela Maduro had wisdom not to print any photos of himself prior to the elections, plastering Chavez posters all over the place instead.

During first 15 years of Bolivarian Revolution an entire generation of people grew up, used to government support in every aspect of their life, and not used to work for living. Chavez distributed handouts, but he created no job opportunities, invested in no industries, he even imported Cubans to fill the service posts in his health programs, instead of teaching his own youngsters to look after their people. Today the general attitude is: "Why work for peanuts, when government will gives you everything for free?" Venezuela used to export their agriculture surplus, while today every item of diet is imported. Rich farmland capable of supporting three harvests a year lies fallow while essential food is bought on credit overseas.

After the collapse of oil revenues the salaries were frozen and basic foodstuffs sold at government decreed prices. Gap between the real prices of goods and government dreamed up prices grew wide. Mismanagement, apathy, greed and speculation combined to create shortages of essential foodstuffs. Rationing and abominable queues followed. That was a state of the country when we rocked up in Puerto La Cruz. US$ was officially pegged at 6 Bolivar. Banks changed it at 200 Bolivar, while the black market kept climbing, 600 Bolivar and onwards. Inflation was difficult to guess, somewhere between 130% and 200%, highest in the world. While in Puerto la Cruz, we watched the minimum monthly wage jump from 7500 B to 16100 B, in one step, overnight. Even the new wages remained way below a possible survival level. Attempts at rectifying problems are hilarious. Early in his rule Maduro sent the Army to occupy and run the paper mill producing toilet paper, but supply did not improve. Then he accused his people of eating too much: "If you eat less, you will need less toilet paper," he declared, in all seriousness. What a leader!

With Chavez dead, his appointed successor, Maduro, got himself elected as a President and asked the Parliament to grant him dictatorial powers to rule by a decree, "to sort out the economy". A bus driver turned union leader with no idea what makes economy tick, he used the favourite trick of all inept rulers: creating patriotic diversions for the masses. Stoking up a stale border dispute with Guyana, then closing the Colombian border amid the claims that Bogota is undermining Venezuelan economy, inaugurating bombastic programs to curb the urban violence, everything coached in revolutionary rhetoric. Boring ponderous speaker with no education, no experience and charisma of a bottle of stale beer, I wondered how can anyone take him seriously. I wondered how long before the Army kicks him out. Venezuelan generals have a history of taking over the country whenever they please, continuous story going back 200 years to Bolivar himself. Good old Simon graduated from a Military Academy and he was a soldier all his life.

Unlike his mentor, Maduro has no military background. Chavez was a paratrooper, a career Army officer, and as a young lieutenant-colonel he even headed a failed coup, in 1992. Six weeks before the current Parliament elections Maduro showed his hand. Facing a hostile and tired electorate, he invited the Generals

to form a Military Junta, in the case that his Socialist Party does not win a 50% majority. Flanked by the top Army brass he promised that the Junta would rule "in the name of the masses". His own job as a President safe for the next 5 years at least, Maduro has been showering the middle ranks of the Army with costly gifts, 10 000 Toyota pick up trucks distributed amongst them "to help them fulfil their mission", giving them free hand to do as they please in violent suburbs, anything to keep them on his side. Parliamentary elections were due in early December. We'll be leaving just before the elections, I though. Little point hanging around if the country will shut down.

As a language learning exercise I was reading the local independent newspapers, especially their inflamed editorials. For all the repression, police brutality and brainwashing, daily newspapers printed open denunciations of the current regime, critique of the leadership was harsh and to the point, naming the proper names, dates and deeds, and political discussion was wide open.
At one point they announced on the front pages that in a week's time Venezuela is planned to run out of beer. That's one thing that central planning is good at – predicting the forthcoming shortages. Reason for the beer drought? The Federal Treasury is running out of hard currency, so imports are being limited to the essential necessities of life. Country that has the greatest confirmed reserves of oil in the world, more than Saudi Arabia or Russia, does not have enough cash dollars to import frivolous items like hops. When you run out of hops you can't make beer and the army was gearing up for riots. Not because of the shortage of beer as such. Everyone was predicting that the drunks would switch to locally produced rum, which was expected to bring a rise in the level of aggression. Poor have plenty to be angry about and replacing their regular intake of beer with rum will do nothing to quell their anger.
In the end political pragmatism won over the principles of Bolivarian revolution. Dwindling reserves of hops were used to produce piss-weak light beer, to stretch the hops in hand, and in an emergency move government released enough funds to buy a ship load of fresh hops from Belgium, speedily forwarded on a cargo vessel to Venezuela. State TV station showed a 10-minutes' long aerial shot (I am not exaggerating) of some generic cargo ship steaming through the open ocean, image they swiped from an Internet archive. Beer shortage was alleviated after a 4-week draught.

After we returned from the Angel Falls we jumped through a few low slung hoops and got a three-months extension on our visa. Packing warm clothes, sleeping bags and more warm clothes we hopped on a bus for a 17-hour ride across the plains to Mérida, the mountain capital near the Colombian border.
Venezuela is a huge country. In Puerto la Cruz no tickets were sold beyond Caracas, so we made a 5-hour bus trip to the capital, arriving after mid-day. Eastern Terminal only serves the routes heading east, so we took a cab across the city to Bandera, the main bus depot south of the city centre, a three-storey anthill of impatient travellers. During the day no departures anywhere, everything leaves in the evening for an overnight trip. No tickets to Merida, not one left for tonight. Impossible to book a day ahead, and anyway, there will be no tickets for several days. How can you know that, if you don't take bookings for tomorrow? I did not argue and pulled out my map of Venezuela. One of the bus companies advertised an overnight trip to Barinas, which looked on the map pretty close to Merida. Bus to Barinas departing tonight at 8 PM. I bought two tickets and we settled to a long afternoon wait.
Spending entire days in bus terminals you get caught in nightmares you prefer not to think about. Like toilets. In Caracas they were a chamber of horrors. No water to flush, no water to wash, no toilet paper, floor drain blocked. Cracked ceramic bowls full and overflowing with raw shit, two inches of sewage covering the tiled floor, yet punters kept adding discharge as if everything was all right, wiping their soiled shoes with their handkerchiefs in the doorway.
It must've been particularly traumatic for the vain Venezuelans. Pathologically obsessed with personal appearance, half of their life is wasted on upholding an outer image which has no substance behind it. People get mugged and robbed as they exit a supermarket after waiting for five hours in a queue, their prize and the object of crime two cans of underarm deodorant and a bottle of hair conditioner. I was refused a ride in a clap-trap taxi because I wore thongs, yet they step into fresh dog shit, when they walk on the pavement, then walk with their soiled shoes directly into their kitchens. Puerto City Council keeps repainting the roadside kerbs in bright acrylics, ignoring stagnant black sludge of the raw sewage that accumulated against those same kerbs, and which could be drained by a simple application of a shovel.
On the outside everything looks spic and span, everyone is dressed in shining news dresses, reeking of deodorant, not a hair out of place. Half of the teenagers wear dental braces to improve their looks and cheap silicone implants advertised in daily newspapers are dream of every good looking girl. In the violent suburbs personal appearance is more valuable than human life. Expensive basketball sneakers are a status

symbol, and many a youngster has been mugged for them; many were shot dead when they refused to part with their shoes. A small country town that can barely muster a single eatery will support seven or eight stores selling clothes and shoes. But try to locate a dictionary of their own language, or something to read!
The general level of hygiene leaves the darkest Asia behind. Unwashed hands serve your arepas, recycled chewed-up straws grace your fruit juice, fish sits in the sun un-gutted, un-iced, sold each with its cloud of flies, butcher's reeks of nauseating spoiled meat. Neighbourhood enterprises sell "filtered" water, but they never clean the filters, so their "purified" bottled water smells worse than straight town water tap.
As much as I like to avoid the dirty unpleasantness, when you spend 36 hours on buses, you have no choice. Exiting a bus terminal in search of cleaner alternative is futile and foolish. Terminals are sited in industrial wastelands of the outer suburbs, with no civilised facilities near-by. Caracas has five main bus terminals, and sticking your nose out you are facing highway, cloud of touts, conmen and plenty of opportunistic muggers. As we snuggled down into plastic seats of the terminal for a long wait, a middle aged bloke sat next to us. A local Caraceño, waiting for his own bus. He seemed a bit fidgety and nervous at first, but we got talking. Fluent in English, he soon confessed he has just been mugged, on his way to the Terminal, on a public bus, in the middle of day. Two armed robbers stripped the bus clean of valuables, escaping without anyone offering slightest resistance.
We spent a whole day in Caracas, but all we've seen was the urban sprawl flashing past the moving bus. I did not intent to explore any more of it. Crowded metropolis of 6 million people, Caracas spreads over a mountain valley and the surrounding hills like a concrete plague. On the outskirts, stretching for miles, red bricks of the slums conquered entire hillsides, for miles, leaving not a square foot to nature. Makeshift buildings grow one from another, stacked like a giant Leggo set, not leaving space between them for streets nor roads, a rabbit warren of narrow alleys where police refuse to enter. The lowest levels on the perimeter of the slums grew into convoluted structures five, six or seven storeys high, upper floors wider than the ground level, unrendered red bricks with flat tin roofs merging into the buildings towering above them, one step above another, all the way to the summit of the hill and down on the other side, like an apocalyptic painting of Jacek Yerka. Little square holes for windows with washing hanging from the lines. They are no temporary structures of cardboard and plastic, like in Asian slums, but permanent multi storey buildings of brick and mortar, here to stay, with no chance of improvement. And they are not cheap, either, if you can find one for sale. The newest ones have no water, no power, no sewage outlet and no legal rights, yet they sell for prices that are out of reach for the young couples starting their families.

Modern two-deck bus took 7 hours to drive from Caracas to Barinas. Air-con cranked to max, even wrapped in warm clothing it was freezing cold, my lungs dry and rasping. A good prologue to the mountain air. We arrived at ungodly hour of 4 AM in a dirty open aired bus terminal of a provincial capital. A little cup of black coffee sold from a Thermos, and soon the first local bus rolled in, looking for passenger across the mountains to Merida. After the crowded Caracas it seemed so easy.
Only later I discovered that there are two ways to reach Merida from the lowlands. Lucky in our ignorance we took one of the legendary mountain highways called Carretera Transandina, an engineering marvel opened in 1925. Switchbacks are too tight to allow full-length buses and other heavy traffic. Bitumen winds its way up the denuded Andean slopes from the sea level up and up and up, until it crosses a pass at Apartaderos, 3500 metres high, before gently descending to Merida at 1750 metres. One side road branches off at the Apartaderos and climbs for another 1000 metres to another pass, at 4500 metres. Buses running from Barinas are short 20-seater Fords with oversized engines and mountain gearboxes. It takes 5 hours to grind those 165 km, sheer vertical drop on your right hand, vistas opening till forever on all sides. Bus stops for a short break and a coffee at a village of Santo Domingo, at 2250 metres. Big broadchested dogs with thick shaggy coats of long hair lie in the doorways, even village curs slinking away look healthy, heavy curtains of silver moss smother the rare solitary trees like sheets of Carnival decorations, it's cold and dry and all you want is drive further up.
From the pass you slowly wind your way down through a string of authentic medieval villages worth exploring in their own right, till you reach Merida in the bottom of the valley.

Merida is a city of quarter of million people, spread like ulcer in a deep mountain valley, on a narrow elevated plateau between two rivers. The two river ravines are spanned by giant viaducts carrying 8-lane highways. From Barinas you arrive from the top end and the medieval centre is at the highest point. The new development slopes steeply down to the west, spreading towards the lowlands. The old town is nothing ostentatious, but well preserved, lived in and friendly. On every corner little eateries, bicycle

stores, bookshops, laundries, cafetins (coffee corners). Our favourite diner was a cosy little restaurant across the street from posada, complete with discreet signs tucked into picture frames, "rooms for rent per hour". Everything shuts down at sundown, though, and it's a hard slog to find a meal after 6PM.
The main market is well stocked, most essential food stuffs that are hard to get on the coast were on offer in sacks, take all you need, no queues. Also an excellent assortment of crafts from this end of America, if you know what you are after.
A suburban trolleybus has its own lane in the centre of the highway. Electric system is still under construction, so for now it burns diesel and does not accept fare. You ride for free until it's finished. It's connected to a new branch of a cable car, which runs downhill, into the bottom of the river ravine, where the poorer suburbs are hatching. The big "Teleferico", the world famous cable car from the Guinness Book of Records, starts from the main tourist square, Plaza del Heroinas. No, no drug addicts celebrated by a water fountain. The name refers to five obscure ladies who seem to have fought in the Bolivar's campaign 200 years ago. There is no plaque explaining their story, no mention of them in any history books, nobody knows anything about them, nor about the origin of the sculpture. The Plaza comes alive in the evening with youngsters dating, conmen conning, vendors vending. In the vicinity you find half a dozen good posadas, cheap restaurants, fabulous ice cream parlour, office of the Los Nevados Transport company and of course, the Teleferico itself, the cable car station.
The French built this bold cable way in 1958 and for 50 years it was a mainstay of mountain transport for the villages up the Sierra Nevada. For decades the highest and longest cable car in the world, in four steps it climbs up to Pico Espejo at 4300 metres. Number of trails and mule tracks branch from the intermediate stations, running to the isolated hamlets. Eight years ago the cable car was closed down for maintenance, projected to take two or three years. Today the ground station is open to public. You can wander around and admire the new waiting hall, new ticket booths, modernist décor, but the cable car itself is not operating. Only the work crew and building material creep up the cable. We were told it'll be another year before the public can ride to the top. Realists say two to three years more. As they said eight years ago.
Merida found its way into Guinness Book of Records twice. Besides Teleferico, the defunct cable car, it boasts of Heladeria Coromoto, the world's richest ice cream parlour advertising a 1000 flavours, but modestly admitting to stocking only some 500 in their freezers. After meandering around the old town for an hour we found the place. Boarded up, closed for renovations, no set opening date.

Los Nevados is a little mountain village perching on a spur of a ridge at the elevation of 2700 metres above the sea level, about 60 km from Merida by road, and less than 20 km as a crow flies. Founded in 1591 as a staging post on the old Spanish mule route from the coast across the Andes, it was named after the glaciers shining above the village, crowning the highest peaks of Sierra Nevada. Glaciers melted away in the 1960ies, leaving behind only the name. The mule trail climbed from Merida over a 4000 metre high pass, then dropped down to Los Nevados. During the 50 years that cable car operated, villagers rode from Merida up to the penultimate station, then walked for three or four hours down, carrying their supplies on pack horses kept near the cable car station. With the cable car out of commission, the old trail is in use again, as the fare on the 4WD Jeep is not cheap, for the locals. Young greyhounds race down to Merida in 7 or 8 hours. Loaded with stores and shopping, they return by Jeep.
Los Nevados runs its own transport gig. Nine brothers take turns with their four vehicles. On a busy weekend there may be up to three departures in a day, all leaving very early in the morning. Return trip starts about lunch time. On slow days it's one car, if they find any passengers at all. A young Caracas couple staying in our posada chartered their own 4WD ride with the brothers, and they agreed to take us on. Driver tied our backpacks on the roofrack and in a crispy air of an early morning we set off.
Narrow strip of bitumen switchbacks across a spur of the Andes, giving fantastic aerial views into the Merida valley. Easy progress ends at a turn off to El Morro village, 40 km from Merida, where the road turns left and follows the valley up the Nuestra Señora River. The last stage to Los Nevados was bulldozed in 1985, and little was done to it since. 20 km from the turn off take an hour and half in a Landcruiser over a rough 4WD trail, two wheel tracks gouged into the steep slopes of the mountains. Traffic is sparse and progress slow, so when two cars meet, they have enough time to pull up at the nearest passing patch. Toyota Landcruisers and 150 cc motorbikes are the only kind of vehicles you'll meet. Landslides are never cleared away, a new set of tracks is laid over the top of them. Bare hills stripped of forests, scarred country with the last clusters of scrub and bush cowering in the gullies, vertical drop into the abyss, steep ungraded up and down of the track. The only adornments along the road are tiny shrines with crosses that mark the fatal traffic accidents. A frightening number of drivers did not arrive.
After an hour on the track we stopped in a tiny hamlet of Monsanda where an enterprising local girl started

an eatery. Everything cooked in the house, thick soup, fresh empanadas, glorious chicha andina, thick fermented drink made from boiled maize and dark molasses, strong coffee, a veritable feast when you expected it the least. I took a look at the roofrack of our Landcruiser, and my back pack was missing. Driver tied it down with a rope, but his knots came undone and my swag fell off the roof. Without any fuss the driver got a local lad to ride his motorbike back the way we came, to look for my luggage. Naturally they found nothing. My warm clothes, sleeping bag, travelling diary, and most importantly, our stash of Bolivars in cash, all rolled down into some gulley, bringing an early Christmas to some eagle-eyed youth on a motorbike. Passports and dollars were safely in my money belt, and Natalie's photo gear was in the other bag, still on the roof, so in financial terms the loss was no disaster, but there was no point continuing further without local money. We intended to stay a week in Los Nevados, and we had to pay for our keep.
I sent my love ahead as I started walking back on foot. Riding in the car the road seemed to follow the contour along the valley, but on foot I saw just how hilly the track really was. Altitude was telling already. We were about 2500 metres up, and every hill climb was a battle. It's been 35 years since I hiked in high mountains, and I wondered how my age will cope with the high altitude. Some of the longest living cultures hail from very high mountains, Hunza people in Karakoram and Aymara in the Andes, so altitude itself is no problem for old folks, but how fast I will acclimatise? I puffed on every incline, slowly putting one foot in front of the other, stopping often as my heart tried to leap out of my chest. In Merida I found a stack of travel guides in our posada and I looked up what the gurus of travelling have to say of "soroche", the altitude sickness. The latest Lonely Planet advised you take pills to overcome it! They even gave approximate dosage! Not a word about rate of acclimatisation, no advise about gradual gain in altitude, no, you pop a magic pill and you can go up instantly.
I was appalled by this ignorance. First thing we were taught when I started on big mountains as a rock climber was approximate rate at which you will adapt to the high altitude. As you gain hight, the air becomes thinner and thinner, containing less and less oxygen. A healthy body compensates by producing more red blood cells, to help you absorb sufficient oxygen. Process starts immediately, as soon as the body feels the lack of oxygen, but it takes some time to adjust. Being fit is no advantage. Safe rates of ascend are well known. For full acclimatisation it comes to about 300 metres of altitude gain a day, or 1000 metres every three days. When we came from very low lands, we were advised to climb at first to about 2500 or 3000 metres, and spend a week or 10 days there, walking around slowly, getting the red blood cells up to the count. As you feel better, you can climb much higher during this first period, but make sure you drop down for the night. Normal body can beef up its red cells count to function perfectly well at 5000 metres, and some crack climbers were permanently acclimatised to 6000. When you descend down to the valley, your redundant red cells start breaking down and your acclimatisation gradually disappears. It takes a few weeks, but after that, when you go up again, you start the whole process from the beginning. Previous acclimatisation does not give you physical advantage the next time, but you know how you will feel, you know what to expect, and how to go about it. I've been through it several times in my younger years, and it was no different this time in the Andes.
I walked for couple of hours along the track, all the way to the El Morro turn off, checking the deep ravines on my left, scanning the slopes across the valleys, searching for my red bag. I knew it was useless. If I could see it, someone would have seen it three hours ago and made sure to check on it. Later we were told this was not the first case of property lost from the roof. On one trip this same driver lost a pig that was tied up on the roof. Flimsy knots came undone, porker jumped clear and disappeared up the hill, never to be seen again. My own luggage was lost well and true. The same driver gave me ride back to Merida, when he caught up with me, but I never received even an apology from the bloke.

In Merida I had a big feed in Cafetin Roma, checked into the same posada for the night, and made a round of likely places, looking for someone to change my US$100 note into local currency. It came to a big slab of bills. I had nothing to carry it in, only supermarket plastic bags. I looked like a derro, a classical Plastic Bag Lady, but my bags were full of money. Cashed up, I went to the Main Market to replace my lost property. Going from shop to shop, asking a lot of questions in my rudimentary Spanish, poking my nose into little stores, I found a pair of reading glasses, good sleeping bag, pen and a writing pad. I didn't really need anything more, so I packed it all into more plastic bags and I was ready for the mountains.
I was up at dawn. A cup of coffee from a Thermos sold for a few pennies on the corner and I was circling Plaza de Heroinas in search of transport. Same Landcruiser with a different driver, a younger scion of the same family, left when the van was full, ten of us in the back, two in the front. It was a long weekend, and tourists were coming to Los Nevados. Apart from a young Canadian and myself, all were Venezuelans. We stopped at the Cafetin in Monsanda, where the story of my lost baggage was making rounds already.

Beautiful big meal, and we reached Los Nevados an hour later.
For the last 100 metres the approach road is a concreted mule path. In the village it kinks around the church, crosses Plaza Bolivar, and continues up the valley of Nuestra Señora as an even rougher ungraded track, heading for tiny hamlets that climb the southern slopes of Pico Humboldt (4987m). It's about two days walk, that way. Los Nevados is said to contain population of 500. That will count all the outlying hamlets and isolated farms as well. Focus of the village itself is a tiny square, naturally named after Bolivar. Paved in flat river stones, it's barely as wide as the medieval looking church, built in 1915. Mountains are so steep, that even the tiny square is not level, rising towards the beginning of the Main and Only street, murderously steep alley of stone paving, flanked by a dozen of adobe dwellings on either side. Masonry verandas, doors made from adzed timbers. Half of the village houses were turned into posadas, but with tourism dead, only a few lowlanders came up for the long weekend. When they left on Tuesday, we were the only outsiders in the entire village, my love and myself. Most inhabitants were busy working in the fields, and returned home after dark, very few people had time to lounge on their door steps. Even though I noticed unmistakeable signs of inbreeding stamped in the young faces.
The core of Los Nevados consist of 50 or 80 houses. Our bolt hole, Posada Guamanchi, was a branch of an adventure company started 20 years ago by a noted Venezuelan mountain climber. He was killed five years ago, at the age of 44, driving the road to Los Nevados. One of the shrines I passed on the way. His Swiss widow is running the company, now.
Their posada in Los Nevados is an old farmhouse just off the main street, several small buildings enclosing a tiny court yard, unroofed area maybe 12' by 7'. Crooked patched up adobe walls painted white, rendering peeling and falling off, requiring constant maintenance to keep the appearance of clean place. Thin round poles as sagging rafters, no piece of timber longer than 8 feet. Traditional roofing puts down a layer of reeds across the rafters, covers it in mud, and slaps round clay tiles on top. There can't be much wind in the valley, otherwise the roofs would blow away. Some ceilings were white washed inside, in other rooms they were sooty black from ancient cooking fires. Today the old chimney holes are blocked off. Only the poorest burn wood, in the crofts in the highest reaches of the valleys, where some crooked timber remains. Stripped of the forests, there is no firewood left. Everyone cooks on bottled gas, which is the most common pillion riders on the motorbikes I met along the road.
Floors of posada are paved in clay tiles of various designs. Adjoining dwellings were built at different times at different angles to each other, floors on different levels, everything sagging from the day it was built, nothing straight, nothing square. Posts around the court yard rotted away at the ground level and were roughly patched up with cement, some raised on flat stones. No bracing in the walls. Rustic and cosy look, but terribly draughty. Doors to the rooms made from three chainsawed slabs of wood, sagging in their hinges, no door frames nor thresholds to stop the cold. Window shutters the same. Not a pane of glass in the whole village.
Furniture in the dining hall was not really furniture. Rough planks of timber of various provenance, neither planed nor smoothed, wobbly and crude, all sorts of sizes and finishes, stacked together in various styles and designs. Dining room wall was dominated by a 5 feet by 2 feet wood panel with a naïve painted carving of "13 Gringos Breaking up an Arepa", a local take on the Leonardo's Last Supper. 12 Gringos were male, sporting black beards and no-necks of Mexican wrestlers, only Mary Magdalene on Christ's left hand was depicted as a rosy cheeked frail girl. Interesting, the way a heretical tradition is handed down the generations.
Our posada was a real home away from home. Zoraida and her husband Jorge run the place for the owners. Zoraida grinds their own wheat every morning for arepa andina, which taste like Indian chapati, a good fresh bread. Every meal starts with a rich thick soup followed by some meat or chicken, with rice, local potatoes, arepas and usually fried green plantain, big cooking banana. Home made fruit juice and unlimited arabica coffee grown several valleys to the south. Tasty and filling, but you will not grow fat on it.
Little stores along the main street were just an extra room in someone's house, lacking even signs on the outside, but just like in Canaima, you could get anything in them. Every rare item that queues of people in the lowlands fought for was here, in a little mountain village. Down to hair conditioner and toilet paper. It makes you think, who or what is really causing the shortages in the urban wilderness on the coast.
In October the place was bloody cold. At night it got even colder, but being only 10 degrees form Equator, there are no classical seasons, temperature does not change during the year, so it's bloody cold the year round. Without firewood there are no fires to warm up by, and the gas cooking stove in the kitchen does nothing to warm up the place. For all the relative cold, it never snows in Los Nevados, and the growing season lasts 12 months. We came in the middle of rainy season, but the year was turned upside down by

El Niño phenomenon, and it did not really rain. In the night thick drizzle descended from the mountains, and the upper reaches of the valley were shrouded in perpetual cloud, but during the day the village itself was bathed in sun. The main valley runs east to west, so the sun shines in the whole day. It did not warm us up much, though.
Potatoes, the staple crop, give three harvests a year on the fields as steep as 45°. Farming is done without any machinery, except the Landcruiser to cart the produce to town. Fields are hoed by hand, less steep slopes ploughed with a crooked stick pulled by a pair of oxen. Rows are run straight up and down, no attempt made to run them along a contour. Run off and erosion destroy the fields in a generation and farmers just move on, leaving the devastation behind. Hillsides are scarred by the former fields where the soil disappeared down the murderous slopes. Work is hard, every step a climb. Potatoes were being harvested as we came in, every spud was dug up by hand, with a mattock or a hoe, full sacks carted on human backs up the steep fields into the houses for storage. Backbreaking work at every stage. I met no fat people in the mountains, and even Merida population is not as obese as the lowlanders. Just walking to the bus stop means puffing up and down the hills.
You can walk around Los Nevados for a fortnight without retracing your steps. Steep valley of the river is more a gorge than a river bed, there is no flat river terrace at the bottom. A number of small bridges give access to the other side, thin slabs of collapsing concrete, if you care climbing down the slope at 1 in 3 grade, them puffing up on the other side. Vistas are breathtaking and I find them hard to describe. Dry air lets you see for miles, and Andes seemed to dwarf everything I knew about mountains. And when you look at the map of the ranges forming the Andes, you'll see that Sierra Nevada is only an insignificant side branch of a northern spur of the ranges. The scale of the mountains is monumental. No trees, but everywhere signs of past and present cultivation, fields climbing up to 3000 metres. Individual fields are about half an acre each, roundish, often bordered by a thicket to keep the stock out. Main crops are maize, potatoes and wheat, with large vegetable gardens closer to the house, carrots, onions, garlic, cabbages, broccoli, parsley, celery, thyme and other herbs. Blackberries line the road sides, with many flowering agaves and banana lilies (Indian shot). Banana passion fruit smothers many a fence, intermingled with Datura (Angel's Trumpet).
Luckily there are no goats nor sheep anywhere, otherwise the ranges would have turned into desolate wasteland centuries ago, as they did all around the Mediterranean and Middle East. Plenty of chickens, some turkeys, a few milking cows, an odd oxen for ploughing, a number of mules and horses to cart loads, spotted brown and black pigs under the house. All stock is either tethered or well fenced in. Dogs are big fluffy mongrels who do not chase after you, cats discreet and rarely seen, chunky shorthair survivors. Too cold for snakes and other reptiles, too dry for mosquitoes, climate makes for an idyllic place, if it wasn't for the cold (hear a Russian talking!).
One morning we asked for a muleteer to bring over some of his charges, we were going for a ride. Valley slopes are criss-crossed by trails, tracks and foot paths, with habitations widely spaced, tiny hamlets of four or six houses, lone farms all the way into the headwaters, ruins of abandoned dwellings. Walking around every day I was getting to know this place, but my love wasn't up to the rigours of mountain trekking, and a ride on a mule seemed like a good compromise. Filipe, the farmer living above our posada, brought three beasts. A placid old Satana for my love, a touch younger Lucifer for me, and a freshly bought new buck for himself.
Mule is an amazing animal. A sterile hybrid of horse and a donkey, it combines best traits of both, surpassing either of them in intelligence and physical endurance. Mule will work for 25 years, then live for another five. It will survive on rubbish feed neither of his parents could. Well trained mule is easy to direct, a slight tug on the bridle will stop it or change its direction, but the best way is to let them choose their own path. They are surefooted, intelligent and patient animals, who will walk entire day, fully loaded, if they are left to proceed at their own pace.
We rode for a hour to San Raphaele village, where at the head of the stream someone built a trout farm. Six concreted tanks, one above the other in a cascade, each about 15 feet by 4, maybe 2 feet deep. Small fry is bought in Merida from the government hatchery, then it's fed every day its pre-made pallets. After about a year tiny troutlings grow into 2kg predators ready for the table. The owner lives in the village, and today he happened to go down to Merida, so we did not meet him. At the trout farm stands a rough mudbrick hut with doors hanging askew, radio blaring for no-one. Like all isolated dwellings, a single strand of wire brings him electricity from the valley. Patches of farming thrown around, pumpkin, fava beans, marrows, solitary ganja plant. His own waterfall and a fluffy cat.
As we climbed into the saddles for the ride back to Los Nevados, I could not resist thinking: an adobe hut, vegetable plot, unobstructed vistas of the mountains, fluffy cat, stove to keep you warm, maybe a mule.

What more do you need? I can name a dozen worse ways to spend my declining years, once I grow tired of the ocean. Weeks later, crossing the Caribbean to Haiti, my love expressed the very same thoughts. It does sound idyllic, doesn't it?

Routine of departure from Venezuela is anything but a routine. Every clearance differs, between different ports, between different agents, from one boat to the next. We paid our agent a set fee, something like 7 or 8 dollars, and she got all the papers stamped and passed them onto the last agency, the Drug Squad. Their visit also varies. Sometimes they come with dogs and search the boat for drugs, before they hand you the departure clearance. After that they may sit on the wharf, watching you, until you physically leave. At other times they don't bother about dogs, or simply leave the marina after their inspection. There is no way to predict what will happen, and even a bribe is not a certain bet. I've seen the Drug Squad arrive punctually when they said they would, and walk off immediately, but one French boat had to wait four days for their visit. Our agent got all the papers ready, drug people promised to clear us at 9AM the next day. We waited the whole morning. At noon the agent rung, saying she will bring them in the afternoon. Nothing happened. It got dark before finally a lone fat rating in army camouflage arrived with our agent. No dogs, but a lot of paper writing, in a long hand, while he kept checking the incoming messages on his smart phone. He was clearly not happy that he had to work overtime. Aloof, haughty, all puffed up with self-importance, as he told us he is 21 years old, and he has a 7 year old daughter in Santo Domingo. Paperwork done, he brought a chair from the restaurant to the wharf and announced he will wait till we leave. He gave us an hour to do so. In darkness our neighbours from the marina gathered around "Kehaar", anxiously waiting what will happen. Originally I planned to ask a neighbour to tow me into the channel, but with that grumpy goon sitting on the wharf I wasn't sure. I sent a word to our agent, who was waiting in the restaurant, she still had to drive the bloke home. No, there was nothing she could do. Even money would not move him. Something bit the goon in his arse and he dug his heels in. He shall wait.
We were lying along the wharf, anchor up, everything ready. It was pitch dark as I sorted out the wharf lines, slowly raised the sail, calculating. Evening breeze swung around enough to get us a possible angle out. To pacify the neighbouring yachtsmen, I quietly told them we'll push off, but anchor for the night in the channel, right in front of marina, and wait for the daylight. I was still thinking. My main concern was the rogue Coast Guard. Recently they robbed a departing yacht, right near the marina, as soon as it got dark, stripping them off their valuables. In our case Coast Guard didn't even know we were leaving. Nobody knew we were leaving, nobody expected us to leave after dark, it was just not done. At daybreak, yes, at night, no. I knew that the land breeze will stay with us the whole night, we ought to disappear below the horizon before the daylight.
Without warning I dropped the lines and we silently pushed off the wharf. Sail drew in, close hauled it looked like we may just clear the corner. If I could lay breakwaters without tacking, we'll get out. Breeze picked up, giving us additional lift. My black boat, completely silent, displaying no lights, slipped past the Coast Guard station without waking them up. Gentle splashing of swell on the breakwaters and we were out in the bay. Nobody noticed us. I pointed the bow to the light house on top of Isla Borracha, The Drunken Woman, five miles away. By midnight we ghosted past it, out into the outer bay and we were off in the open Caribbean.

R.I.P., Denis

Just because a guy is a thug does not mean his story can't be an inspiration to the rest of us. I am not defending criminals, but I have noticed that their life lines are often more complicated than they appear at a glance, and given other options, many of them would have lead a successful law-abiding life.
I have met many people from the shady areas straddling a law divide and clearly they prefer anonymity, so I will not drag them in here. Denis is an exception. I can speak of him without harming him. By all estimates Denis is dead. No one really knows for sure, but he hasn't been seen by any of his friends for over 5 years, which never happened before.
Denis was a Russian. Since his school days he was a keen sailor and he started competing at an early age. Talented, dedicated and hard working, he was picked up by the communist system as a youngster and he was groomed to become a champion, representing the Soviet Union overseas. At the age of 17 he won the All-Union championship in some class of small sailing craft, I am not sure which one. The title opened the door into privileged class of top sportsmen, with perks and bonuses that ordinary citizens could only dream about. His life was about to take off.

On the day he won his title he celebrated with his friends, in a traditional Russian style. They got blind drunk and while they were waiting for their train at a station, boys decided to play around the shunting yard, jumping the freight trains, hopping off, horsing around. Denis was on top of the world. In the drunken haze he misjudged a step jumping down from a speeding fright car and he fell under the train. Wheels cut off both his legs, one just above the knee, the other one below the join.
He spent two years recuperating from the physical injuries. To cope with pain in his amputated legs he was kept on strong painkillers and he got hooked on morphine. Once out of hospital, he moved onto cheaper opiate, shooting heroine. His stumps heeled, but what happened in his head was just as bad. From the pinnacle of hope, surrounded by perks and girls, with two decades of privileged life ahead of him, he tumbled to the deepest despair, while he was still short of 20. As a double amputee he was unemployable, at a mercy of charities. He survived the accident, but as far as the Soviet system was concerned, that was it for him. He was finished. Cripples and infirm were the bottom of the heap in the socialist society. They did not starve but they were outcasts without future. Walking dead to be suffered, unwanted burden. Then the Soviet system collapsed, and newly won democratic freedom had no space for a young cripple.
Denis was always highly competitive and he did not give up. With indomitable will he learned to walk on steel legs, first with crutches, then with sticks. Basically walking with his arms, his upper torso beefed up to a barrel of muscles. When he finally discarded the sticks and wobbled around unaided, he was a powerful monster who could crush stones with his arms. With no useful skills and no education, addicted to expensive drugs, in the post-soviet Russia he had no prospects in a straight society. There was only one route he could take. Crime.
From this point onwards story grows sketchy. He did time in Russia for selling drugs. He was arrested in Canary Islands for the same offence. His father sprung him out of jail and they sailed away. Afterwards Denis stayed on the waterfront, sailing was a job he knew best. He kicked the heroin habit but got on the bottle instead, in a heavy handed Russian way. He hitched a ride across Atlantic to the eternal sun of the Caribbean.
To support the lifestyle he crewed on a smugglers' run to the States, shipping rich Russian Jews illegally across the Florida Straits. Well organised racket based in Dominican Republic, which has direct flights from Moscow. Rich hopeful immigrants pay US$ 15 000 each for the last leg of the trip. Smugglers buy an old cheap Beneteau or Jeanneau sailing boat from a charter company, cram 25 souls on a 45-footer and they sail across the Bahamas to the last point of land facing Florida, Bimini. Their associates advise them on a sat phone when the Coast Guard vessel has passed and smugglers motor the last 50 miles to America. They go every time into a different marina, arriving after dark, they tie up and wait for the mafia to pick up the punters. Except for the crew, everyone stays inside, out of the view. Every 20 minutes or so a van pulls up and take 3 or 4 passengers away and by morning it's only the skipper and his offsider on board. Naturally all the neighbours in the marina were watching and they warned the authorities, but when the uniforms arrive in the morning, smugglers just shake their heads. What? 25 people? In this boat? You joking? Their yacht is confiscated but in absence of proof, for the first offence the smugglers themselves are merely deported. Denis found a loophole in American law: as a double amputee alien he can't be jailed, only deported. So he went back to buy his own boat and take another 25 Jews to a different port. Deported again, with $ 350 000 in his pocket.
When we got to the West Indies, Denis was a fixture on Margharita island in Venezuela. Drunkard and a brawler, his line was beating up people for a fee. Imagine that: a guy without legs, working as a free-lance enforcer. He still carried chips on his shoulders, but he was living his life in full. For a discarded cripple chucked into a dust bin he's done well. Margharita was at one time crawling with Russians, but collapse of Chavez economy thinned their ranks and most were moving to greener pastures. Last that I heard of Denis was from St.Marten, where he lived on his 45' Hunter. Drinking heavily, he had several close calls, falling out of dinghy running at full speed. Only a quick grab by his mate saved him from drowning, his steel legs pulling him down fast. Then he disappeared altogether. If he was in jail, word would get out: he would not be the only sailor locked up. Almost certainly he ran out of luck and sailed under. Rest in peace, Denis, you are not forgotten.

Chapter 10: Haiti

Mainland Haiti, La Grande Terre, has only one thing to offer a cruising yachtsman, senseless unprovoked violence. Don't believe the on-line "Free cruising guide to Haiti". Frank, the guy who wrote it, ought to be strung by his balls before he was quartered. He is a rich property developer with a stake in several marinas built in unsavoury corners of the Caribbean, and he promotes them with his free cruising guides. He has

never lived in Haiti, he does not speak the language and he never visited most of the places he describes. He has been a number of times to Île-à-Vache, as did dozens of happy sailors before him, and he extrapolated his experiences to the whole country. Wrong. Haiti is a dangerous coast to cruise, with that one noble exception – Île-à-Vache, a small offshore island in the south.
Treachery of Internet info is that it all looks genuine and true and you have no way of checking the veracity of the claims. When it comes to cruising guides, petty greed of Internet users plays against them. If you know what you are doing, you get what you pay for. If you don't know what you are doing, you get what you deserve. People who put their effort, time and money into detailed research to put together reliable guide want to recover some of their expenditures. They do not post their guides for free, they want money for it. Internet culture is so steeped in the idea that you can get something for nothing that many people prefer to download superficial guides instead, as long as they come free. And there is no other way to tell a good guide from bullshit but bitter experience.

It is not an outright piracy you are facing in Haiti, none of the attacks happened against the boats on the move, in the open sea. Sailing past, you will be fine. Only when you anchor do the thugs arrive. That applies to virtually entire coast of the mainland. Most attacks are not reported to cruising websites, for various reasons. I have met guys who successfully fought off the thugs, slashing them with machetes, helped by their big on board dogs. They were not interested in bragging about it on-line. I also anchored next to an Australian boat whose skipper was badly beaten, and had both his arms broken. I am not a paranoid Yank, I am open minded when it comes to judging the risk I am taking, and it takes a lot before I deem an area unsafe. We arrived to Haiti from Venezuela, a place generally considered dangerous. True, a lot of shit happens in Venezuela, but with a good planning and cool head you have better than fair chance to avoid all the danger. Not in Haiti. La Grande Terre is a place to avoid.
Small islands off the Hispaniola coast are more interesting. On the north coast you find the island of Tortuga, historically the original home of the buccaneers. In the beginning buccaneers were not sea robbers at all. Buccaneers were French, makers of "bucan", meat dried over a fire. They were biltong makers. The first bands reached Tortuga in early 1630ies, driven off the St. Kitts and St. Christopher Islands by Spanish raids. They lived by their own code, by their own rules, by their own written contracts, minding their own business, hunting cattle and pigs that went feral after the enslaved Indian population died under the Spanish maltreatment. They called themselves the Brotherhood of the Coast. Esquemeling estimates that in the whole western part of Hispaniola (Haiti) there were about 600 French buccaneers, plus their servants and slaves.
These peaceful producers of beef jerky may have fallen into oblivion of historic amnesia, if they were only left alone to cure and sell their meat to the planters and passing mariners. It wasn't to be. In 1638 Spanish drove the makers of bucan from Tortuga in another violent raid. Buccaneers sailed in their canoes across to the mainland Hispaniola, hid in the bush, biding their time. A few months later they saw that Tortuga Spanish defence grew thin, and they recovered the island in far from peaceful style. Cycle of violence had started. Over the time the defiant settlers were joined by homeless, rootless, mutineers, escaped prisoners and slaves, beachcombers, shipwrecked sailors of all nationalities. Unemployed, with few legitimate prospects, they became a ready recruiting ground for pirate captains looting the Caribbean.
We know a lot about buccaneers thanks to a remarkable little book written by an eyewitness and an insider, one John Esquemeling. A Dutchman, he came to Tortuga as a clerk in services of the French West India Company. In an administrative gaffe he was sold into slavery, maltreated, resold, finally freed flat broke. With no prospect of surviving in a more gentile way, he joined the Brotherhood of the Coast. An educated man, he became a barber surgeon, a personal physician of Henry Morgan. Upon return to Europe he qualified as a real surgeon and wrote a book of his experiences. Known today as "Buccaneers of America", it was translated into all the maritime languages, every translation mangling and enlarging the original work.
Pirates he described were far from bumbling drunks with an eye patch and a parrot on a shoulder. He writes of cruel and ruthless men organised into orderly military units. Brilliant tacticians, physically and mentally tougher than any other fighters around them, they had no military equal in the Americas of their days. For them a lost encounter meant swinging from the gallows. What I find fascinating is recreating the pirate tracks and timetables across the Caribbean. Esquemeling's book with its later appendices is a rich trove of exact dates and places. Geographic names changed over the centuries, but once you figure out what was what, you can chart pirate raids and retreats on a map, with exact dates attached to it. I drew a startling conclusion from the data: those guys crisscrossed the Caribbean at will. They sailed all year round, in any direction they fancied.

Modern yachtsman with a big engine complains how difficult it is to make any easting, bashing into the Trades, while these guys have sailed in whichever direction they fancied, at any time they were ready to go, with no engines, aboard of presumably cumbersome crafts that we are told didn't go well to windward. There is something important missing in our picture of the old days. They lost a lot of boats in process, but then, lots of modern yachts are lost every year as well.

Tortuga has no safe anchorage and it has never became a home port of any pirate fleet. They would call in, recruit a crew, load on bucan, and move on. Thuggery continues to these days. 18 months ago armed thugs set onto an American singlehander who just rowed across Atlantic from Canary Islands. Rowing in the narrow strait between Tortuga and Haiti, in October 2014 he was robbed off everything he had, including his clothes.
For a sheltered safe anchorage you have to look to another small island, lying about 6 miles off the south coast of Haiti, Île-à-Vache, a Cow Island. It was also one of the earliest buccaneer settlement, jerky makers poaching the cows and pigs that Spaniards released on the island. About 8 miles long and 2-3 miles wide, this island has several excellent harbours on its north west end, two of the bays being true hurricane holes. Today the little cove inside the Baie de Feret bears the name Port Morgan, after Henry Morgan, who often used it as his base. From here he staged his sack of Maracaibo, here he got his fleet together for the plunder of Panama. Ribs of many of his ships lie in shallow waters around Île-à-Vache.

We sailed into Port Morgan at the beginning of the cruising season. In the inner harbour there were 10 boats swinging on anchor and moorings, but only one of them was a real cruising boat, a Miami German we have met a few months earlier in Grenada. Hairdresser, computer geek and a yacht broker, he was getting his 40-year old concrete schooner ready for the last hop back home to Florida. Big heavy 54-foot hull was a replica of an 18-century American trading schooner, with long pointy overhangs on both sides and steeply raked masts. Three years' leisurely cruise of eastern Caribbean left his boat in a sore need of maintenance. He left it a bit late; Haiti is not a convenient place to do a major refit. You can't buy anything in Haiti.
Here, in Île-à-Vache, he rebuilt his steering, fixed the rigging, but the old diesel refused to fire up. Inspired by the ease with which "Kehaar" sails in and out of ports, he decided to sail to Miami without an engine. With no spare parts for sale in Haiti he had little choice. He bashed his way up the Windward Passage, but a few weeks later, in Jamaica, we heard that he lost his boat in Bahamas, wrecked on a reef of Great Inagua. The first night the Coast Guard towed him off the reef, the second time his brittle hull was pounded into rubble. He managed to take a photo of it, so I assume the crew got off the boat in safety.
Five of the boats in Île-à-Vache were occupied by stationary American priests, preachers, pastors and rabbis of various shades of fire and brimstone persuasion. A suspicious number of them had professional background in diving and detailed knowledge on the history of local shipwrecks. Three other boats were unattended, owners gone home for the time being, and one French Canadian was living in sin with a local school teacher.

For decades Île-à-Vache was a popular staging post for the birds of passage, and everyone who told me of the place loved it here, but this year the visitors were slow to arrive. A number of recent savage attacks on yachts elsewhere in Haiti put skippers on guard. Local "arrival committee" can be blamed for driving more yachts away. Long before you can find a good spot and drop your anchor, several crude dugouts will row out to meet you, offering their services as guides, workers, suppliers, middlemen, anything. We watched one yacht approaching through the passage between the reefs, with six canoes zeroing on the new boat from different points ashore. Skipper got visibly nervous, and you can't blame him, with reports of violence all over the web. Dugouts came very close, not giving him time to anchor, before they started pestering him. Skipper turned his boat around and fled, not stopping even for a night.
For the first week you will be constantly surrounded by decrepit dugouts manned by young boys, asking for work or chores to do. They are quiet and polite, and curt "non, merci", will keep them off. They will come badgering you next day, though. When they learn that there is nothing coming from you, their visits will space out to every other day, but people keep rowing over all the time. Sometimes they do offer useful wares, we bought coconuts, fish, fruit and water from them, but most of the time it was a nuisance. Art paintings on offer were pathetic for most part, and overpriced for the rest. Ile-a-Vache is an expensive place, in spite of virtually nothing on offer. Laundry woman wanted US$10 a load, packet of mosquito coils was $2, trinkets for sale in the artisan shops way above anything you'd want to pay.
There is no longer an ATM on the island. US$ changes into local currency, "gourds", at a rate of 50:1.

Everything seems to cost 100 gourds, a couple of dollars, once you haggle the price down to the bare minimum similar to what the locals pay. There is very little to spend on and what there is comes in stunted variety. Tiny coconuts, offered at two for 100 gourds, until you find on the market at Madame Bernard that locals buy four for 100 gourds. Mangoes grow everywhere and people do not bother to sell them, except to the yachties. Fruit is tiny and stringy, you spend half an hours digging hairy mango fibres from your teeth after every fruit. More creative mendicants may bring passion fruit, called "grenadine", about dozen for 100 gourds, but only half of them will be edible. A pound of fish, speared on a reef, is also a 100 gourds, but fishermen do not bring it very often. What they do bring are tiny lobsters, way below their legal size, in hope of selling them. We passed on that offer. Octopus is cheap, but you have to know how to skin it and cook it.
People are black, the darkest hue which comes from West Africa. They speak their own version of Creole. Creole we heard in Guyana was based on English. In Haiti Creole is based on French, but it twists the mother tongue in a different was than Creole of Martinique. Unlike on the other islands, Haiti Creole was elevated to a status of a full official language and it has a written form. Kids at school learn also proper French, and if you speak French yourself, you will have no trouble making yourself understood.

Haiti breathes wondrously warped history wherever you step ashore. Even a tiny place like Île-à-Vache hosted its share of oddballs. The village fronting Port Morgan where you are most likely to anchor is called CaiCoq in Creole, from Caille Coq in French. There is very little there except for an occasional bakery. The main settlement, about 4 miles away, is a little bit bigger village, named Madame Bernard. Both commemorate an eccentric American businessman, and a conman, Bernard Kock. Around the time of American Civil War he got an idea to start a colony of freed American slaves on Île-à-Vache. Abe Lincoln have signed the Emancipation Proclamation abolishing slavery, but he was no friend of dark skin; he had no intention of having all those uppity Niggers running around free, not if he could help it. He offered a reward of $50 for every ex-slave taken out of the country and given a job somewhere else. Several enterprising businessmen took him up on the offer, a country of Liberia sprung up in Africa, amongst other projects.
Bernard Kock negotiated lease of Île-à-Vache with Haitian government, he found financial backers in New York, and in April 1863 he brought over 500 Negroes from the States, as labourers on a 4-year contract to grow sugarcane on a plantation. He collected the reward of $50 for each of them, a significant sum in those days. He printed his own money, with "Island of A'Vache" and his name, Bernard Kock, on it. He built a small hospital to treat his workers who were coming down with smallpox. Before he could make any progress on the plantations, he ran out of money, he ran out of provisions, his financial backers abandoned him, his labourers rebelled, Haitian soldiers were called in and the whole caboodle went broke. In December of the same year Lincoln sent a ship to Haiti to pick up the remaining blacks and bring them back home. All that was left on the island were those two village names and a significant fresh streak in the genetic pool.

There are no cars on the island. There are no real roads to drive on. During the last election campaign a number of motorcycles were distributed amongst the electorate. Today they run as taxis between the villages, in dry weather. Most people continue on foot, on donkeys and on sailing boats. From CaiCoq, 4 miles to Madame Bernard, runs a wide trails that looks like a road that was commenced, but never finished. You tramp over gently undulating countryside with great views of the sea on both sides, small fields, maize, manioc and sweet potatoes, here and there. Freed slaves refused to work large plantations, no matter who owned them, and everything is grown on small plots until today. Big properties are still equated with slavery. Tethered bald-faced sheep of Border Leicester breed, free ranging goats, donkeys and scrawny horses nibbling on short cropped grass.
Both times I went to the market at Madame Bernard village, it rained the night before and the track turned into muddy slippery skating ring, thongs getting stuck to the road with every step. Even walking barefoot at the edge of the grass, I was sliding like a cow on ice. The few motorbikes offering a ride for 100 gourds, got their wheels clogged with sticky mud and jammed. I saw two machines abandoned, standing like mud sculptures along the way. The main road remained impassable until the sun dried the ground and tramping bare feet pounded a narrow ribbon of a trail through the sticky mess.
Riots of children were hiking to school, barefoot, carrying their precious sneakers in their hands. Without real shoes they are not allowed into school building. Little girls come with elaborately plaited hair, braided in several streams, with glass beads and colourful ribbons worked into their coiffure. The largest school I saw was an ambitious aid project abandoned midway through the construction. A long narrow building of 8

or 10 rooms, with ornate arches of Arabic palaces and blind balconies where the access doors were bricked over. The ground floor was operating, second storey looked nearly finished but was not in use, and the reinforcing bars sticking through the roof suggested that higher levels were planned but not attempted for the lack of funds. Quality of concrete poured into the walls deteriorated as the building progressed, until in the last section you could look right through the walls.
Countryside looks green, but it was stripped bare of trees, there are no forests left anywhere on Haiti. What trees you see along the road are all fruit and nut trees, mangoes, cashew nuts, coconuts, breadfruit trees, Indian almond and sea grapes near the shore. No timber trees. What they call forests, or even "old growth", are mangrove stands along the coast. In that way government can claim that Île-à-Vache has a largest stand of forest in Haiti, an extensive mangrove swamp in the east. Trees were cut down in an effort to pay off crippling foreign debt that the new nation was saddled with at the independence. Haiti started as a slave revolt, the only one that succeeded. Rebelling slaves demolished the pompous armies of Napoleon, killing 70 000 of his elite troops, then kicked out the white owners of plantations. The humiliated French government naturally demanded compensation. Haiti government was hoping to gain international recognition, if they paid for the expropriation of private property. Not having any mineral resources, refusing to work in agriculture on large estates, which they associated with hated slavery, the only income government could generate was selling charcoal to other islands in the Caribbean. They went on chopping down trees since independence in 1804 until the debt was finally paid off in 1947. One and half centuries of stripping the tree cover denuded the mountains bare, and goats made sure no trees had a chance to sprout on the cleared land. With no tree cover, all the water sources dried up and lack of drinking water is a major problem today.
Many existing wells are brackish, and women have to trot a long way to the nearest clean water source, balancing the plastic buckets on their heads. Drinking water for the resorts is bought from the mainland in round jerry cans. If you need utility water, get one of the mendicant boys to bring it to you in his canoe. Specify that you want drinking water, even if it's only for laundry and shower, otherwise they will bring you brackish brownish liquid from the nearest shallow well. Three jerry cans will set you back 100 gourds.
People live close to their fields, in small masonry cottages that look transplanted from Bretagne or Cornwell. Lovingly painted walls are teetering on crazy angles, crooked doors built into crooked doorways, rhomboid wooden shutters closing the irregular window holes. What looks like solid masonry are really post and beam structures, with supporting timber posts in the corners and next to openings, spaces between the posts filled with crude rubble masonry. All the walls are built slanting in from the beginning, to give some bracing. Hip roofs, giving additional bracing, are always red painted tin. Earthquakes shake the flimsy buildings, pushing them on additional angles not planned by the builders. After the quake people putty the cracks in the walls and paint over the cracks. Next quake the buildings slant further, until dwellings are leaning on impossible angles like in a crazy cartoon. Whitewashed walls are painted all sorts of bright colour, red, pink and blues being favourite. Sometimes the stones in the walls are painted white, while the mortar grout between them is picked in bright turquoise or lime green. Effect is gay and festive, with every house a different colour scheme. During the day only doors are open, all the window shutters remain closed. Not a pane of glass anywhere.
In front of some houses stand imposing masonry tombs taller than a man, right next to the road. Being dead does not seem to change a colour taste, and tombs are as gaily painted as the houses. Dead can't be moved, so when an old tomb stands in a way of a new dwelling, people built around it. Some tombs are better constructed than the houses, with tin roofs overhead, stone entry gate, ornaments on top of walls. Each tomb have four chambers, with doors numbered, to make sure there is no confusion as to who lies where.

Twice a week market in the largest village of Madame Bernard is right on the waterfront, a sorry affair that even Darkest of Africa would be ashamed of. There are no real shops or eateries. Women squat in mud, offering manioc, coconuts, sweet potatoes, few meagre vegetables brought over from the mainland, asking a dollar for one onion. Cashew nuts grow abundantly, and they are cooked into sweet cake of nuts covered in caramelised brown sugar. I found no eggs for sale. Open air butcher was offering a cattle carcass lying on a sheet of plastic in the mud and a chopped up pig, choose your cut.
For real shopping you have to go to the mainland. Fronting Île-à-Vache lies Cayes, with about 40 000 inhabitants the third largest town in Haiti. Most people go by "bateau a voile", small sailing craft with no engine. Flying a huge cloud of sail, these shallow drafted timber boats are the backbone of native transport. Rig is a sprit sail, a 20-foot boat will have 20 feet tall mast, with a bamboo sprit nearly 30 feet tall and the boom sticking a long way beyond transom. Many a sail are hand-me-down dacron that yachties

donated during their stopover on Île-à-Vache. Haitians are top sailors and they know how to work their craft into the steady Trade Wind.
Alternative to "bateau a voile" are Jamaica-boats. Long narrow speedboats powered by 40HP outboards, they arrive regularly from Jamaica loaded with ganja. The strait between Jamaica and Haiti is only 100 miles wide, a 6-hour ride for a crew of Rastaman. Crop sold, drug runners sell their boats as well and fly out with cash. In Haiti Jamaica-boats work as water taxis, a regular fare from Île-à-Vache 7 miles to Cayes is, you guessed, 100 gourdes. Everything cost 100 gourds.
Cayes lies on a nasty lee shore, not a place to bring your own boat and anchor. There is no public wharf, no safe and sheltered place to land. An intricate and bizarre landing system evolved. All the craft anchor inside the reef, about 50 metres from the lee shore. A flat bottomed boat poled by an old man takes the passengers off their vessel and pole them closer inshore, where porters grab you by the legs and carry you piggyback on their shoulders the last five metres onto the firm land. Everyone is subjected to the same treatment. Locals and visitors, rich and poor. You pay a few coppers at every transfer.

A short walk over the hill from CaiCoq is a beautiful white beach of Abacca Bay Resort. Here, in 4 metres of water, lies the wreck of "HMS Oxford", flagship of pirate fleet of Henry Morgan, that drunken pirates accidentally blew up in 1669. Morgan was then assembling a strike force to attack Cartagena in Colombia. About 15 miles down the coast from Île-à-Vache French had a fort on the mainland, at Saint Luis. Morgan rocked up with his ships and found a French warship on anchor in front of Fort Saint Luis. Morgan sent the captain a court note, inviting him to join the pirate force in the plunder of Spanish Cartagena, or else he will blow him clear out of water. French captain had a look at the overwhelming force surrounding him, and threw his lot in with Morgan. Esquemeling in his memoirs gives us a rather more complicated story, how Morgan came by the French ship. French and English never liked each other, not even as pirates.
Pirate fleet, now 10 ships and 800 men strong, returned to Île-à-Vache to celebrate. Smaller ships were anchored inside Port Morgan, the large warships were too big and too deep to work into tiny cove, so they were anchored just south of the headland closing the Abacca Bay. "Oxford" and the Frenchman were about half a mile from the shore, officers drinking in the aft cabin of the flagship, while the rabble caroused amidships. Somehow fire started on the "Oxford", spread below the decks and gun powder magazine exploded, sinking the ship. Morgan himself was blasted through the window of his cabin into the sea, but he survived. 200 of his men did not. This setback mattered little, they left for the cruise as they were. Three weeks' beat to the mainland killed a large part of the crew and Morgan decided he didn't have enough men to tackle heavily fortified Cartagena. He sacked Maracaibo instead.
"Oxford" lies in 4 metres of water, and any valuables that could be easily retrieved must be long gone, first washed ashore with the storms, then plundered by native divers. Morgan tried to salvage something himself, returning 6 years after the shipwreck. Sailing on "Jamaica Merchant" this time as a new Governor of Jamaica, he was bringing with him heaps of arms, cannons and munition to fortify his new Jamaican capital, Kingston. Treacherous currents around Île-à-Vache got him, and in a sudden storm "Jamaica Merchant" sank as well. Besides four metres of water, shipwrecks are today covered by additional two metres of dense mud, result of centuries of uncontrolled erosion from the surrounding hills. The exact position of the wreck is known, remains of "Oxford" were pinpointed by an expedition in 2004, with resident pastors-yachtsmen-divers in full attendance. Weather they recovered anything of value, they do not say, but it sounds like the mud defeated their efforts for the time being.

Western headland overlooking Port Morgan is taken over by manicured landscape of Port Morgan Hotel, French luxury resort built and ran by Didier. Not a place a yachty with arse shining through the holes in his shorts would be invited to. A plate of food with a couple of beers sets you back US$50. We had to buy a can of "OFF" to keep at bay irritating sandflies. At US$16 it costs three time what we pay in Australia. Didier himself is a pleasant silver haired gentleman, the only place on the island where you can change dollars into gourds, the local currency. His resort is most of the time deserted, sometimes hosting a gang of young NGO girls on a leave, spending some of the aid money lounging around his pool.
Coast of Île-à-Vache are low cliffs and crumbling rock, with only few white beaches breaking the steep shore. A small beach belongs to the Didier's resort. Daily maintained lawns, deck chairs, narrow strip of sand. Strolling along the lawns we found a curious artefact set into the grass. A ring of white stones, about 14 inches across, with a large conch shell in one apex, and two small black stones set opposite the shell. It was no art creation, it was a sample of voodoo, but no one we asked cared to elaborate on the meaning of it. The owner of the beach, Didier, didn't know about its existence, and when we told him, he discreetly called a voodoo priest to have it removed in the appropriate way.

Haiti has the strongest independent culture of the whole Caribbean, and their society revolves around the practice of voodoo, worship of spirits. Voodoo is more than religion, it is the whole way of thinking and even on a short visit like ours you come across references to it all the time, especially if you are surrounded by a swarm of evangelical preachers, as we were on Île-à-Vache.
Unlike santeria and condomble, its cousins on the mainland, voodoo, with its roots in Dahome, remains purely Haitian religion, gaining no outside converts. Reason is simple. Voodoo is practised in Haitian Creole, and the religion is steeped in Creole culture. Unless you speak Creole, you can't practise voodoo.

Zombie is one Haitian concept that did escape the island. In its homeland zombie is a timid inoffensive victim of witchcraft, a docile slave with no will of its own. Zombies do not invade the countryside, they have no thoughts of their own, they are passive slaves. Haitians are not afraid of zombies. They fear of being turned into one, though. Long term residents all agree zombies are a real phenomenon, not a fairy tale. Zombie is a walking dead, a human being that appeared to die for a short period of time and was revived by black magic of a powerful sorcerer. Most rational explanations revolve around use of herbs and drugs on the victims. Toxin from the puffer fish is usually blamed for the first stage, when the voodoo priest brings about in his victim a catatonic state resembling death. The poisonous salve is said to work through the skin, so smearing the potion on the doorstep is apparently enough to induce the poison into the body of the victim. Poisoned person falls into a coma, looking for all purposes dead. In tropics cadavers putrefy fast, so funerals are hurried affairs, dead bodies promptly disposed of. The dead is shoved into the appropriate chamber of a tomb and the lid is shut on it. Sorcerer recovers the body that same night, and takes it to another part of the country where he can use a mindless slave to work his fields. After they wake up from the initial catatonic state, zombies are kept drugged to keep their minds fuzzy and docile. Some female zombie slaves are said to be used as domestics in the priest's households. On a visit of a few short weeks you do not come across genuine zombies, but the preachers had some interesting stories, and everyone took the phenomenon seriously.

Bucolic countryside of small cottages and no cars with only few motorbikes roaming the dirt tracks is planned to change in a big way. In 2013 President Martelly flew in and announced a massive tourist development on Île-à-Vache. 1000 luxury hotel rooms, international airport, marina dredged into the mangroves in the middle of CaiCoq, new road across the island for emergency medical evacuation to the hospital… What? You have no hospital? We'll throw in a hospital as well. By a presidential decree he suspended private property rights, to make expropriation of the land easier, stirred up a lot of dark emotions and flew away. Date of completion of the whole ambitious project was set for the late 2015.
In November of that year we sailed in. Very little of actual work has been done. Locals resented the arbitrary decisions coming from the capital, they were upset about being thrown out of their land without any consultation. Several times they gathered to express their protest. From the entire population of about 14 000 people, in February 2014 they mustered a crowd of 8 000, to tell the Secretary of State what they thought of it all. They pelted him with rocks and the dear minister fled, fearing for his life. To the next public gathering riot police was flown in, shooting live ammunition, wounding 12 people.
By the time we came in, situation calmed down, but progress was slow. A small private company from Dominican Republic started work on bulldozing the airport runway, out in the mangroves in the east. The scenic road was apparently pushed through as well, but contracts were being sold down the road and no actual building commenced, anywhere. On top of local resentment, country was facing serious logistic problems. In 2015 Haiti was paralysed for most of the year by a legal impasse: President appointed a new Prime Minister. Parliament declared the Prime Minister and his Cabinet illegal and unconstitutional, refusing to endorse their decisions, or give them any money from the public purse. Treasury was empty, anyway. Upset, the President dissolved the Parliament.
The constitution ordered the president to call new elections. The current president, a popular pop-singer known as a Sweet Mickey, was not allowed to stand again himself, so he dragged his feet for half a year, milking his position for all the money he could. Loosing his office, he was not spending money on some frivolous project like tourism in Île-à-Vache. The resort was a personal project of the President, he provided all the money. Without government money everything stopped. Second round of election was coming at the end of December and everyone was sitting on a fence. Then in January, after we left, President decided that his successor, known as Big Banana, was likely to loose, so he cancelled the second round of voting, indefinitely. Jamaican newspapers showed a photo of a Haitian man at a looted fuel station, furiously hacking fuel bowsers with a machete, taking out his frustration. No, it doesn't make sense to me either.

Why is Haiti so miserable? The dysfunctional state that is Haiti can be traced to the long history of discrimination heaped onto it by the western powers. The only successful revolt by the black slaves, their country was shunned by the rest of the world, afraid of Haiti setting an example to their own slaves. Even supposedly enlightened men like Kant, Hegel and Jefferson were adamants that black race is mentally inferior to the white people, and incapable of ruling themselves in a civilised way, overlooking the fact that Haiti generals managed to defeat much better equipped armies of Napoleon at the time when he was at the peak of his power. French needed an excuse for the loss of face, and they claimed that Haitians made a pact with the Devil. This nonsense is repeated till our days. When Ronald Regan's Administration finally acknowledged existence of AIDS, they pointed at the "4H-club" as the cause of the disease: haemophiliacs, homosexuals, heroin addicts and Haitians. With this accusation tourism in Haiti died and has not recovered. As late as 2010, after the massive earthquake which devastated much of Haiti, American televangelists pointed their sick finger, you see, God punished them for their pact with the Devil. What sort of God do their worship, if He kills innocent people in rubble of their own homes?
Haiti declared its independence in 1803, but it had to wait for admission into League of Nations for 60 years. The Republic, which modelled its Constitution on the American Declaration of Independence, was not recognised by USA until 1862, while the American bullies in the north supported every divisive and oppressive regime that the local rich minority came up with. The history and politics of Haiti are macabre, with sadistic tyrants succeeding megalomaniacs, to be ousted by psychopaths, with every sign that the trend will continue. Greatest care is lavished on meaningless details while the major problems are not addressed. Clean water, sanitation, education, basic necessities are overlooked while the parliament debates the shape of the flag.
Government was not functioning, so the life was flowing on inertia and custom. Clearance into the country is optional. Coast Guard vessel may drop in once a week, but they do not check anything. Only in the height of the season, December till March, Immigration comes along with them. Entry and exit stamps cost about $20 each. Not clearing in and out was a considerable saving. In Haiti you get very little for your money.

Chapter 11: Cuba

Everyone I met who's been to Cuba loved it there, each for a different reason of their own. For me it was a lot like Prague: everyone who has visited my home town loved it, for many it was the best city in Europe. I can understand that, but I ran away from Prag as soon as I was old enough, and I never went back. I felt the same about Cuba. I liked many things in Cuba, but with my background of communist upbringing in Eastern Europe I could see the shadows creeping from behind the curtain and I know that I could never live in Cuba.
Fidel put his money on educating people. He thought that higher level of education will lift their awareness and they will appreciate the advantages of socialist society. Unfortunately better educated you are, clearer you see that Gospel according to Marx is not the answer. 19th century socialism is not a viable model for harmonious society of 21st century. It does not take into account natural inclination of average man: envy, greed, jealousy, indolence, complacency, opportunism. Fidel himself is a totally honest man with absolute integrity. Society composed of people like him may live happily in communism, where people do not steal just because something is lying there unguarded. Real life is stacked with dishonest lazy bums who will gladly take something for nothing, if they can get away with it. – "Who does not steal is robbing his family," a socialist truth I learned in my youth.
Dealing with foreigners, Cubans are strictly pragmatic. Holder of any passport is welcome to visit Cuba. For $25 cash you will get a month visa on arrival, no matter where you came from. Americans have problems, but their problems come from their own government, not from Cubans. Coming to Cuba with US passport you get treated exactly same as everybody else. In Santiago half of the visiting yachts were flying US flag without any discrimination, while the White House brands every American visitor a traitor, punishable by law for "trading with the enemy". Cuban Immigration thoughtfully do not stamp the passports, they fold in a separate piece of paper with your entry details, so after your departure there is no evidence that you have been to Cuba.
Arriving on a yacht, you will sail into one of the six designated Ports of Entry and wait for the officials, who will come within half an hour. Very efficient. I heard scary stories about compulsory radio contact, about Navy boats coming out to escort you into the harbour, a lot of off-putting stuff. When I asked my Russian friends who regularly sail to Cuba, they waved their hands in dismissal: "Just go."
We went. We sailed deep into huge natural harbour of Santiago de Cuba and the first that officials heard of

us was the rattle of my anchor chain in front of their marina. Marina launch brought the officials on board within half an hour. Officious but courteous, polite, efficient, no fuss. There are many departments interested in you or your boat, but there is little of actual paper filling and the system is fair and pragmatic. You are presented with a bill, you pay, and you are free to roam Cuba on land, travelling anywhere you want.
Cubans make no fuss. You break a rule, you pay a fine and all is forgotten. Around New Year a plastic tub arrived in Santiago, with US flag flying from transom. 40-foot Hunter with two guys on board. Obese pink man-mountain with little shrewd eyes was a skipper, a Pole from New York. His crew was a middle aged black primadona from Santo Domingo Marina, who did not like to get his hands dirty. Boat wasn't theirs, they were delivering her for a friend, sailing from Dominican Republic to Havana. The owner, another New York Polish, bought her in the marina in Santo Domingo and for five years used her as a party boat to entertain his American visitors. They have not left the berth once in those five years. Now they decided to move their operations to Havana, and without any refit, without preparations, they just sailed away. They reasoned, Cuba is not far from Dominican Republic, maybe 400 miles, no more, what can go wrong.
First squall out of Marina broke the rotted jib halyard and their furling head sail dropped on deck. Skipper was too fat to climb the mast to replace the broken rope, his crew too scared. In the next squall their furling main sail, which is rolled into the mast, got stuck inside and they could not pull her out. The second day of their trip they were left without sails. They started the engine and only then discovered they only had 20 litres of fuel. When they ran out, they drifted in fluky breezes and calms of the Windward Passage between Hispaniola and Cuba. Skipper, stumbling around the deck, stubbed his toe on something. A diabetic in advanced stage of the illness, his toe became septic and by the time a kindly cargo ship stopped for them and gave them some fuel, his toe was black and gangrenous.
They motored into Santiago harbour and dropped their anchor near "Kehaar". Officials ashore indicated that they should come right in, and tie to the wharf. For the next two hours we watched the comedy of two clowns attempting to raise an anchor for the first time in their life. Full speed forwards, screams of the foredeck man who got his hand caught in the anchor chain. Full speed aft, screams of the foredeck man again, it was hilarious. Their anchor must've got caught on something, for they mangled the poor Danforth into a pretzel.
As if all that wasn't enough, the sniffer dog found five marijuana seeds somewhere in the cabin. In any other country it would spell a major problem. The skipper apologised and explained it was not his boat, the owner used it to entertain, obviously that's where the ganja came from. Cubans kept their cool. They pulled out a rule book, found the appropriate paragraph and showed it to the skipper. – "Traces of marijuana – $200 fine." – Skipper paid $200, officials wrote him a receipt, then they called a cab to take him to hospital so he can get his gangrenous toe cut off before it will kill him. Nobody mentioned marijuana again.

Cuba is like DDR with coconuts, drab East Germany in sunny Caribbean, down to ordinary people wagging their finger at me in disapproval when I ride my bicycle wrong way down a one-way street. Just like the Germans do. Boxy IFA trucks and two-stroke MZ motorbikes help to reinforce the illusion (I believe both factories disappeared after the reunification of Germany.) For many visitors Cuba means vintage American cars and trucks, living antiques from 40ies and 50ies that fill the Cuban streets, lovingly maintained and passed down in the family. The shiny museum-grade ones run as taxis, while many had an extended rear cabin installed to fit more passengers in, complete with a little stairway and a balcony at the back, where the conductor can perch. Together with ridiculous shoddy Soviet-era Moskvich and Lada cars from the 70ies, the American antiques form the backbone of personal transportation. WWII Chevrolet 10-ton trucks, Dodge and Fords had benches bolted down in the tray and they perform the function of buses, secondhand Isuzu diesel under the bonnet. Plethora of Russian trucks, Maz, Gaz, Zil, Kamaz, Uaz, Kraz, diesel belching mastodons that you will not encounter anywhere else in the world. I remember them being already obsolete in Eastern Europe 40 years ago. The only more recent vehicles are rare French cars brought in by personnel of joint-venture companies operating in new Cuba.
There are very few private cars, and even fewer people drive around for no reason at all. Government vehicles are obliged to share their trips with civilians waiting by a roadside, a form of government approved hitchhiking. At the exits from large towns, under a specific road sign, there will be a beige uniformed official flagging down government vehicles passing by, appointing the empty seats to the people waiting orderly in a queue. Refusal on the part of the driver may mean forfeiting the privilege of the car at all.
Traffic is light. Very light. Ancient trucks belching unfiltered fumes, Lada's with tinted windows, horses pulling two wheeled carts, ox wagons loaded with firewood, 1960ies Czech motorcycles with side cars,

cyclists and pedestrians, are all allowed even onto a four-lane freeway with ancient bougainvillea flowering on the median strip. When Russians pulled the plug in 1991 and the cheap oil ran out, Cuba imported 750 000 Chinese bicycles to keep the populace moving, simple lightweight single speed machines used for all sorts of tasks.
Riding your own bicycle is a great way to explore the neighbourhood. With half a country riding themselves, nobody takes any note of you. Over the next four weeks I followed roads from Santiago in all directions, pedalling up and down the potholed bitumen strips for 20 or 30 km, then back along an alternative way.

I liked the most that there are no billboards along the roads, no advertising on town buildings, not even communist propaganda. I haven't seen a single sign warning of "Private property" or "Trespassers prosecuted". You ride through a countryside unpolluted by commercial brainwashing. You notice hills, mountains, trees and flowers, instead of being bombarded by moronic buy-buy-buy lobotomy. Looking down an historic street you see buildings, not placards. Like in the Eastern Europe I grew up in. Shops are empty, there is nothing to advertise.
Very little rubbish was lying on the ground. No plastic bags snagged in the bushes, no plastic bottles in the gutters, no styrofoam take away boxes floating in the harbour, no grease paper from cut lunches fluttering in the wind around the building sites. Country is clean as a whistle. People themselves are as much of pigs as anywhere else, they are ready to throw garbage anywhere, but they do not get much chance to littler. There is no wrapping dished out with every purchase, no plastic bags coming with every shopping, no boxes with every meal. If there is anything to be bought in a shop at all, it comes raw, without a cover, without a wrapper. You want 6 eggs? Sure. Market vendor will hand you six eggs. It's up to you to figure out a way to carry them home. You learn to bring your own plastic bag for the bread buns from the bakery, for the vegies from the market, for cookies from stall holders. You want a pizza? One of few things you can buy from the corner store ovens, good simple round pizza comes by itself, handed over on a wooden ladle. Now find a way to take home three of them. I ended carting around Tupperware tubs with lids and a cloud of old plastic bags from Venezuela.
Country on a whole appears looked after. Hilly and rocky, it's been stripped off its forest cover centuries ago, and only 14% of the land is clad in trees. What looks from a distance like forest clad mountains is really dry scrub, bushes and stunted acacias. Drought is common, water scarce, but it does not look desolate. On the outskirts of towns large fenced paddocks are set aside for communal gardens of town residents, who supplement their meagre diet with home-grown vegies. Surplus is sold along the streets from push carts.
Between the villages country is empty, except for scattered poor one room dwellings built each of different salvaged materials, tin, cinder block, even mud brick. Little vegetable gardens add some dignity to rural survival. Brown sheep tethered to pegs, small flocks of goats tended by elderly shepherds, scrawny horses pulling rickety carts. Horses are never ridden. Most of the poorest folks are black.
On the mainland no wildlife remains, anything of edible size has been eaten. Fish survived only on the offshore reefs, where ordinary Cubanos can't reach. Inshore waters were fished bare. Santiago Bay is notorious for its polluted water, the agricultural run-off of phosphates from the surrounding fields supports fantastic rate of algae growth. After a single month "Kehaar's" keel was clad in a forest of weeds two feet long, the bilges sprouting a two-inch layer of soft coral. Across the bay on the western shore stand an oil refinery and an ancient power plant. Every few days, when the night breeze was especially strong from the land, Marina would wake up in the morning covered in small yellow dots, sulphuric acid from the dirty sulphur-saturated Venezuelan oil burned in the power plant. Owners of fibreglass boats, white with blue strip, were particularly upset, especially on the days when marina ran out of water. Cement plant on the hill wasn't operating in full, but the decades of accumulated cement dust keep swirling in the wind, and after a few days you notice fine coat of grey powder covering every horizontal surface inside your boat. Solar panels needed washing every week.
For all the rural poverty, there are no squatter shanties between the villages, no slums in the suburbs, no "informal settlements" as they call them in other countries. One of the first things Fidel did after the revolution was slashing the rent so it did not come to more than 10% of family's income, then government converted the rent into mortgages. After paying the rent for certain number of years, dwelling became yours. Owning your own place satisfy a deep seated human need, no matter how humble a house or shack, and palming off an old building to its inhabitants frees the government from responsibility to maintain them. Win-win solution. Unfortunately the miserable level of disposable income leaves no money spare to look after houses, and suburbs look run down, dilapidated, in sore need of repairs. New

extensions, additions and improvements are bare brick, block or concrete, funds not stretching to render the walls nor paint them. So even if the buildings may be new, they look in disrepair and falling down. Lack of basic building materials hampers new construction and people have to wait twenty years for a place to move in. For decades people were not allowed to sell or buy their houses and flats, only swap one for another. Now the new laws allow real estate market, and even foreigners can buy a dwelling in Cuba. In Santiago a tree bedroom apartment in a good neighbourhood will set you back about US$8 000, while $15 000 will buy a detached house in good order.

Shortages are the way of life. They are blamed on American economic embargo, rather bombastically dubbed "greatest genocide in the history", but that can't be right. Cuba is nowhere near as isolated as the American media makes you believe. Canada has never broke off their relations to Cuba, nor did Mexico. Everyone, except the arrogant Yanks, is here to make business. Mexico runs the cement industry, Canadian Alcan mines the nickel (one third of entire world deposits of nickel are in Cuba), French dab in telecommunications, Chinese and Koreans cornered market for public transport, Venezuelans bring oil. 4 million Canadians alone arrive every year for holidays, bringing more money into the country than entire Russian subsidy used to be. Somehow all this money disappears.
Cuba is a second biggest producer of sugar in the world, after Brazil. Yet sugar is on a list of commodities that are hard to find. Polish skipper got to the hospital with his gangrenous foot. As a diabetic he asked for a glass of water with a bit of sugar, before they pumped him full of medicines. – "Sorry, we have no sugar," was an apologetic reply. No sugar in a hospital?
Looking around, you soon spot the financial leaks. Socialist state guarantees a job for everyone. If there is no job available, state will create you one, and foot the bill. There is no unemployment, but little of actual work is done. I watched one woman sweeping a road, up in the hills. Deserted strip of bitumen with fallen leaves that gathered in the gutters. The lady walked down the hill with a broom, swirling the leaves this way and that way, moving them around, but not removing a single one from the whole. I passed her first as I was pushing my bike uphill, then she went past the lookout where I stopped, and I met her on the descend again. All she did was swirl the leaves from one place to another, making sure there was plenty of work left for tomorrow. In a day she accomplishing nothing.
In the marina half a dozen mechanics were fixing a diesel engine on one of the Marina charter boats. For a whole month I watched them loosening and tightening bolts and nuts on that one engine, without a perceptible effect. Six qualified tradesmen got paid a month's wages to produce no result. Engine still would not start.
Every park, every lookout, every public space has several discreet guards working in shifts, 24/7. They don't actually do anything, the ground maintenance is taken care of by other crews. They just guard the parks. That must add up to thousands of useless jobs. There are several branches of police. Blue uniforms belong to Municipal Police, your regular cops. Green are from the Ministry of Interior, out in force when a cruise ship visits the port. Then there are beige uniforms, the "Protectors". Protecting whom from what? Or what from whom? 57 years after the Revolution? I suspect they are what we called in Prag the Grey Plague, after their rat-grey uniforms, the upholders of civic standards, sour old men sticking their nose where it's none of their business, and getting paid for it. Thousands more worthless jobs.
When the jobs are legitimate and needed, their performance left me scratching my head. At the Post Office we bought several pre-stamped postcards. We came back the same day to buy more of them. The same lady first charged us 75 cents a card, second time $1.25. A couple of days later I returned for more, and I had to pay $1.75 a card, for the very same photographs of Che Guevara speaking to the workers. Another day I was sending off two letters to Darwin, Australia. The smaller letter cost 90 cents, while the larger one, with much more volume, incurred 85 cent stamp. At least the postal services were functioning, our mail reached its destination, eventually. The last two countries had no post office at all. Venezuela was thrown out of World Postal Union for not paying their contributions and Haiti had no government that could pay the bills or guarantee the delivery.
Internet was a fickle affair. Google boycotts Cuba, and any service smelling of Google is blocked; Android phones and tablets, G-mail, Google Earth, everything. In Santiago there are several public wi-fi spots, and an office where you can buy prepaid cards to access them. Providing your battery is good, broadband is fast. Do not buy your Internet credit in a tourist restaurant or hotel. They will charge you five times the going price.

Everyone gets paid the same, and the pay is not much. As we said in Prag: "You pretend you work, we pretend we pay you". In absolute terms a worker takes home about US$10 a month. A totally misleading

figure, because two different currencies circulate at the same time. Locals use Cuban Pesos, that's what they are paid in and that's what they use to do their shopping with. Foreigners pay in Convertible Pesos, or CUC. One CUC is somewhere between one US$ and one Euro. For one CUC you get 25 Cuban pesos. Tourists pay the same amount as locals, but in a different currency, which makes everything 25 times more expensive for them. A ferry ride from our Marina to Santiago is one Cuban Peso for a local or one CUC for a tourist. If you look like a local and keep your trap shut, you can pay a peso and get away with it. We couldn't. "Kehaar" was anchored in front of Marina, smack in the middle of the fairway and the ferry passed our boat six times a day, at very close quarters. The guys knew perfectly well who we were.
In theory, tourists pay for everything by Convertible Peso. All the accommodation, transport, visa, entrance fees, photographing rights, drinks and food in restaurants, Internet access, postage stamps, everything you can think of. However, not every Cuban has a right to accept CUC, only the licensed traders and the government, so the small fry on the street is charging local pesos to everyone. You can buy for the local money street food, which is severely limited, bread from a bakery, which is fresh and excellent, fruit and vegies from the market and from the ambulant peddlers, locally printed books, newspapers and assorted bits and pieces that a normal tourist has no interest in, like Chinese-made bicycle parts. We found private houses selling good cooked lunches to take away, also for local money. Sleeping on the boat, riding to town on a bicycle or by a ferry, eating from the unmarked street outlets and fresh food from the market, life did not cost much. Choice was very limited, though, and shopping amounted to constant battle, just providing food to fill the belly. If food is important in your life, forget about Cuba.
Those US$10 take home pay is far from all that a worker receives. Government subsidise its citizens on virtually everything. All the medical care and education is free, on all levels. Government runs huge food factories that make packed lunches distributed to workers, for a token price. Everyone is entitled to a ration book, which allots the bearer certain amount of essential food, free of charge. A human body would not for long fed only on those free rations, but it helps to balance the budget. There is no stigma attached to ration books, I've seen them raffled as a price in a local lottery.

Shortage of materials prevents maintenance, but with their ingenuity people could fix a lot more if they really wanted to. Trouble is the lack of motivation. Not my job, not my concern. Every plumbing join in the Marina leaked, and with water shortages, a truckload of heavily chlorinated water lasted only a few days, slowly seeping into the ground and walls from the innumerable leaks. Then there was no water for several days, until the next truck was allotted. Managers ordered water delivery only when two boats or more were present in their marina. When we were alone, nobody bothered. Anchored in front of the jetty, paying half price, we were entitled to only half the service.
No one was interested in fixing the leaks, there was no-one assigned to do the maintenance. Entrance gate, locked every night, was hanging from a single hinge at the bottom. The top hinge slid from the masonry years ago, but no one bothered hanging it back. Rusted reo bars were sticking from broken concrete where the swimming pool was ripped out of the ground by the last hurricane. There was not a single cleat on any of the crumbling wharfs. A 43-foot fibreglass sailing boat that belonged to marina was tied by two flimsy strings to couple of reo-bars. One afternoon squall it broke its front line, and nobody bothered retying it. The whole night she ground her transom against the crumbling concrete wharf.
Government owned Marina is ran by four co-managers, each doing a 24-hour shift, then taking 3 days off, so it makes for a 40-hour work week. Trained in foreign languages, to become teachers, they were all arbitrarily assigned to manage this marina about 20 years ago. Nice guys, all four of them, but being equal, it relieved them from the pressure and danger of personal initiative. They were there to collect money from the yachts, as instructed, and perpetuate the set system. No room for innovation, new ideas, or personal responsibility. Upstairs there is a fancy restaurant, dollars only, and the next building is a deserted beach bar playing horrible local pop music without a tune or rhythm. For whom? For the staff. The only reprieve we got from the racket was when the power went off in a blackout.
Marina Merlin is about 5 miles south of Santiago itself, in the very entrance of the fabulous large bay that can rival any of the great world's harbours. Morro Castle are imposing ruins of the Spanish fortifications commanding the narrow entry passage, perhaps 80 metres across, half of it deep water. Built in the 17th century to repel the repeated pirate attacks, Morro was restored in the 1970ies and it is a rabbit warren of masonry walls, large chambers dug into the cliff, cave floors paved with bricks, windows framed in the same weathered red brick, stairs and narrow passages clinging to the steep hill. Fortifications are approached via alley of touts and trinket sellers, over the draw bridge, across the tiled moat, into the clutches of the extortionists. You pay extra for the right to take photos (US$5). I had a hard time convincing them I have no camera and therefore I take no photos.

Arriving in a new country you have to get to a bank, to change money, first. If you ask marina management in Santiago about transportation, they will automatically ring for a tourist taxi, charging US$20 return. They don't tell you that there are cheaper alternatives. You discover those only if you talk to security guards or other yachties. You can catch a cheap direct ferry three times a day, a flexible timetable bus or you can ride a bicycle. I wasn't going to pay the extortion taxi fares. After a passage I enjoy stretching my legs, so my first venture to town, to get local money, I walked both ways.
Midway to town towers a silent cement factory. Decades of unregulated emissions covered the surrounding hills and dead trees with a thick blanket of cement that hardened during the rains into fantastic grey moon scape cascading down into the canyon you are walking through.
Ferries are small flat bottomed two storey barges, run on an informal basis, like village transport. Times of departure fluctuate, and the itinerary is also flexible. Bargemen all live on Cayo Granma, a tiny island opposite the Morro Castle in the harbour entrance, and they take their boats with them home for the night. Santiago fishermen are not allowed to take their boats fishing outside the bay, government is afraid they would attempt to escape to USA, so all the fishing happens inside the bay, day after day, night after night. More destitute fishermen float around the bay, sitting inside the inflated car tubes, paddling with their hands, jiggling a fishing line. Sometimes a ferry will stop at one of them to buy their catch. A large salvage barge with Belize flag and local crew (from Cayo Granma again) works the bay, lifting what's left of submerged Spanish warships that sank in the bay during the battle in 1898. Wherever the salvage barge is working, it becomes another regular stop for the ferry, bringing in the crews and delivering lunch boxes at noon. A very neighbourly feeling, the ferries in Santiago.
The name "Granma" merits explanation. It is the name of the main Havana daily newspaper, the province to the west from Santiago is called Granma, as is a tiny island in the entrance to Santiago harbour. It all comes from a 60-foot motor vessel "Granma" (short for grandmother) which brought Fidel and 80 other fighters home from their exile in Mexico in December 1956. They landed in the wilderness west of Santiago, in what is today province of Granma. Three days later most of the rebels were killed by Batista's troops, and only a dozen managed to escape into the mountains of Sierra Madre where they continued their struggle. Today the original MV Granma sits in its own glass museum in Havana.

Santiago may only be the second largest town on the island, but the true heart of Cuba is here, not in Havana. The original capital of Cuba under the Spanish, the first Mayor of Santiago was Hernán Cortéz, the future Butcher of Mexico. Henri Morgan (him again) plundered the bay in 1662, while the defensive Morro castle was under construction. Santiago was the cradle of all the important historical and cultural developments in Cuba. In here started both Wars of Independence. Imperceptible San Juan Hill in the Santiago suburbs saw the infamous charge of the Rough Riders when Teddy Roosevelt cheated the black Cuban soldiers of their victory against the Spanish. Fidel started his revolutionary struggle in 1953 by an attack on the army barracks in the central Santiago. Sitting in the main tourist square, Plaza Cespedes, you turn your head to the Town Hall for more history. Here young Fidel stepped onto the balcony on the night of 1st of January 1959 and announced that Batista fled the country and the revolution had won. Only after that, two days later, his brother Raul together with Che Guevara took Havana to fill the power vacuum.
The huge cemetery of Santa Ifigenia is the last resting place of the most notable Cubans. Fidel himself expressed a wish to be buried here, and not in Havana. He studied in here, and he's been an elected Deputy for Santiago for several decades.
Town lies spread around the head of a marvellous bay, formed in a sunken valley of the mountains. The amphitheatre of Santiago is surrounded by a solid half moon of mountain ridges, offering from their tops breathtaking views of the whole plain.

The Old Santiago is being slowly restored, all what I wrote about dilapidated unrendered houses in the suburbs is true about most of the Old Quarter as well. One of the main streets is closed to car traffic along its entire length, to form a pedestrian mall more than two km long. It's hosting a number of dollar shops, many holes in the wall selling identical bread buns with "ham" (soy bean meat substitute) or instant pizza with melted cheese on top. Under shady trees of the Mall you pass the passionate and vocal domino players slamming their stones on the tables, grumpy edgy chess masters waiting for opponents, or you can stumble onto a mechanical organ band, several percussion players surrounding a piano sized box full of mechanical wooden flutes and whistles, powered by a big crank and a small electrical motor, power pilfered by a naked wire from the nearest lamp post. Mechanical organs are still being produced in a small factory in Holguin province in the east of the island, half a dozen machines made every year.
Near the Plaza Cespedes congregate the Santiago musicians. Small bands take turn to serenade under the

tourist café balconies, more serious trovadores (songsters) have their own hangout around the corner, Casa de la Trova. A small wood panelled hall with a tall ceiling and great acoustics, front opened onto the street, three rows of upright leather covered chairs facing a tiny podium, all the walls plastered with photographs and painted portraits of the past greats. Open the whole day, entry free, beer to sip on, constant stream of impromptu folk music, mostly boleros (ballads). Professional dancers step onto a tiny floor for a spin, smell of cigar smoke wafting onto the street. My love spent entire days sitting in there, getting to know the musicians, finally being invited to stay the night in town with one of the matronly singers. Raul Castro is slowly relaxing the strangling policies, and Cubans are now allowed to invite foreigners to their dwellings, after both parties received a government permit to do so. My love didn't need a permit to stay with her friend. As a Philippina mestiza she looks dark enough, and if she keeps her mouth shut, she can easily pass for a Cubana. Or any other Latin American. She had a whale of a time in Santiago, and some weird experiences. She wrote about it on her blog.

Around flat parts of the old town horse carriages ferry people along the fixed routes. Light steel contraption with four spoked wheels suspended on front springs from the old trucks, high and bouncy, they seat 10 people when full. Horses do not look well, they never do in the tropics. Three-wheeled rickshaws ply the same routes. Unlike in Asia, Cuban rickshaws are built from light motorbike parts and scooters, not from bicycles. Some have car back wheels. Ingenuous drum brake on the rear axle, six gears and chunky motorbike chain. Locals pay a peso each, tourists a dollar (eg CUC). Drivers do not own their machines, government does, they are only employees, but an enterprising rickshaw driver can earn in a day an equivalent of a month's wages, carting tourists.

With all the crowds of Canadians and Germans and French prowling around, nose in their guide books, cloud of pimps, hustlers and guides stalking them is large and varied; girls and contraband cigars are the most common offer. Anyone who approaches you speaking good English is an unofficial guide or procurer. If you need a help or guide, that's fine. Just mind that those guys do not work for peanuts, it will cost you a bundle.

Young touts are easy to spot, and they usually target punters of their own age. Cuban companion for the duration of the stay is common. They are known as "jineteros", which means horse riders. In Cuba the difference between a lady, a girl and a prostitute is one of the price, only. In another echo of my distant past, Cuba reports more legal abortions than live birth, just like the old communist block used to.

Most touts are black, coming from the lowest social strata. Younger riders left me alone, I am too old a mark. I was beset by quiet well educated and timid looking middle aged blokes. One claimed to be a local chess champion. He did carry Bobby Fisher's "My 40 memorable games" under his arm and he did roll out a string of names that rung a bell, but chess was not what he was after. I did not need his help, but he tagged along for couple of hours, and when I finally stopped and politely asked him to leave me alone, he insisted I pay him for his guidance. Naturally he was not happy with my contribution. At another time we got talking to a professor of English sitting on a park bench next to us. He carried a copy of "Brave New World" under his arm. Complaining that's difficult to find such daring books in Cuba, he was not interested in books, either. His tale soon slipped into some cock and bull about his monthly paycheck not coming through to his bank account and can we help him out to feed his family that night and blah-blah-blah. I found that the only way to keep the unwanted guides at distance is to make it clear from the start, in polite Spanish, that you do not need their help. If they insist on coming along, just for a walk, I would tell them straight, that I will not pay them anything at all. As soon as I started riding my bicycle to town, pushing it around the steep streets, touts left me alone. Hookers as well, they could see there was no meat on the bones.

Away from the city centre people are genuinely friendly, and when they talk to you, they do not want anything. I often saw old folks sitting on a porch in front of their house, reading books, following the lines with their index finger. How many places you see old people reading books, in public?

Cuba has a number of idiosyncrasies. I haven't found a newsagent anywhere; the only newspapers I acquired were a couple of copies from a guy delivering them on his bicycle in the suburbs. They had surprisingly large sections on literature and arts, good for my Spanish practice. The only foreign news were about the murder of two unarmed blacks by white cops in Chicago, and an appeal by the Pope to solve the impasse of stranded Cuban refugees in Costa Rica. World news indeed. The back page was given to the next year's calendar, a lame contemporary drawing of a youthful Fidel conversing with the workers, quoting one of his sayings from 1959. A rare appearance of El Comandante in print.

Fidel, a lawyer by profession, like Lenin, was an honest idealist with indomitable will, who dragged his people out of poverty in spite of their nature. A man of great intelligence, animal charisma and

unquestionable personal courage, he wanted to give them more than just enough calories and vitamins in their belly, their own house and good education for their children. He wanted to raise them to dignity, pride and purpose, and in that, I think, he succeeded. Smart man, he avoided the trap of strutting in his own limelight, building a cult of personality. It is the official policy of his regime, that no living revolutionary is to be publicly glorified. You will not see his name on any building or street sign, no statues of him disgrace the public parks, his face does not stare down at you from every wall, from the money, from the postage stamps, as is the normal case of democratically re-elected dictators the world over. In Cuba official portraits of party functionaries are forbidden.
For all his towering public image Fidel's private life is never intruded upon. You seldom hear that he is married. In his turbulent life he sired nine children with five women and they all carved lives of their own, wearing their mothers' names. Now 88, Fidel retired from the running of the country, leaving his brother Raul to do the work, but he remains deeply revered by his people, and his authority is absolute. His prestige amid the new generation of "pink" leader in Latin America is unsurpassed. Every freshly elected populist makes a pilgrimage to Havana and spends a night talking to Fidel. Often their path changes after that one talk. His acolytes are not all socialists or Marxists, most see themselves as populists, bringing ordinary people and their lives into political focus, genuine reformers who try to build a different, more just social order, an alternative to autocratic socialism or exploitation of capitalism. Evo Morales of Bolivia, Chavez of Venezuela, Correo of Ecuador, old Pepe Mujica from Montevideo and a host of smaller, more timid fry.
Intellectually Fidel stands like a lone giant who had no peer in Cuba since the murder of Che Guevara in 1967 in Bolivia. Cubans do not use his name lightly, and he is usually referred to obliquely, by euphemisms. His pictures hang in people's houses and stalls, not formal portraits, but simple cut out from magazines or small posters, very human and immediate, with no formality about it.
I have personally seen Fidel in flesh, during his glory years, when he was a formidable phenomenon indeed. It happened in Prague in the early 70ies, when the Comandante made a rare visit overseas, touring all the East European countries, drumming up support for his faraway island. We were herded as a school class to the airport, to wave Cuban flags in a display of solidarity. By chance our group was placed right at the head of the procession, a few metres from the boarding steps leading down from the plane. I remember looking at the aged aircraft, with a scratched sign "Cubana" across its aluminium body. I was bored, waiting for the doors to open, which was taking an inordinate amount of time. I was not a kid any more, I was at High School, and suddenly I noticed that half of the rivets on the fuselage were missing. My eyes popped. I jabbed a friend standing next to me in the ribs: look, this heap is barely holding together, with half of the rivets gone. Then a couple of blokes in overalls climbed the stairs to the airplane's doors, inserted a screwdriver into some crack and levered the door open a bit. Whow, what a crate. And this guy had the guts to cross the Atlantic in this coffin. My respect for Fidel grew 100%.
Finally they preyed the door open and this gigantic figure dressed in plain army fatigues issued from the plane, straightened to his full height and scanned the crowd. He was the first one to stick his head out of the plane, no security goons ahead of him. He never wore any insignia of Army rank on his uniforms. He did not need them. He was The Comandante. You could feel the raw power of the man even at that distance. His beard was still black as night in those days and he walked down the steps in a resolute stride, not waiting for any prompts. At the entrance to the airport hall he turned around, waved to the assembled crowd and launched into an impromptu speech. He was a magnificent orator. There was a Spanish translator ready with a microphone, but the poor woman had no chance of keeping up with Fidel, as he was barrelling down his own highway. We didn't understand a word, but we did not need a translator to get the meaning of his speech as he carried everything in front of him on a wave of passion. He wove the whole universe into his welcome greeting, history of our country and history of his, imperialism, communism and every other -ism you could think of, on and on and on, gesticulating, explaining, promising, a man who sincerely believed every word he said. You can judge the impression he made on us: it's been 45 years, but I can still picture it vividly in my mind. A man who truly knew how to inspire. His visit was a success. For the next few years our liquor stores were flooded with excellent Havana rum, sold at a cost, dirt cheap, and hundreds of Czech Jawa motorcycles are still today riding up and down the streets of Santiago.

We spent the Christmas and New Year in Santiago. Christmas was not celebrated at all. People went to work, bakeries stayed open, shops were empty, everything running normal. New Year was very different. It happens to be the anniversary of the revolution, and it is celebrated in style. Cuban style. This year the festivities were extended by a timely weekend stretching it to five days.

New Year's Eve was the Day of the Pigs. I rode my bike to town, looking to score some food for the day, and every half a mile I passed a makeshift slaughter house. Dead pig lying next to the road, on the bare concrete pavement, cans of hot water poured over it to scrub off the bristles, the owner sharpening the knife to gut it, his helpers stoking up wood fires to build up enough coals to roast it on the spit, right there on the street, blocking the pedestrian walkway. Several times I passed a grey bundle of pig's guts that some thoughtful soul dumped in the gutter of the main road. The easiest way to dispose of them, make it somebody else's problem. I saw horse carts delivering suckling pigs stuck on stout poles, ready for roasting.

In the Mall the little pizza ovens were all roasting a quarter of a pig on their top racks. Drinking was subdued and discreet. The flood gates opened the following day. From the early morning new stalls opened along the road, offering decanted grog and raw pork for sale. An open doorway of someone's house with a plank thrown across the entrance, supporting a few glasses and bottles of rum. Glasses are all home made, cut off lower halves of beer bottles. Celebrations dragged on for days, work resuming around 6th or 7th of January. Bakeries were working every single day, though. TV carried a lengthy feature on the heroic workers stoking the fires in the baking ovens to provide the workers with their daily bread, while everyone else was feasting.

Another Cuban idiosyncrasy is beards. There aren't any. You won't see a young man in Cuba wearing a beard. Some older fellows sport a Hemingway's grey stubble, but long patriarchal beard is unknown. Yet all the holy icons of Cuban Pantheon were bearded up to their ears. Myself, I've been wearing my whiskers ever since they started growing on my chin at 16. I haven't shaved, not since the day the police had me shaved in Czechoslovakia as an "antisocial element" when I was at High School. After that experience I got a doctor's certificate that shaving was harmful to the skin on my face, and I look like a caveman ever since. In most of the Christian world my face produces irritating catcalls "Jesus! Jesus!" or in the past decade marginally less annoying "Bin Laden! Bin Laden!" In Cuba the calls were different. For start, people are better educated and much more civil, or civilised, than in Asia, no rude hackling or kids yelling, while throwing stones at me. In Cuba people would gently ask: "Are you an Argentine?" or "Do you come from the president's family?" or like today, when someone called to me from a court yard: "Che! Comandante!" You either get the inference, or you don't, callers assuming that you will know what they are referring to. So much more intelligent and engaging than the crude "do you know you look like Jesus?" that I get in the Philippines every day.

Comandante was the highest rank amongst the guerrilla fighters; both bearded leaders, Fidel and Guevara, were Comandantes. As for "che", in Latin American Spanish a call "che!" translates as "Hey! Listen!" It is used to grab attention at the start of a conversation, and books say it is particularly common in Argentina. When Ernesto Guevara, a young doctor from Buenos Aires, joined Fidel's revolutionaries in Mexico, he was soon nicknamed after his favourite speech mannerism, "Che". In my experience, hitchhiking around Argentina, I have not heard it once. Maybe it died out since.

Cuba is the original home of Santeria, a popular religious faith stemming from Yoruba believes which the slaves brought with them from Africa. Santeria is widely practised in modern Cuba. Religion in its entirety is an anathema to a communist doctrine. Marx and Lenin were staunch atheists, their materialism declaring that there is no such a thing as spiritual side to a man. For them any faith was like a drug, "opium of the populace", and communist dictators were ruthless in attempts to eradicate all religious practices in their domains. In a paradox twist they created themselves another mindless faith, yet another philosophical system that cannot withstand a purely rational analysis.

Fidel was always pragmatic about religion. He is proud that his revolution was the only major popular uprising in the history that did not kill a single priest just because he was a priest. In his writing he contrasts it with the French Revolution of 1789 which was violently anti-clerical and with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 that attempted to wipe out clergy as a class.

At the beginning he wasn't even a Marxist or communist at all, and for the first few years the old Communist Party of Cuba did not support his struggle with Batista's regime, they only joined the revolution when it became obvious that they will win. It was the American pressure to crush the rebellion and the new society it was building that pushed Fidel further left. Ever pragmatic, he closed the ranks with the side that did not want to ruin him. He turned a communist. When it came to religion, he remained practical. People need to believe, full belly and rational arguments are not enough. Santeria, with no leader, very loose hierarchy, no prophets, no Revelations, no Holy Book, and no ambition to enter the secular government, is a perfect counterpart to a democratic populism that Fidel was hoping to build. A faith that's both soothing and toothless.

Santeria was allowed to continue in the populace. El Comandante is widely rumoured to be an initiated santero himself, son of Elegguá. Nothing unusual in that, all the Cuban presidents before him were santeros as well, mostly associated with Chango, the Orisha of war. Santeria is not a secret society or exclusive domain of a tight group of people. Officially it is included under umbrella of "popular traditions", and treated like folklore. Cubans are happy to talk about it, even invite you to a ceremony. My Mermaid was taken to see a babalao, a santeria priest, by a kind security guard from marina, himself an initiated santero. In the covered main market in town, when I walked into the dimly lit cavernous hall, first thing I heard was a loud joyful voice of one of the vendors, singing an elegy to Elegguá at the top of his voice, for the sheer heck of it.
In Santiago Santeria has its own museum. Called "House of the popular religions", it is located in Vista Allegre. Large villa with Doric columns, manicured gardens, but no money spent on maintenance since 1960ies, so the trees were left to mature and cover the crumbling mansions in greenery. No sign announces what's in the building, and only a giant kapok tree, sacred to santeria, betrays the contents. The massive tree towers over the the house, in a wide yard which was turned into a beer garden. A strange beer garden, with religious sigils painted onto the garden walls, sacred stones set in the ground, leftovers of small sacrificial fires scattered between the tables. Sign over a beer vending counter named the place "El Palenque", which means community, or sanctuary, and a liveried waiter was hovering next to the bar. This is a quiet drinking hole where the babalao's, santeria priests, come to whet their throats and talk about women. It's a public bar, so everyone is welcome. Once a week a santeria ceremony is performed in the garden, also open to the public.
I was fascinated by the massive kapok tree. As so much in santeria, there is no formal ritual how to relate to a sacred tree. Some guys come and make a sign of a cross facing the tree, some come and touch the bark and mumble something, others bring a small flask of rum, pour the cap full and sprinkle the grog over the roots or over the sacred stones surrounding the tree.
Inside the museum you will find a lot of modern socialist pseudo art, but also a number of genuine exhibits, yet there is no explanation of any kind, no signs, no captions, no names, no indication what you are looking at. You have to know, guess, or someone has to explain it to you. Many exhibits lying in the corners are actual altars or "cauldrons" of deceased babalao's. When a priest dies, nobody else can use his altar, and by law it is donated to the museum. Some cauldrons are heavy with Catholic effigies, some are mixture of Spanish figurines and African bush art, many are a wild jumble of symbols, power objects, stones and sea shells, dried herbs, goat skulls, animal bones, African animal skins, old iron nails, chains, everything coated by black residue of smoke from sacrificial fires. Very much like the altars of Zulu witch doctors I've seen in South Africa.
I call them altars, but they were just sad bundles of things lying on the ground, grotty, abandoned, and never cleaned. With the death of their creator a lot of their life perished as well, and without life energy to animate them they turned into dead exhibits. When in use, a candle of a right colour associated with that specific Orisha would be burning in front of the altar. Inside the museum entrance they had their own small Elegguá behind the front door, with a red taper burning in front of it, the only sign of life in the house of anonymous dead images.

After the first month in Cuba you can walk into an office and for US$25 you can get another month extension to your visa. It is a mere formality. I decided that 31 days was enough. Visit in a zoo is interesting, but you don't want to live there.
To slip out through the narrow entrance of Santiago Bay, a channel maybe 80 metres wide, I waited for the land breeze that often wafts in the night. First start I jumped the gun. Reluctant zephyr died before we sailed half a mile and I limped back to marina to anchor and wait more. At 3 in the morning, with flat water and a bare whisper of northerly, we lifted the pick again. Ghosting under the masonry fortifications of Morro castle gave the term "ghosting" a different meaning. There must be legions of ghosts prowling the shore, dead pirates, defenders, shipwrecked sailors, marines and able seamen from more recent battles. So many people lost their lives in violence in the entrance to this bay, on both sides and in the middle of it, they must be truly infesting the remaining walls with their memories.

Suso

In Jamaica we met Jesus. Not particularly surprising, in Spanish Jesus is a common enough male name. They pronounce it Xesus and shorten it to Suso. No disrespect meant, every language twists the names to suit their phonetics. English are the only ones who call Our Saviour "Jesus". In his own tongue, Aramaic,

He was known as Ioshua, shortened to Josh.
Suso we met in Kingston was, fittingly, a fisherman. He spent his entire working life as a Chief Engineer on a large fishing boat, chasing sardines in the North Atlantic, operating out of a small Galician port in northern Spain. He knows about sea. He has a great respect for Atlantic gales. At 55 he retired and bought a small sailing boat, modified it, and set off after his boyhood dream. He wanted to reach the north magnetic pole, deep in the Arctic, in the Northwest Passage. That was 18 years ago. He's been chasing it all this time.
My love took instant dislike to him: "Obnoxious overbearing old man who resembles my father," she declared. In her eyes there is no way a man can sink lower than that. As I am turning into an overbearing obnoxious old man myself, I am careful in condemning other people.
Suso chose a strange craft for his quest. One look at a boat will tell you more about the owner than a whole night talking to him. Boat is a statement, it embodies who you are. Suso is a self-taught village tinkerer who picked a 28-foot fibreglass coastal racer-cruiser built 30 years before in Canada. Light construction, fin keel and unsupported spade rudder wrecked his cruises three times already. On the first trip they hit a whale near Azores. Thin plastic shell cracked on impact and sprung a leak. Suso limped home. Next year heavy weather in north Atlantic got through the hatches and swamped his prised electronics. Then in a gale his boat was thrown on her beam ends and rudder bent on its shaft. Suso limped home again. He glassed over the hatches, but did not strengthen the vulnerable rudder.
Morbidly afraid of accidents to his rig, Suso designed and patented an aluminium A-frame mast on which he hoisted five little triangles of sails. It was easy to handle in a gale, but in the Trades he was badly undercanvassed and so slow that he ran out of food crossing Atlantic to Brazil. I can't imagine the air flow when close hauled, but I guess he had his engines for that. He was adamant that an A-frame mast is the answer to all the ills of single handing, like getting hit on the head by a gybing boom (his rig has no boom) or attempting to jury rig your vessel after you were dismasted in a storm.
Once a grease monkey, always a grease monkey. He could not conceive of a boat without an engine, so to make sure, he had two identical massive diesels. On a 28-footer. He proudly showed me around his tiny cabin, where the second main engine, installed to feed the mob of electronics, took all the floor space. He had no fewer than 27 electronic boxes bolted to the walls. Two computers, four radios, three plotters, several redundant GPS, two autopilots, weather fax, you name it. Without them he did not feel safe, yet on every single voyage his entire system failed when the water invaded his cabin. Attempting a circumnavigation he slipped down the Magellan Strait, but in Chile he clipped a rock coming to anchor in a small cove and the boat sank under him as he reached the beach. All the electronics died under water. With help of Chilean fishermen and divers they refloated his boat and patched the hull, but without electronics he felt naked and ran for home again, via Panama Canal. It never occurred to him that his return trip proved he can navigate without gadgets as well. His answer was to bolt more gimmicks onto the bulkhead. Electronics are like drugs. It's an addiction. Once you get used to their effect, it's very hard to cut down on them.
I hold his book in front of me, to get the details right. Not confident to write himself, he got a friend to ghost write it for him, a retired school teacher. It's a pathetic muddle, the worst-written sailing narrative I came across, beating by a boat length Sander's non-stop solo triple circumnavigation which held my trophy for the worst sailing book until I met Suso. Makes me cringe just to think of it. If you gonna get someone to write your story, get a real writer, for Christ's sake.
As we were leaving for Colombia, Suso was waiting for a favourable weather forecast to head north. He was in the right season for Greenland, and hopefully further west, into the frozen Arctic, he said. I wish him well. Who am I to tell another man what to do.

Chapter 12: Colombia

Colombia is famous for its coffee, for its plastic surgery silicone dolls and for legalising possession of small quantities of cocaine for personal consumption. Up to a gram at a time, currently at US$ 3 a gram on the street. Tourism is booming. Cruise ships call in daily, two or more at a time.
Cartagena de Indias, the Pearl of Spanish America, nests in the northernmost cove of a huge Cartagena harbour, a deep landlocked bay ten miles long and four wide. A complex waterway full of islands, bays, reefs and lagoons, it has two sea entrances, two Bocas. Third exit, in the southern end, leads to river Magdalena via artificial canal 50 miles long, dug through the swamps in a single dry season in 1582.
The northern entrance to the bay, Boca Grande, near the old town itself, was barred by a man made sea wall in the early 18th century, to stop pirate attacks sneaking in through the wide gap. Sea wall is

submerged, barely awash and invisible, just under the surface. In the middle is a narrow 7-foot deep passage marked by green and red buoy, deep and wide enough for a yacht. In the prevailing north and north-easterly winds this entry makes for perfect beam reach, and water deepens right away on both sides. Boca Grande is too shallow for commercial traffic.
Big ships enter through Boca Chica, about five miles further south. Boca Chica is full of reefs, shoals, cays and rocks. Narrow shipping channel was dredged through the maze, about a mile long, leading into the deeper waters of the Bay. Mariners are warned not to anchor near this passage. If you do anchor, you are likely to get robbed by the friendly natives from the shore. This is not paranoia, this is a general experience. My Aussie friend for some reason choose to enter the bay via Boca Chica, anchored in front of the village, and took his dinghy ashore. After five years bumming around the Windward Islands, playing an itinerant fiddler in local bands, this was his first and only stop on the South American mainland. He didn't say what he met ashore, but it made him hop back into his dinghy, head back to his boat, lift the anchor, and depart Colombia without even entering it. Shame, for Cartagena is a marvellous place, people are friendly and it's easy to pass several months in the bay.
Anchorage in front of town is deep, in oozy black mud. A lot of scope is a must, for every afternoon the Trades build up to 15-20 knots. Short fetch prevents any nasty swell. Security on the anchorage is all right, by Caribbean standards. Five years ago local boys used to swim with bolt cutters between the boats every night, snipping the stainless wires and chains guarding outboards lifted with the rubber duckies in the davits. Concerted security drive put the end to that racket and today many guys do not even lock their boats when they go ashore.

The whole coast of South America between Curacao and Cartagena is called affectionately a Colombian Hole. During the Dry season, from December to April, it is a host to a stationary gale, from the beach about 120 to 150 miles out. Strong winter trades are reinforced by a low pressure system over Venezuela – Colombia border and by a range of 5000-metres high mountains running along the coast. During the day the local convection will drop the wind speed to 15 or 20 knots, with occasional gusts, but every night it will work itself up to 35 knots plus, again gusting. The wind stays in the east, backing slightly as you move south, till near Cartagena you will get north-east and inshore along the coast a northerly, perfect to close in with land and duck into Cartagena Bay. In our first fortnight in Cartagena, in early February, we watched one yacht coming in from Curacao with a broken mast, then an English yacht, also sailing from Curacao, was towed in by the Navy, with broken rudder. A week later a Panama backpackers' ferry limped in with half a mast lying on deck, the other half lost to the deep. During those five months trying to bash your way from Panama to Venezuela is a murder.
Counter current that runs north along the mainland from Panama gyre stacks up the swell to alarming size. My Pilot Charts show a set of concentric rings of abnormal wave height in this area. Mixing of waters is great for fish, and tuna fishing in here is marvellous. You drop in a lure, you pull up a fish. Taking a sextant shot in boisterous seas can be a wet business, though.
The only calmer months are May and November. The trades die down, replaced by fluky breezes, long calms and thunderstorms. In July, August and September the main feature of Cartagena weather are fierce localised storms called "culo de pollo", which translates as "chicken's arse". No one could explain me where the name came from. Squalls come from south and for short while pack winds of 50 knots, turning the anchorage into pandemonium of dragging anchors, colliding boats and extensive damage. Anchoring techniques I watched in Cartagena are shocking even in calm conditions, culo de pollo makes a joke of them.
In the summer Colombia is deemed too far south for hurricanes. In the recent decades several storms skirted the northern coast with their fringes, but the last full on hurricane that hit Cartagena was recorded in November 1588.
Trade Wind haze covers to coast, obscuring the landmarks, and the first inkling of mainland will come only about 10 miles offshore, an incredulous forest of slender high rises sticking out of the flat ground just south of the old town of Cartagena. Cocaine boom of the nineties fuelled a real estate explosion that covered the narrow spit separating the Bay from the open sea. Many sky scrapers are only one building block wide, a single apartment every floor, repeated 30 times up. Skinny white fingers clawing for the sky, all with identical emerald green glass window panes, some sporting weird indentations and attempts at innovative shapes. Building boom is far from over, and a dozen cranes rise above concrete skeletons. At night most windows remain dark, only few stray lights sprinkle the empty high rises. The whole jungle was built to park dirty cash, not to house people.

Clearing a yacht into Colombia is complicated and Byzantine rules are evolving every day. Unable even to purchase necessary forms as a private individual, you have to engage an agent, the Harbour Master is not allowed to deal directly with mariners themselves. Customs will ignore boats that stay up to five days, for anything longer you will have to import your boat, temporarily, the paper chase starting on the day six of your stay. In Colombia I happily paid US$ 200 to a retired German sea captain to organise all the permits. Manfred, a big man made even bigger by a colostomy bag, a self confessed drinker with a boating problem, operates out of a supermarket café five minutes walk from the Club Nautico. The biggest problem I had was convincing the Customs that I really do not have an engine. They did not believe me, but they were too lazy to come and inspect my boat in person. How do you prove that you do not have something? Immigration gives you three months on arrival, extendible for another three months. Officially you can't stay more than 180 days in any calendar year, but your clearance agent can arrange it, if you need to stay longer The other day I ran into Jo in the café, a jovial New Yorker who's been in Cartagena for years. He greeted me with a grin: "I am in Panama right now, getting a new visa. Be back next week." For equivalent of $80 he got an exit stamp, and a new entry stamp into the country, without moving from his chair.

All of the Old Town is enclosed by masonry fortifications built over two centuries. Four miles of walls, some are up to 50 feet wide and 25 feet tall, with turrets, crenulations, crooks and crannies, access steps, and heaps of massive cannons pointing out to sea. Rapping your knuckles on a cannon, it sounds hollow, and a closer inspection reveals it for a well made replica cast in concrete. After Francis Drake plundered the town at his leisure in 1586, loosing only 28 men during the attack, Spanish invested in a massive system of walls, forts, batteries and garrisons scattered along the shores of the outer bay, making Cartagena's defences impregnable. One pirate later described the place as a "bay within a bay whose forts protect even smaller bay bristling with guns. It can be taken, but not by mortals." The easy access via Boca Grande was cut off by a sea wall, forcing the attackers five miles down the coast and through a narrow entrance of Boca Chica, flanked by two imposing forts raining fire and brimstone on the foe. Further progress towards the town was defended by more forts and more cannons. In 1741 Brits send a fleet of 186 ships to capture Cartagena. Admiral Vernon lost 18 000 men, dead or sick from yellow fever, malaria and dysentery, before he withdrew to Jamaica without gaining anything.

The Old Town is the largest, best restored and most lively medieval town in South America. The place is alive and developing. Modern sculptures stand in front of baroque churches, blank medieval stone walls of Getsemani are covered by graffiti thrown up by the world's best known artists, welded sculptures share their seat with visitors in the small parks of the Old Town.

In the old town even the richest residents do not drive cars. They either walk or catch a cab, because they have nowhere to park a car. Streets are so narrow that a big American SUV could never turn a corner, there is enough room only for small cabs. Garbage collecting trucks can do only straight runs, no turning of corners. When a car stops, like a cab taking a fare, or a cop questioning someone, there is no way to pass them, and the whole traffic banks up behind them, with accompanying cacophony of horns and curses. Pedestrian pavement is so narrow that it often does not admit even one man, so people walk in the middle of the street.

At midday aunties come out, selling home made lunches from crude push carts. Street food is the cheapest way to feed, lunches packed in styrofoam boxes appear on street corners around noon, and cost half of what cheap eateries charge, for the exactly same fare of rice, beans, generous serve of meat or chicken and a bit of salad. More carts are selling fresh juice, arepas, empanadas and deep fried snacks, but in general, Colombia is not famous for its cooking.

Coffee sold on the street comes out of a thermos flask, in tiny little cups, and it is the abomination of the infidels, Nescafe. But there is an option of real coffee, a proper Colombian arabica, cup of bitter nectar that grabs you by the neck, gently swivels your eyes, and deposits you gingerly in the chair, smacking your lips. We suffered for a full year the indignity of swallowing our dream of South American coffee, with every cup of murky dishwater. In north Brazil what they sold on the street was unadulterated merde, in Guyana the merde was adulterated 50-50 with chicory. Haiti and Cuba had no coffee at all, and in Venezuela it was hit or miss, mostly miss. Colombia finally offered true connoisseur's delight. An espresso will set you back a dollar, a cappuccino a touch more. From now on coffee got better and better, with the best stuff we scored coming from Honduras and southern Mexico.

The main market in Bazurto is a rabbit warren of small shops, stalls and open air vendors. Sanitation is minimal, level of hygiene appalling and drainage runs on the surface, fish guts, meat offal, general grey water. When the fishmongers throws on the street a full pail of fish guts, waiting army of pelicans, cormorants, four-foot tall herons and smaller wading birds rush the heap in feeding frenzy worth a wildlife

photographer. Best way to buy fresh greens is from the "palenqueros", ambulant vendors wheeling their crude carts down the streets everywhere. In the Old Town they are an overpriced tourist attraction, fat black mamas dressed in gay colours of Colombian flag, yellow, red and blue, carting huge baskets of fruit on their heads. Buying fruit from them is a sure way to get ripped off. Old skinny blokes trudging after their wheeled contraptions in the suburbs are a better bet, their vegies are fresh and cheap and you run into them the whole day long. Houses in the middle class residential suburbs of Manga, around the Yacht Club, are all fenced in, and many older residents can't be bothered climbing down the stairs for their vegies. They send a plastic bucket on a string down from the balcony. Palenquero reach through the wrought iron fence, fills the bucket with required goods, and the owner lifts it up. Checking that she is happy with the purchase, she lowers the money down in the same bucket.

Old Cartagena lives off tourism. Not only foreigners. Cartagena is a number one tourist destination for the Colombians themselves, and there are 50 million of them. Every other house has on its ground floor either craft and souvenir shop, restaurant or bar. Core streets are regularly closed to car traffic, discreet cops patrolling every corner. Dozens, if not hundreds, street vendors are offering their wares spread on the pavement. Some of them are licensed, but number of permits is restricted, no new ones issued, so majority of the vendors are technically illegal, periodical prey to police raids. Tourists come from every economical strata of society. The most interesting is the gutter level, hordes of very young feral hippies from all corners of south American continent. Many try their hand at selling craft off the pavement; hand made jewellery, friendship bracelets, trinkets and such. Most have no imagination, copying what their neighbours are selling. Even if something original turns up, it's swallowed by the sea of mediocre stuff and mind reeling from the sheer number of sellers refuses to appreciate something different.
Licensed craft shops sell handicraft of better quality. Number of outlets peddling the same stuff is mind numbing, but they all seem to survive. Every cruise ship brings in two or three thousand clients, and with two to three ships a day, do your maths. Some of the wares on offer are very good. Cotton handbags made by Wayuu tribe are the most popular. Tightly crocheted from an endless coil of colourful cotton yarn, they are made by the largest indigenous group in this part of the world, Wayuu people who straddle the Colombian-Venezuelan border up in the north, in the dry Guajira peninsula. Colombians call them Guajiras. Half a million proud war-like people who were never subjugated by the Spanish, they make mockery of the white man's borders, smuggling merchandise freely between the two countries. Bags we bought in Cartagena are said to be made by men only, patiently crocheting the tiny stitches that made the bag, but I've seen their women making them on the street as well.
We discovered "mola" embroideries of Kuna Indians. Every yachtie on a circumnavigation knows of Kuna and their "mola", often the most striking souvenir people bring home from the whole sailing venture. Kuna people live on the 365 tiny sand keys off the coast of Panama, in San Blas archipelago. Since their rebellion in the 1920ies Panama government granted them an autonomy in self government and in San Blas they run their own show. Matrilineal society of traders and dealers, groom moves in with his bride's family and assumes his mother-in-law's family name. Grandma holds the purse. Outsiders are not allowed to marry in or settle on their territory. Not even spend a night on land, unless specifically invited.
On their tiny islands Kuna live by harvesting coconuts, fishing, and squeezing money from the visitors. I heard skippers waxing about "unspoiled paradise islands" even though cruise ships regularly call in, unleashing hordes of Yanks onto trinket huts of Corti, and every circumnavigator stops there on their way to the Canal, about 300 yachts a year. Unspoiled paradise islands charge a hefty entry fee which does not entitle you to stopping elsewhere in Panama, at the time of writing around $500 per boat. Add to it payment in cash for every single anchorage, dollar for every photo you are caught taking and aggressive mamas trying to sell you their overpriced molas, which they probably bought cheaply from a wholesaler in Cartagena. It was not my intention to stop in San Blas, but I like their molas.
At the time of Spanish conquest Kuna walked around naked, painting intricate geometrical designs directly on their skin. Missionaries made little progress in the way of doctrine, but they made the natives wear clothes. Gradually Kuna transferred designs from their skin to their clothes, and developed a beautiful art of reverse appliqué. Several layers of cloth of different colour are tacked together, pattern cut in some layers and fabric hemmed and stitched down, making a multicoloured picture. An awful lot of work, but result, called "mola", is marvellous. "Mola" means clothing in their language, and molas are made into women's jackets and children's clothes. The best molas you can buy come from old jackets that were pulled apart and sold as craft items. You can see the old stitching on them. A lot of contemporary molas in San Blas are made for tourist trade, and many are made with a sewing machine, a quick job from two layers. Tourists will know no difference.

Kuna people came originally from Colombia, pushed out to the San Blas islands in relatively recent times by the neighbouring tribes and by the marauding Spaniards. A sizeable population of Kuna live in their traditional way on the coast of Colombia, near Panama border, around the town of Turbo. And like their sisters in San Blas, women wear hand made molas. These folks come regularly to Cartagena, selling their embroideries to a few well established wholesalers. We were introduced to one such place by a Cartagena street vendor, friend of my love. On the outside it looks like any other respectful craft and souvenir joint in the Old Centre, but deep in the back of the shop is stacked a mountain of original molas, all hand made, selling for a fraction of price that San Blas natives charge the visitors. San Blas women come here themselves, buying molas cheap, taking them home, re-selling them for a multiple from their canoes. It was fabulous, teaching us what a mola really is, a living contemporary collection of cultural heritage to rummage through. We came back to this shop several times and picked about 60 or 70 molas, geometrical patterns we were going to turn into book covers. Molas with narratives in them or quirky stories we picked as presents for friends.

Twenty years ago nobody dared to go out into the streets of Old Cartagena at night. Run down ghetto of the poor was barely safe to walk during the day time. At night you locked your security grills and stayed home. Two decades of dedicated effort turned the Old Town into an attractive easy going promenade, perfectly safe to venture out at any time. At night Cartagena is a different town altogether. She transforms herself into a huge dining, drinking and partying circus, with bars and restaurants on every corner. Mimes and clowns perform in the open air, as do informal dance troupes of every imaginable genre, from classical through acrobatic down to break dancers. Ambulant peddlers circulate between outdoor tables, dozens of elegant horse drawn carriages course the streets, livered coachmen acting as tour guides. You don't see a single horse cart during the day.
Tourists and locals, dressed to kill, stroll down the streets, then sit down for a drink at the tables outside of their favourite watering hole. Fashion statement of the season says: if you've got it, flaunt it. If you don't have it, get a silicone implant. Well kept mothers are competing with their budding daughters, young girls unsteady on their stilts attempting to emulate their never ageing mothers, dentist-designed smiles, silicone enhanced curves, ultra revealing see-through dresses that would fit into a small purse in your pocket. Cackles of Barbie dolls pushing waves of pheromones in front of them, attending toads rolling a few steps behind, cans of beer in their bejewelled hands.
Ladies of the night come out in their splendour, body sculpting pushed to grotesque extremes. Plastic surgery makes them look like Indian goddesses from erotic temples of Kajuraho: enormous tits, waist of a wasp and big round arse, wiggling on tall platform shoes. Not all of them were born as females, but you can't tell without an in-depth inspection.
At night two things are conspicuous by their absence: live music and street food. Music entertainment comes out of a can and day time food stalls disappear, replaced by a sprinkling of kebab stalls. You end up drinking more than eating.

Cartagena is full of museums. Majority of them are museum only by name. Anything involving emeralds are upmarket jewellery shops trying to drum up business by claiming to be a museum. Colombia produces 90% of world's emeralds.
Maritime museum housed in the former Jesuit College is one that's worthy its entrance fee. Information on the history of Cartagena, trade, transport and culture, be it of legitimate or illicit origin, covers the entire ground floor. Second storey is devoted to gory glory of constant wars that Colombia has been fighting through its history. External and internal, liberating and subjugating, noble and dirty, no peaceful respite for this beautiful country.
On the ground floor tangible and surreal freely mix. After expulsion of Jesuits by a Royal Decree their cloister was turned into a charity hospital. Suffering of the patients (and former pupils?) reflects in a pride of ghosts that inhabits the walls. Ghosts are described in museum captions in plain everyday language alongside more mundane historical data, as if they were crockery pulled out of the sea bed. Ghosts persist till our days. Deputy Director of the Museum himself saw a headless pirate during an official function in 1998. Several of his guests testified to seeing the pirate as well. An Ecuadorian couple came across a monk in 2011. Turbaned black boy and a newly married couple are two other inmates.
It isn't just a blind superstition. Walking up the wide coral-stone steps to the second storey I suddenly stopped mid way up with a definite uneasy feeling I could not explain, deep in my stomach. I halted twice and turned around, searching for the source of uneasiness, not sure what spooked me. I felt strangely tense, as if someone was watching me. Then on the ground floor I read a caption on the wall explaining

that a bodiless entity is often encountered on those steps. In here real and magic are intermingled seamlessly, both accepted as a part of mundane daily life. It's easy to see how the Colombian master of Magic Realism came to write his "100 years of solitude" in Cartagena. His "Love in time of cholera" is actually sited in Cartagena. Gabo's house is in the San Diego quarter of the Old Town.
Museum of Zenu gold is the best. Housed in a former bank, display rooms are in the old bank vaults, complete with time-delay cannon-proof armoured doors. It is a home to a collection of personal jewellery and ritual objects from the ancient Zenu culture that flourished in the inland river delta of central Colombia centuries ago. Gold, gold and more gold, intricate work in gold leaf, filigree or lost wax cast, quirky designs echoing the art of Mexico as well as Peru, yet developed into its own style, reputedly the best gold work in the entire Americas. I am ashamed to admit that I have never heard of Zenu civilisation until I stepped into this museum.

During the winter, the dry, windy season, about 50 or 60 yachts swing on an anchor or from the moorings in front of marina, and another 20 or 30 pay for the walk-ons. Many passing boats take advantage of the easy 5-day clearance option. You get a stamp in your passport and that's it. We didn't meet any of them, they were too busy to fit their program into the five days they were given; catch up on sleep after a boisterous crossing of the Colombian Hole, do a whirlwind tour of Cartagena, stock up on provisions and cheap fuel and shoot through to San Blas islands in Panama.
A separate class of yachts are the Panama ferries. 90 km wide Darien gap separates north from south America. There is no road across the swampy jungle from Panama to Colombia. Technical obstacles are not insurmountable; people dug a tunnel under the English Channel, they bridged the Florida Keys and crawled over the Karakoram ranges. Engineers could easily push a road over the Darien Gap, but USA decided they do not want that road so there will be none. Panama can do little about it. It was created by the USA as an independent country so the Yanks could build themselves their Canal, and that colonial servitude remains. There isn't any regular ferry either. Today's backpackers, free of imagination and insisting on travelling over surface, not leaving a carbon footprint supposedly created by airplanes, prefer to pay $500-600 for a 200-mile trip from Cartagena to Porvenir in Panama, sailing on a yacht, crammed 10, 15 or more passengers on vessels designed to accommodate five. Some skippers ferry bicycles as well, and even motorbikes. It's possible to hop along the coast with local lanchas, right across the gap, but this option is uncomfortable, unpredictable, time consuming and presupposes some knowledge of Spanish. The only people who cross the Darien gap on foot are illegal aliens from Africa and Haiti, heading from south America for the States.
Yacht ferry is an easier way, and a whole fleet of shuttle boats arose to meet the demand. The enterprise is a closely knit mafia. Each boat tries to do two return trips a month, barely qualified crew of two flogging the boat hard, owner not spending any money on maintenance. If you are thinking of making a bit of cash on a side, taking people across the gap, it is possible, and doing it once or twice is no problem, but sooner or later you will run foul of the mafia. Ferries have some form of arrangements with the authorities. Not being part of it, one day your agent will tell you that the Harbour Master refused you a clearance, and your days as a ferrymen are over. Nobody comes to check your boat, but shuttling half a dozen people every other week will clearly stand out from genuine passage making. Blokes told me it takes two or three years before the ferry boat gang accepts an outsiders into their ranks.
Cartagena is a good place to buy a cheap boat, especially a smaller one. Some stories are a variant on an ancient theme: an American sailed alone around Caribbean, ended in Colombia, found a girl, made her pregnant, boat was too small for a family, they moved ashore. Short on funds, skipper is selling his vessel. Unable to tear himself from his new home, he can't sail her back to better markets in the States. He'll take what he is offered. We met several guys refitting their new yachts that they bought for 4, 6 or $10 000 in Cartagena. James picked up a game fishing powerboat to while away his time with occasional charters as his new family grew up. Tony scored a sweet 28-footer for a song. He was going to take her back home to Lima, to do sunset charters. In Cartagena he threw away the old diesel and he was installing a complicated electric propulsion on his boat, importing every bit from the States. Next to him on the marina dock was Bill, a Woodstock era hippie. He lost his previous yacht on a reef in Cuba. Sailing into a bay he blindly trusted his chart plotter. Electronic monkey said the bay has 26 feet of water. Bill did not look at his depth sounder, he did not look ahead. His 45-foot Hunter was pounded to chips on a reef in 2 feet of water. His boat was insured and in Cartagena he bought a nice little replacement for $6 000.
Smugglers' boats confiscated by Customs are also offered on the market, and sold dirt cheap. Possible returns on investment in cocaine are astronomical, so the small fry with little experience at this level of smuggling jump into the game they do not understand. Most of them are dobbed in to the authorities by

the cocaine suppliers themselves. Tony watched a raid on a French yacht in a boat yard where he was getting some work done on his little vessel. Armada's speed boat nosed its way into the boat yard, tied to the public wharf, half a dozen uniformed guys armed to teeth going around the yachts, asking questions. Sniffer dog was brought in. Paranoid skippers parked in the boat yard frantically hiding their personal stashes of ganja. Uniforms ignored them. They boarded the French yacht and soon they were inspecting plastic sachets full of white powder. 320 kg of pure cocaine, the newspapers said the following day. That will make another yacht for sale, cheap. The owner received a warning, probably from the double dealing suppliers again, because he walked out of his boat a couple of hours before the raid. He may have lost his boat, but better that than time in a Colombian jail. It keeps happening all the time, regularly like a clock, and the confiscated vessels rafted up behind the Navy base form a long line. Better ones are sold, less glamorous ones are scavenged for rigging, then slowly allowed to sink in the mud.
Streets of Cartagena are swarming with feral hippies from all over the world, and not all of them are broke. Some drifted to the waterfront and bought abandoned or confiscated boats. You can tell them by the gangs of youngsters squatting in communal squalor, paddling every morning on their rubber duckies ashore, assorted wooden boards and broken paddles as their propulsion. A lesbian couple bought an abandoned 40-foot steel boat anchored forever next to us. The Swiss partner put up the money, the Argentina was going to do the work of maintenance. The Swiss was a hard worker, Argentina a party girl. They fought like cats, situation complicated by s swarm of other hippies camping on their boat.
Rowing around the anchorage in my dingy, I finally had a chance to check out how Yanks build junk boats, there was a big steelie from Alaska, rigged with Colvin's junk sails. I was shocked by the perversion of the basic Chinese ideas. No wonder they have such a .bad reputation. Mr.Colvin did not grasp essential principles of a junk rig. His battens are fixed in one position against the mast, you can't move the sail fore and aft. His rig has no chance of pointing well to windward close hauled. He has no snotter to pull the entire sail aft of the mast, moving the centre of effort back. Instead of looking at existing junks, he arbitrarily added a jib or two at the front, which meant he had to support his masts with standing rigging, loosing another advantage, free standing mast. Having shrouds, he can't square his sail when running down wind. And the whole caboodle was mounted on a cumbersome heavy bilge keeler, further affecting its performance. An abomination, a hybrid that lost advantages of both parents. Colvin died a couple of years back, no badmouthing the dead, but I pity the unfortunates who were duped into buying his rig.

Heavy police presence keeps the Old Town safe. Both for the visitors and for the locals, round the clock. Residential area of Manga, with its Yacht Club, is also thoroughly patrolled. Heading further out into the suburbs you are in a jungle of south American metropolis. Waterfront slums line most of the Bay. Squatters' shanties start right after the bridge at Bazurto Market. Several small boat yards are thrown along the shore, a few minutes motorcycle ride from the Yacht Club, but already deep in the slums. Some of our friends had their boats in those yards and one day I went for a visit.
Prashan is the only Indian cruising yachtsman from the Subcontinent that I ever met. For some unfathomable reason he joined the Indian Navy as a young men, then spent 8 years trying to resign his commission, trapped in a Catch-22.
"Why do you want to leave the Navy?"
"Because it's not a fighting force, it is a meaningless bloated bureaucracy full of selfserving nobodies posturing in stuffy rituals."
"Indeed. Exactly. And we need to change that. We need a modern Navy. We need men like you who can see the deficiencies. Therefore, we can't let you go. You have a brilliant future".
When he finally got out, he turned his hand at film-making, but as an independent producer-director-cameraman he was finding it hard to recover his outlays.
"I can't even relate to my own people. I do not understand them," he told us, switching on the Indian accent: "I walk down the street in Bombay, I am happy, I am smiling, and I pass an Indian man. I do not know him, but I smile at him. He stops. He frowns. He confronts me: "Why are you smiling at me? Are you trying to make unnecessary friends?"
Chasing his dream, Prashan went to the States and bought an old 34-foot double ender in North Carolina, dirt cheap, a good seaworthy boat. Together with his Polish girl friend they sailed her to Colombia, refitting her in Cartagena for a long cruise of Eastern Pacific. I heard he was currently alone on the boat, pretty much trapped in a boat yard surrounded by hardcore 'hood. So I went to see him.
. Motorcycle taxis cost half of what a car does and in a heavy traffic they meander through much faster. Any bike rider who carries a spare helmet on his elbow is a taxi, licensed or otherwise. I flagged down a bike and gave the driver address. I didn't know the exact name of the Prashan's yard, but I though, once

in the neighbourhood, I'll find it. I'll just walk towards the water. Right?
Driver gave me a funny look when I told him I want to go to Zapatero suburb in Manzanilla. Ten minutes later he dropped me off in the middle of depressing slum, and roared off. Quiet dusty lane of crooked single storey dwelling, unrendered cinder block, rusting corrugated iron roofs. Faces peeking from behind the half drawn curtains. Mangy dogs licking their wounds in the full sun. Oppressive stillness of late morning. I've been warned that I'll be venturing into a real "hood", but I was not prepared for the strong feeling of uneasiness that it created in my bones.
I knew I wasn't far from the shore so I walked on until I found the water front. The lane ended at the water's edge, dead end, with several rusted barges sunk at the beach. Three guys were sitting in front of the last house. I asked them for directions to the boat yard. Two of them threw a glance at each other, both gave a barely perceptible nod, got to their feet and walked away, each in a different direction. The third bloke offered to guide me to the yard, and pointed into a tiny crooked walkway between the houses, so narrow that I didn't even notice it before: "This way."
There was no way I was going to follow him down that alley, I wasn't born yesterday. I turned around and retreated the way I came. Bloke called after me, but at that moment a motorbike taxi appeared at the corner, looking for a passenger, and I caught a ride out.
Back at the Yacht Club I rang Prashan from a pay-phone and asked him the exact address of his yard. I told him I tried to find him on foot but I did not like his neighbourhood. – "Did you get mugged?" was his first cheerful question. He got shaken down three times in the first fortnight there. Stepping out of the gate to buy a couple of beers and some vegies for the curry, he only carried enough small change for the purchases. Around the first corner a bunch of guys barred his way, demanding money, phone, wallet, everything. Prashan is a great actor and comedian, and he managed to clown his way from the guys without harm. Being a Bombay Indian with very dark skin helped. A white man has no chance. A neighbour of his in the same yard, an Englishman, is building a new rudder to replace one he lost on his way here. Dusty itchy fibreglassing job, the skipper and his Burmese crewman walked out one evening to buy a few beers at the nearest corner store, 50 metres from the armoured gates of the yard. They also carried only the cash they needed, but the friendly neighbourhood thugs relieved them of everything in their pockets. An Estonian skipper I know, a rough diamond fluent in Spanish, landed here a while ago with his rowing dinghy, also looking for a boat yard. He returned to his tender half an hour later, literally barefoot, in his underpants. Colombian thugs plucked him clean.
On a second try that day I did meet up with Prashan, but afterwards I lost track of him. Couple of years later in Panama I heard that nothing came off his planned cruise. True to the tradition of Indian Navy, he is no sailor, being prone to seasickness. He sold his boat, loaded his blond Polish bombshell on the pillion of his Harley and they went touring India in the search of that ultimate camera shot.

Mention to anyone Colombia, and the first image in their mind will be: cocaine. Few realise that Colombia is an industrialised country of 50 million people with 2000 years of history, modern agriculture, developed manufacturing base and booming tourism. They make their own electronics, build cars and airplanes. Not exactly a banana republic that depends on drug money for its economical survival. It is the world's largest producer of cocaine, but the billions of dollars in cash flowing into the country is only a consumer tax that affluent West pays to Colombia for its insatiable demand for a quick fix of joy in their bleak existence.
Since a German chemist first isolated cocaine from the coca leaves more than 150 years ago, the drug ran a roller coaster of image. At first it was hailed as a wonder medicine curing just about every imaginable ailment, from toothache to rheumatism. Sigmund Freud started his questionable career by curing alcoholism with cocaine. Both Shackleton and Scott took cocaine tablets with them on their expeditions to Antarctic, to boost their stamina.
Angelo Mariani, an Italian chemist, started producing in 1863 his immensely popular Vin Mariani, wine laced with cocaine. His regular customers were Queen Victoria, Mark Twain and Leo XIII, Pope of Rome, amongst others. Scientists of the day calculated empirically how much white powder a human body needs every day to remain happy. Coca-Cola begun in 1885 as a direct competition to Mariani's success, a teetotaller's alternative to his wine, a non-alcoholic tonic doped with cocaine. The company did not remove cocaine from its formula until 1929.
Dutch planted large estates of coca shrubs in their domains in Java, Indonesia, and by the 1920ies Netherlands' government was the largest producer of cocaine in the world, pushing out the traditional heavyweights from the Andes. Commercial plantations were started in Sri Lanka and Formosa as well.

Coca is an evergreen shrub growing to about 10 feet in height. Originally from the eastern foothills of the Andes, where the Amazon basin starts to rise into the mountains, until recently there were four varieties of the plant, one wild and three cultivated. Indiscriminate application of herbicides by American agents seemed to have produce a new, fifth variety, Bolivia negra, which is totally resistant to spraying, and its leaves have higher content of cocaine than the wild plants. Spraying Bolivia negra with herbicides encourages its growth, as it eliminates competing weeds. It is not certain if the variety arose from selective breading by the farmers or if it was genetically manipulated. Its DNA shows a striking similarity to genetically modified herbicide resistant plants developed by Monsanto.
Virtually all the coca is grown in three Andean countries – Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, but coca plant will grow anywhere that conditions are favourable, as the Dutch experiment in Indonesia proved. If too much pressure is applied in the Andes, plant is sure to "escape" to elsewhere in the tropics Recurrent rumours say that a rogue plants were already spotted in Congo, in Africa. A recent scandal in Sri Lanka uncovered accidental planting of coca shrubs by ignorant farmers in Ceylon, with seedlings mistakenly distributed from a government nursery. Nobody asked what was coca doing in the government nursery in the first place.
Coca shrub will live for 40 years, producing six harvests a year. Leaves contain less than 1% of cocaine, so it takes a lot of greenery to come up with a line of snow. One hectare of mature shrubs produces about 300 kg of leaves in one year, which is processed into about 2 and half kilo of "pasta", a base, which has a cocaine content of between 40% and 60%.
Crude chemical process that turns a mountain of leaves into a plastic bucket of brown gook changed little over the past century. Harvested leaves are dried for a half a day, then macerated and sprinkled with powdered cement. Leaves are then dumped into 44-gal drum full of petrol, and allowed to soak for another day. Petrol dissolves the active ingredients which are not soluble in water. Squeezed dry, leaves are pressed to gain all the liquid and discarded. A bucket of battery acid (weak sulphuric acid) is added to the petrol mixture to acidify the free base. Addition of caustic soda bring the liquid back to neutral, and after petrol is evaporated you end up with the base, which farmers sell on to the drug networks for further processing, refining and crystallisation in the jungle laboratories. World consumes something like 600 tons of cocaine a year, half of it in the USA. Add to that tons and tons intercepted every year by the drug enforcing agencies and you can visualise the scale of the operation.

People who know what they are talking about make clear distinction between the coca leaves and cocaine. One is a herb, the other a semi-synthetic chemical extracted from it. You can compare it to difference between poppy seed and opium. Don't scoff at poppy seed. When I was a kid in Moravia, I once stuffed myself so full of freshly backed poppy seed cake, that I slept for 20 hours straight. If there was a doctor in the village, my grandma would have dragged me there, I was asleep so fast.
Coca leaf has been chewed or brewed for tea for centuries, in all of its original range, from Colombia to Argentina. When chewing on a ball of leaves, natives add some alkaline substance like lime or wood ash to help release the alkaloids. Low drug content in the leaves makes coca a mild stimulant that suppresses hunger, thirst, pain and fatigue. It does not produce a high familiar from snorting cocaine.
Tea made of coca, anise and chamomile is served to the new arrived visitors in La Paz and other high level mountain centres to help overcome altitude sickness. Even current Pope of Rome did not scoff at a cuppa when he flew in for his visit of Bolivia in 2015. Coca was sacred in many ancient societies; offering and chewing of coca was part of every religious ritual. Today commercially manufactured coca teas, muesli bars, biscuits and sugar candies are sold in supermarkets.
Our Colombian friends in Cartagena were enthusiastic about it, how good it is for the skin and your general well being and what not. They all assured me I can buy it fresh in Bazurto market, no worries. Our friends got their own supply from stores in Bogotá and Medellin, in the mountains, closer to the growing areas. I made several sorties, looking amongst the herbalists in the market, but I found nothing. Finally one local friend came with us, to show us, foreigners, but, alas, she didn't find anything either, and from the response she got from the sellers I gathered that in Cartagena you did not speak of coca in the open.
In contrast to scarcity of coca leaves, its derivative, cocaine, is widely available on the streets of Cartagena, like in any other big town in Americas. Difference is in price. In Colombia, if you are paying more than $3 a gram, you are being ripped off. The legal status is confusing. Officially possession of up to 1 gram is legal. However production, sale and purchase are illegal, as is any larger quantity. Decriminalizing drug possession had little impact on levels of drug use, but it decreased number of arrests of small drug users, reducing opportunities for low level police corruption; allowing cops to focus on more serious crimes. It turned addiction into a health rather than criminal issue.
Contemporary policy in the Andean countries is a critical re-think of the American "War on Drugs", which in

30 years of violence, skulduggery and economic oppression achieved nothing. Thousands of innocent dead, large acreages of farmland destroyed by herbicides, and rising production of cocaine. Current Colombian president likened the War on Drugs to an exercise bicycle: you furiously spin the cranks, you sweat and work, you spend a lot of energy, you look left and right, and you are still at the same place.
Small Andean farmers were impaled on the stake of western hypocrisy. On one hand the World Bank tries to wean them off the subsistence agriculture, and induce them to grow profitable crops for export, but when they do exactly that, grow the most lucrative crop that they know, the same powers punish them by destroying their farmlands, killing their workers and driving them off their land.
The strongest voice in the discussion is the Bolivian President Evo Morales. A pure blooded Aymara Indian from the Andes, he is serving an unprecedented third term in the office. When it comes to coca, he knows what he is talking about. He started as a traditional coca grower himself, like his father. Organising the exploited small farmers into coca growers union, he served as its president for a decade. Arrested many times for direct action against the foreign mercenaries eradicating coca plants, he turned to national politics, becoming a Congressman, before winning the presidential elections ten years ago with a landslide victory at the age of 46. Immensely popular for reducing poverty, taxing foreign oil companies and standing for the indigenous rights, he is a tireless campaigner who tries to explain the world the difference between growing coca leaves and producing cocaine. I have great respect for Morales, whatever his faults are. One of the rare politicians who think for themselves, instead of parroting the demagogic propaganda of Big Money issuing from the White House.

From Cartagena we were heading west, to have a look at central America, and then, hopefully home. Usually all it takes is a transit through the Panama Canal, but a small boat without an engine is facing a brick wall of bureaucracy.
Americans handed the Canal back to Panama at the turn of the millennium. With no experience of handling this sort of business, Panama government hired a Hong Kong accounting firm to run the daily grind. Chinese being Chinese, management is not interested in facilitating an easy round the world cruise. It is only interested in making money. A large container ship pays more than US$ 300 000 for a single transit of Canal, $84 per each container. Compared to that a yacht transit is peanuts, a nuisance nor worth the hassle. Authority allows it only because they use our small expendable vessels as a training ground for the future pilots.
You are not allowed to sail through the Canal. You have to motor through, and the new set of rules (2016) stipulate minimum speed of 8 knots. Most cruising boats will never attain 8 knots, but that seems to be overlooked at present and 6 knots is accepted. I heard that hanging an outboard on a bracket outside of your boat is no longer permissible. In the past many engineless yachtsmen convinced their cruising friends to give them a tow through the Canal, but regulations are being tightened up, and cruising community itself frowns on the bums like us. Most cruising yachtsmen I encountered in the Caribbean did not even answer my "good morning", so expecting help from them would be a tall order.
If the lack of mechanical locomotion was the only problem, I am sure I would find some way around it. But it does not stop at that. You need to be in a continuous radio contact with authorities. "Kehaar" has no radio. I could borrow one, but then comes the next – rules stipulate "adequate sanitation", meaning a decent toilet, so your compulsory pilot can have a leak or whatever. Again, "Kehaar" is found wanting. In Cartagena we looked up the official website of the Canal Authority, and discovered that their fees took another steep hike. "Kehaar" is about 31 feet, but with all the stern guards and anchor rollers they would measure it at 34 feet. For a 34-footer $1000 was the base fee, plus $900 deposit in case I do not fulfil all my obligations. Add to that all the hidden costs, like $100 for every Panamian visa, obligatory Yacht Club mooring in Panama City at the exit from the canal, pilot's lunches, and God knows what else I did not think of, and any alternative starts to look promising.
Crossing Panama Canal with "Kehaar" sounded like a royal pain. I wanted something more elegant than a thick wad of money thrown at Chinese book keepers. If it was going to cost me $3 000, I'd rather give it to some enterprising bloke and see what fun that will buy me.
Theoretically there are a number of options open, especially to a steel boat weighting only 6 and half tons. Unfortunately all of them were only vague rumours unsupported by any hard data. The omniscient Internet is deaf and dumb when it comes to elaborating on interesting rumours. Ever since my love received condolences spawned by anonymous Internet reports of my death at high seas, I am extremely sceptical about so-called information emanating from cruising websites. Contributors simply copy-paste from each other, not bothering to look where the news originated and not contributing anything new themselves. Everything interesting is castrated to guard against possible legal claims and what we are left, in the 21st

century, is good old grapevine, gathering unrelated snippets of gossip, hoping to form a bigger picture. Sitting down with old blokes, sipping coffee, yarning about this and that, as I did in Madagascar and East Africa 20 years ago, as Odysseus did three millennia before me.

Panama Canal is not the only possible waterway across the central America. Canal running across Nicaragua has been on the drawing board for as long as Panama. For the past 150 years one company or another has been working on the project, but so far all of them went broke with nothing tangible to show for the millions spent. The actual work started several times, the most recent try only last year, when a Chinese telecommunication billionaire from Hong Kong turned over the first shovel of the excavations. If it will ever succeed, it will be a serious thorn in the side of USA, especially if it will be a Chinese Canal, so reports on the progress do not find their way into the normal (eg. US-controlled) media outlets.
Nicaragua canal plans pivot on existence of a large lake in the middle of the country, only 30 metres above the sea level. Lake Nicaragua is 80 miles long and shallow, some 20 feet deep, but it would support our draft. Six alternative routes have been surveyed over the past 150 years, from the lake to the Caribbean, following natural water courses. There is actually a river flowing from the lake along the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border into the Caribbean, San Juan del Norte, about 120 miles of it. On a map it looks like a viable alternative to use by a small boat, and the American millionaire Vanderbilt surveyed the river personally before he started his transoceanic venture in 1850. His steam boats went from Caribbean side, half way up the San Juan river, as far as Castilian Rapids, and after a half a mile of portage another steam launch took the passengers to the Lake Nicaragua, and 75 miles across it. The last 10 miles overland were done by the coaches. Vanderbilt's plans to dig a canal were fouled by an American adventurer named Walker who invaded the country, at a point of his gun declared himself a new president, and threw Nicaragua into yet another civil war.
50 years later, at the end of the 19th century, for four years hundreds of labourers were working on the canal route that was going to use San Juan river. In 1893 they went bust as well. Today several things make the navigation up the river impractical: the river is barred at the mouth, depth over the bar reported to be less than 2 feet, then there are those rapids in the middle.
On the Pacific side of the lake Nicaragua, it's only about 12 miles to cross, as a crow flies, over the mountains. In here also several possible routes were surveyed, not all realistic. I remember American plans in the 60ies called for use of nuclear explosives to blast the way through. For us it would mean trucking "Kehaar" across this bit of mountains into Pacific itself. When you talk of lifting the boat on a truck, you could as well truck her all the way from Caribbean. Another option to check in Central America.
Trucking a small boat like mine across land ought to be a viable alternative. Several guys mentioned they heard of boats trucked across Isthmus of Panama, either from Colon or from Boca de Torro, but it was all very vague. Another rumour kept surfacing again and again. I kept worrying it with every hook I had until I distilled it to one name: Carlos the Welder, operating out of his workshop in Rio Dulce, in Guatemala. Apparently about 20 years ago he built himself a big trailer and he offers a service carting yachts across Guatemala from ocean to ocean. I have actually read a report of one such trip, and I saw the photos of his machine, and it looked realistic. On the Caribbean side Carlos has access to machinery to lift the boat onto the truck and to lower the mast. On the Pacific side 8 feet tide will float the boat directly off the trailer. Derrick mounted on the trailer then steps the mast in. The whole circus takes two or three days, and it's rumoured to cost about same what the transit through the Canal would. In Brazil I met Dima, Russian skipper who spent six months in Rio Dulce. Carlos did some welding on his rigging bits and pieces and Dima confirmed that yes, Carlos drags the boats across to Pacific. So that became my number one option. From Cartagena we were heading to Rio Dulce for the hurricane season, to do some travelling around Maya sites in Central America, and ultimately for "Kehaar's" trip to Pacific.
And if Carlos can't do it? Or I can't afford him? Or I don't like the way he is going about things? I am a realist. I like to play out the darkest alternatives till they resolve, and I developed that scenario as well. If I can't get my boat across Guatemala with Carlos, I'll have to sail out into the open Atlantic and look for another way home. I am sure "Kehaar" could ride the currents from Rio Dulce out into the open Atlantic, where she would face a whole new set of choices. No need to analyse it that far. And I set aside Panama Canal as the last, default option, if everything else fails. In Cartagena I heard a fresh gossip that Carlos the Welder was still in business a couple of months previously. From that distance I put my chances of dragging "Kehaar" over the mountains of Guatemala at 70%. Good enough for me. We were off to Guatemala.

Chapter 13: Guatemala

The best hurricane hole in the western Caribbean is in Guatemala, 20 miles up the Rio Dulce river which empties into the Honduras Bay. Set in a deep kink in the coast, hiding behind the mountains, by a freak of topography it does not get direct hits by hurricanes. A passing depression will dump rainfall measured in feet, not inches, triggering massive landslides, floods and loss of life, but the wind never reaches destruction level.
A lot has been written about the bar in Livingston, limiting the access to the river world of Rio Dulce. In its estuary river is over a mile wide, but it's only 3 to 4 feet deep. In the northern section a 6-feet deep gutter follows the main axis of the river out into the bay. With the tides at springs being less than a foot, only a few inches can be gained by waiting for high water. Tides are semi-diurnal, changing only once a day. Guatemalan Navy anchored a fairway buoy near the entrance to the channel at Livingston, in 8 or 10 feet of water, but it's position changes every few years, every time the buoy breaks loose and has to be replaced. I have three sets of GPS coordinates from three different guide books, differing by almost half a mile. Better guide is a transit of certain hills that form the entrance to the river canyon. Hills do not change position. Flying before the favourable breeze I lined up the two landmarks. In a hazy smoke of bushfires details were obscure, but the main shapes stood out clear. The buoy seemed to have shifted again, and murky water gave no clue to the depth. It's spooky, flying at 6 knots over the water that looks deep, knowing there isn't more than 3 feet under your keel.
Keeping the landmarks aligned we slowly progressed against the strong current until we came abreast with the town jetty, and dropped the anchor in 8 feet of water. River was running out so fast that "Kehaar" pointed into the current, transom into 15 knot wind. Lumpy swell was pitching the boat like rocking horse every few seconds.
In perfect calm at dawn the next morning, outlined against the rising sun, we saw around the fairway buoy seven yachts anchored in a tight cluster, awaiting the daylight. Yachtsmen around here prefer to wait out the wind, then motor in flat calm. I have not seen a single sail up on a mast, anywhere along the river. Some of the new arrivals drew more than 6 feet and needed assistance. One Yank ploughed a furrow at 3000 RPM, his 6'8" draft being about the maximum you can do with the boat upright. Bottom is hard packed sand and shale. If you draw any more, you will need to hire a tugboat. Pulling at a rope leading to the mast top, tug will lean the vessel on a 45° angle, diminishing the draft. The passage across the bar is nearly a mile long, and there are two shallow patches in the channel that you have to clear.

Livingston used to be the Atlantic gateway of Guatemala, the privilege that it lost to a deeper haven of Puerto Barrios around the corner, built by the omnipotent banana company early in 20th century. The river mouth was originally settled by black Caribs who were forcibly brought in from St.Vincent around 1770. Guatemalan president named it after certain Mr. Livingston, no relations to "Dr. Livingstone, I presume," of Zambezi and Tanganyika fame. This Livingston here was a Louisiana lawyer who wrote a penal code adopted by Guatemala in 1823. Unlike the rest of the country, where you will not see any descendants of black slaves, in Livingston Garifuna form a large part of population, the rest being Maya and mestizos. Since it lost its shipping, Livingston shrank to a couple of streets climbing a short steep hill, a nice beach, and a lots of jungle all around. Number of eateries cater to tourist trade, and some of their offers are spectacular: peanut butter and banana smoothie was a great hit. Town does not have a road access, the only way in is by a boat or by a small plane. Fast lanchas, passenger speed boats, run 20 miles up river to Rio Dulce, another one out to Puerto Barrio, or you can take a quick two hour trip to Punta Gorda in Belize. Local boat operators ganged up into a union and their fares are more than double what they ought to be. The only cheap way out is to take a lancha sideways to Barrios and continue overland.
Despite its size, Livingston remains a Port of Entry, and our first day went into doing the entry clearance. First the officials come to your vessel, write down a few things, and invite you into their office to fill the forms and pay the dues. They apologised that they didn't clear us in the day before, when we arrived: "We had no energy." – A curious admission to make, I thought, for a lazy government official, until I gathered that he meant they had no power the day before, a blackout killing their office computers. Clearance is a long-drawn but friendly exercise in patience. It is not cheap, but you can do all of it yourself, without engaging an agent.
At 3 PM we finally got back to the boat. Afternoon breeze was blowing strong, boat pitching in the current like crazy, all other yachts gone ahead. We lifted a pick and headed for the mouth of the canyon, full rag, dead before the wind, crawling at one knot made good against a stiff current.
Rio Dulce starts from Livingston with 7 miles of a narrow deep canyon that brings you to El Golfete, a lovely lake 9 miles long, and about two or three miles wide. At the head of the lake you slip into another stretch of river, full of bays and nooks and crannies, which leads after 4 miles to the entrance to Lake

Izabal, a 30 mile long waterway fed by innumerable tributaries of the mountain rivers. The whole system is navigable for 50 miles, and it's been in use for hundreds of years, first by Maya, then by Spanish, and finally by British traders and German coffee planters.
About a mile above Livingston the river narrowed to 100 metres, with 300-metres tall green curtains of jungle towering on both sides, hanging down from the limestone walls. Behind the first sharp bend the wind dropped and we entered a completely different weather. For the next 7 miles, as the river meanders through the mountains, you can see the clouds overhead racing from NE, but the wind you are getting on the surface can come from anywhere, if you are getting wind at all. The fluky breeze does not follow the direction of the river, it drops down from the hills at odd angles, it swirls in drafts, it backs on itself, it dies down to nothing.
Modern sailors do not proceed up the river without an engine, but colonials regularly sailed large vessels all the way to Lake Izabal, long before the age of steam. I was curious how the old fellows did it. Spanish collected their loot from all over the region, brought it down to the Lake Izabal, and loaded it onto their treasure fleet, before heading out to sea and to the main depot in Havana. British pirates came sneaking up the Rio Dulce to help themselves to the very same treasures, so the Spaniards build a fort in the narrows at the entrance of Lake Izabal, a couple of miles from modern Rio Dulce. Every night they stretched a stout chain across the river to stop the pirates from ascending any further. It didn't stop the Brits who burnt down the castle on their way up. The little fort has been rebuilt in the 1950ies as a tourist attraction, complete with manicured lawns, shade trees and steep entrance fee.
Becalmed in the second sharp river bend, I tied my bow line to a tree root on the shore, and a stern line to an overhanging branch behind the boat, to keep us clear off the shore. There was no way to anchor in the bend. Five metres from the rock wall I found 6 fathoms of water, a bit further out my 20-fathoms line did not touch the bottom. A passing Frenchman offered me a tow through the canyon with his ketch. Current against us was flowing around 2 knots, swirling fluky breeze, too deep to anchor… I thanked the man, but I declined the offer. We had plenty of food, plenty of water, and I still didn't know how the old fellows went about it, without an engine. It had nothing to do with being a purist or proving anything. I don't have to prove anything to anyone. I did not see a point in rushing through an interesting place, to achieve what? We'll be sitting in a marina up in the lake next 6 months, so where is a hurry? With an engine it would take me only 2 or 3 hour to negotiate the canyon, and I would miss a lot of things I ended up seeing and noticing precisely because we were stuck there in a calm.
River is not level flat, in those 7 miles through the canyon river drops about 20 feet in elevation. Tidal range is negligible, measured in inches. Yet the current displayed a steady pattern according to the tides. Around full moon, as we went up, in the morning the river raced down at 2½ knots. In the afternoon the flow slowed down, and in the evening it became so light that I could tow "Kehaar", rowing with my dinghy, in any direction. After dark, about 8 or 9 PM, the current reversed, and for 3 or 4 hours it flowed uphill. Yet the level of water never changed an inch. I watched the same rock for 20 hours, as I tried to figure out what to do next.
River is alive with folks. Fishermen and their wives paddle tidy little dugout canoes, carved out of mahogany trunks, hugging the vertical stone walls of the shore, skirting in the eddies and countercurrents, disappearing from the view behind the overhanging creepers. At night fishermen dive along the cliffs with torches, scraping edibles from the rocks. We did not understand a word they said to each other. Local peasants are Maya, and they speak Quiche, one of the 30 Mayan languages alive today.
At night huge fireflies flutter in crazy patterns, their greenish light so bright they look like someone walking in the sky with a powerful torch. During the day a morpho butterfly came to visit. Large bald vulture-like birds ride the thermals, together with graceful frigate birds.
After the first night and a whole day tied to that tree in the bend, unable to sail around in frustrating breezes, I saw that elbow grease was the only way upstream. I pulled out my spare anchors, joined several lengths of rope together and started warping "Kehaar" up, against the weakening current. That's what the Spaniards must've done. Warping up the boats used to be the way to get big sailing ships into tight corners where they could not sail in. Approach to the wharf, leaving a crowded anchorage, last mile in a narrow river. You take an anchor with a long rope, coil the line into the bottom of a rowing boat, run it upstream as far as the rope will reach and drop the pick. Returning to the vessel you pull the boat up to the anchor. Then you leapfrog with another anchor and another length of rope, lifting the first pick as you pass it. It sounds like a slow and cumbersome way of moving a boat, but I was only trying to break out of dead spots, a quarter of a mile at most.
Both of my ropes were more than 100 fathoms long, so we were moving. I had to watch for the passing traffic, making sure a speed boat didn't cut the floating rope with its propeller. After the second jump the

river straightened out and I could run up a line to a tree on the river bank 200 metres upstream, set the tiller to point the boat into the stream, away from the shore, and pull on the rope. Once the boat gained momentum, we actually passed the tree where the rope was tied up. At the furthest point, just when the current stopped the progress, I dropped a light anchor and rowed ashore to recover my rope. Quarter of mile further, as the light failed us, we anchored for the night.
In the morning we ghosted with a gentle zephyr another mile upriver, right into a 180° hairpin. On the chart this point looked like a nightmare, but I thought, if we manage to get this high up the river, we will pull through somehow. Wind carried us right through the bend, but around the corner swirling wafts came from all over the place, mostly from dead ahead. Not strong enough to tack against the current. I warped the boat into a shallow and anchored through the heat of the day. In an overcast afternoon in the dying current it only took another quarter of mile kedging off to catch a fair breeze, and we were through.
Slipping silently past rich men's villas, passing a last stretch of white cliffs covered in centuries of sailors' graffiti, and the country opened up, steep hills receded and we were out of the canyon itself. Before the exit into the lower lake, El Golfete, we passed the Hot Springs. Four decades ago, when my cruising guide was written, it was a scramble over slippery rocks to find the anonymous sulphurous springs. Today you are greeted by a pub, big signs advertising "hot water" and an entrance fee.
We anchored in the lake, well away from the main speed boat run, in 3 fathoms of water. In the morning, in flat calm, we started with a scrub, wash, laundry, general clean up. Rio Dulce means "sweet river", and above the canyon water is indeed fresh. Local Maya believe that their river is a vein in the body of God. Afternoon fair breeze sprung from NE and with all our laundry streaming from the boom we crossed the lake in two hours.
The last 4 miles up the river leads through rich man's suburbs; pretentious villas of moneyed Chapinos, as the inhabitants of Guatemala call themselves, each with a private jetty and a monstrous barn housing a big speed boat. Looking at the flimsy structures, 10 metres tall posts supporting tin roof with only token bracing, I couldn't believe the boat sheds would survive even moderate storm. 60 knot wind would knock them down all. A good news, hurricane is not something they are expecting.
Weekend play houses alternate with small marinas set up by retired yachtsmen, six boats here, a dozen over there, few moorings in a deep bay out there. For every functioning enterprise there is one unfinished and a couple more defunct. Moss covered rotten roofs of beach bungalows, cracked plastic deck chairs lined up around a dry swimming pool, an impressive stone masonry wall, but no roof above it, shags patrolling skeletons of former wharfs, hulls full of water resting on the bottom of shallow coves. Broken dreams, messy divorces, change of rules, bankruptcy. Finally a steep arch of a concrete bridge on the horizon announces that you arrived. Longest road bridge in central America, its span allowed a 90' tall masts to pass under. Then sagging electric wires were suspended next to the bridge and clearance dropped to something like 75 feet, cross your fingers. On the north shore from the bridge lies Fronteiras, on the south much smaller Relleno. Together they are known as a town of Rio Dulce.
Two dozens of marinas circle the bridge. There is a choice for everyone, and several hundred yachts make it their home. For many it became a permanent home, place they came to die. Orchids growing from the top of an aluminium mast is a sure sign that the boat is not heading anywhere. Some of the mooring lines look like forests of tiny Japanese bonsai plants, bright green vegetation from the wharf all the way to the cleat. Dead and dying boats are sold and resold to inexperienced suckers, who are later forced to sell them on, without ever leaving the place. One abandoned 30-foot yacht hull was converted into a quarry barge: centre of deck on "La Gorda" was cut out and the hold became a bulk storage. In the quarry labourers shovel the hull full of rocks, sand and gravel, then move it with a small outboard to town.

Two large haul-out yards in Shell Bay take in most of the boats, with forest of masts in their dry storage, while other places would be pushed to accommodate more than a dozen yachts afloat. These days almost everyone books their marina ahead, over the Internet, but the smallest locally owned joints that do not advertise online always have a place. They are also the cheapest choice. In the far SE corner of Shell Bay, dwarfed by the neighbouring Nana Juana, Ram and Mar marinas, snuggles a cluster of improbable walk-on establishments. Five rickety fingers jerry built out of treated pine posts are sticking out in front of people's houses. Each jetty can take three vessels. Some take three on either side. And each one is a separate marina, four families running four "marinas". The fifth is a municipal jetty, a public wharf where your can tie up your dinghy for free. At night the free jetty becomes expensive, as your outboard is likely to disappear. Local tour operators park their "lancha" speedboats there as well, but no one touches their engines.
In those rickety places asking prices are cheap, and even that is negotiable. Paying 3 months up front it

cost us $100 a month, exactly what a dinghy dock had cost in Cartagena.
Looking at the flimsy wobbly structures I had to remind myself that these people are no newcomers to building on water, all Mesoamerican cultures were fond of building their cities over the water of shallow lakes.
A few weeks later I watched our neighbours building a new marina jetty by a technique that did not change in millennia. The most advanced tools they used were a hammer and a few nails. First a couple of blokes erected a temporary framework of bamboo poles, a scaffold they were going to work from. Individual bamboo poles were floated to the position, two guys swimming in water stood each pole upright, then hoisting themselves out of water on the pole they used their body weight to push the pole into the mud. Once the initial rough scaffold was tied together with strings, more human body weight was used to sink the bamboo firmly into the lake bottom. The actual pier posts, large round logs of treated pine sharpened at the business end, were driven in the same way. Timber was floated in. Four blokes working from the scaffold grabbed the ropes from the pole and stood the 8-inch diameter log on its end, while two more guys swimming in water helped to point the spar in the right place. Log's own weight, combined with a couple of workers clinging to the pole, sunk it two feet deep into the mud. Tops of the posts were sticking about 7 or 8 feet out of water.
With all the poles in position, neighbouring pairs of them were joined by small sturdy platform nailed on about 3 feet from the top of the post. Just enough to give a foothold to four men hanging to the pole top. Then a large maul, a heavy manual pile driver, was wrestled into position on top of the pole. A big chunk of hardwood with four short handles sticking from its sides. Four guys balanced on the platform, grabbed the handles of the maul that was about their waist high and with brute force of trained muscle repeatedly lifted the maul, and let it drop on the top of the pole. Combined weight of their bodies, plus the massive driver, generated enough momentum to belt the pole in. With every blow it went 2 or 3 inches deeper, four or five hoists, a short break to catch a breath, four or five more, another short break. When their working perch became too inclined to stand on, blokes shifted the maul to the sister pole and belted their step level. It sounds primitive, but in three days six blokes built a serviceable wharf that will host four yachts, two on either side. $400 a month income they didn't have before. The whole operation went on smooth, with very little discussion, no arguments, no change of plans, one step after another, following a time honoured tradition that needed no improving on. I was impressed by their efficiency. If you ever watched a bunch of Philippinos or Balinese erecting a little jetty in Asia, you know what I mean. These guys here knew exactly what they were doing, down to the last detail.
In Rio Dulce some people prefer to anchor in the river for free and use someone's facilities ashore. Ants crawling onto your boat from the wharf and mosquitoes from the mangroves are the main argument they give. As long as you actually live on your boat, coming home every night, security is no problem. An unattended boat, owners gone for even a few days, will be looted. My Russian friend left for two nights and came back to a cabin stripped bare. Someone has been watching him from the shore, waiting.
A while back a middle aged couple anchored in the river were attacked by three armed thugs. Skipper tried to resist and was shot dead. His wife was badly cut up with machetes. Police, as usually, did nothing, but the local drug lord, old man Mendoza, who rules the district, personally visited her in the hospital, apologised and promised to rectify the matter. All three robbers were shot dead, and their entire families were wiped out, women and children, all. There were no armed attacks against yachts ever since. Thieving, yes, violence, no. Mendoza does not like problems in his fiefdom; problems bring in the army.
It's not only boats that came here to die. Many a resident sailor looks like warmed up death, not sure if he will wake up the next morning. In our little marina there were four more boats tied up, but only one was permanently inhabited. Our neighbour was a wizened old skeleton from the Ozarks, bone-thin limbs, blotched pink skin, few long blond hairs plastered on his pate, slurred southern accent. A retired degenerate on a pension, he blew in three years ago, got conned into buying a 36-foot fibreglass coffin and has been rotting in her ever since. His pigsty has not moved once under his ownership, slowly being overrun by creeping vegetation, mould, mildew, cockroaches and kitchen grease. In three years in Guatemala he learned no Spanish at all, did nothing to his boat and the only time he leaves is a short bus trip across the border every three months for a new visa. He spends his days watching porn, from morning till night, the same one DVD over and over again, sound turned up loud so he can hear it. At 64 he was only two years older than myself, a sobering thought.

Rio Dulce is becoming a small town. Originally just a ferry across the river, it became a truck stop when the bridge was built by Porto Ricans in 1980 and a new road was laid to Flores, in the depth of Peten swamps in the north. A few eateries opened up, a petrol station, some stores. Then the yachties discovered Rio is a

safe hurricane hole and started summering over. That led to the first marinas.
Highway does not lead to town, highway is the town, a short rough strip of shops on both sides of the road with more impromptu stalls crowded in front of the shops. Buildings growing without any plan, retailers squeezed the bitumen into a narrow strip. When a vehicle stops on the road, anywhere in town, all the traffic banks up behind it. Huge noisy semitrailers carting nickel ore from the Russian mine in El Estor, two-trailer fuel convoys, tourist buses, long distance air-con coaches, Bajaj Indian tricycles, motorbikes, pedestrians, everyone has to wait till the road is clear again.
A dozen permanent stalls sell fresh fruit and vegies in a variety we haven't seen since Cape Town. Mangoes, watermelons, cantaloupes and other seasonal bounty is sold from a back of a truck. Subsistence farmers squatting on the road side are offering baskets of produce from their gardens, half a dozen species of hot peppers, buds of aromatic "loroco" flowers or flowers of "pakaya" palm that are fried like aubergine, varieties I have not seen before. Street food is marvellous, day and night. Tortillas, corn or flour, with choice of meat filling and any number of pickles, relishes and filler on a side. Grilled meat or eggplants, all sorts of peppers, chillies and capsicums.
Guns and ammo shops with names like "El Gran Jaguar", cowboy shops selling pack saddles, stir ups and bridles. Shoe shine boys polishing stockmen's cracked boots. Armed robberies of long distance trucks are so common that larger transport companies now hire armed guards who literally ride a shotgun beside the driver. Every time the driver stops, be it a meal break or just to take a leak, their gunman hops out with his stun gun, leans on the nearest fence and keenly observes the surrounds. At any given time there are half a dozen of them watching the trucks as the drivers have a meal in one of the roadside stalls along the Rio's Main and Only street. In the evening the young owner of a tortilla stand where we were eating rides in on his scooter to check the place over, a shiny revolver stuck behind his belt.

With exception of Cuba we've been out of the range of Postal Services for a year, so when I found a post office marked on my mud map of Rio Dulce, I got excited. My mud map is 20 years old. I asked Louis, our landlord. He confirmed, yes, post office is there, next to "Holandesa" shop. – "Make sure you are early," he added cryptically. I found the place in the morning. Rough wooden shack painted in post office colours. Closed and boarded up. In the shop next door they told me it's been boarded up for a year. Guatemala government in their privatisation drive contracted postal services to a private company from Canada, hoping to make money that way. For a few months the partnership worked, but then the government fallen behind on its payments, so the company scaled down the services ("go early, otherwise you find them closed", as my landlord suggested). Then the payments stopped altogether and the deal folded. Within months of privatising Guatemala was left with no post at all.

Rio straddles the main strategic highway north, and walking across the bridge twice a day I couldn't miss noticing the heavy military traffic, trucks, utes and camions of soldiers in full combat gear standing on the back tray, forest of machine guns pointing to the sky. At first I took it for a normal situation in a country that stumbled for two centuries from one civil war to another, interspersed with military coups, dictatorships, death squads and unrelenting violence. Then I got hold of a copy of independent newspapers from the capital and it seems like the Clown in the Palace is leading his country on the patriotic warpath. Story as old as recorded history.
Corruption became such a cancer in Guatemalan politics, that no party can claim they are free of it. Every official, from the President down to Municipal level, takes their elected posts to be a licence to print money. Guys on $ 15 000 a year were buying million dollar properties every year, holidaying in America, giving new cars as gifts to their friends. It got so bad, that the country's top lawyer, the Attorney General, took an unprecedented step and asked an independent UN commission to look into corruption in the highest echelons of the government. Results of the investigations accused the President and his Vice-President of blatant rort, bribery, money laundering and ripping off the Treasury. They were pocketing millions of dollars, in a country where half of people earn less than $2 a day. Massive demonstrations forced the President to resign. He was arrested the next day and is now in jail, awaiting the trial. His Vice-President is behind the bars as well, as are most of the mayors and former members of Parliament. Elections were called, but there wasn't a single politician left in the country with a clean name. When a 45-years old TV comedian Jimy Morales threw his hat into the rink, he ran off with the pot, winning by a long margin. We watched this comedy unfold last year from Venezuela.
With absolutely no experience in administration, no coherent program and no power base, the new President found that making racist jokes about indigenous people is easier than to rule a country where they make up half of population. To get some friends to watch his back he aligned himself with discredited

Army Oligarchy that for 36 years waged a ruthless civil war against Maya farmers unhappy about their lot, killing nearly a quarter of million of them. The civil war ended in 1996, but atrocities committed by the armed forces still need redressing. Morales has no intention of offending his generals. He has no idea what to do about the poverty, illiteracy and collapsing health services. Election rhetoric does not fill the bellies. So, like every cornered scoundrel in power, he turned to patriotism. He declared that British stole Belize from Guatemala and now he demands it back. The whole country. The early years of Belize, then called British Honduras, are a bit hazy on legal points, Spanish and British half-heartedly tussled over it, but it never was a part of Guatemala. Morales sent 3000 troops to the Belize borders and took the case to the International Court of Justice. Samuel Johnson first stated that patriotism is the last recourse of a scoundrel. Lenin stole the phrase from him two centuries later. Unfortunately, that does not fill the bellies of the poor either, and barely 8 months in the office, Jimy's approval rating is in single digits.

Guatemala moves on corn. The greatest Maya contribution to the world civilisation, maize is a mystery plant. It has been domesticated about the same time as wheat, rye and rice in the old world, about 10 000 years ago, but what were its wild progenitors is not certain. It appears to be a fertile hybrid of wild teosinte and another, unknown plant, conveniently extinct today. Theories in favour in ivory towers of Academia leave a lot of questions unanswered, amongst them the origin of the immense number of stable varieties grown by subsistence farmers in Meso-America. Hybrids are supposed to be sterile, unable to propagate true to type.
Maize is grown everywhere, from the lowlands up to the upper limit of cultivation at 3000 metres above sea level. Maya never figured out a plough, and on the steep slopes, with no beast of burden to pull it, plough would be useless even if they invented one. Fields, often too steep to walk up on, are cultivated with variety of hoes. Traditional way of planting, called The Three Sisters, was to raise together maize, beans and squash. Beans climb on the maize stalks, providing it with nitrogen, squash giving ground cover to smother the weeds. I've seen it still practised in the fields around the lake Atitlan. Many corn fields are interplanted with trees as well, fruit, nut, or timber varieties, their roots slowing down the erosion.
You can grind the corn kernels directly into flour, but resulting meal will be deficient in several vitamins and amino acids and prolonged diet will lead to pellagra, a disease that crippled poor populations fed on corn that Spanish spread from America into their colonies. To release all the goodies locked in corn seed, maize has to be first soaked in lime water. That also helps peel off the hard skin of the kernel, which is fed to poultry. Grinding and cooking the rest will make flour, which is then spread thin and roasted over a hot surface, today usually a heated sheet of metal. That's your tortillas, backbone of Guatemalan cuisine.
Sound of pats-pats-pats, women slapping their palms together with a glob of maize dough between them, making tortillas, is an archetypal sound of Guatemala, heard everywhere at all times of the day. The way dull tingling of sheet metal bells signalling a passing string of cattle in Zimbabwe became my memory of Africa, pats-pats-pats of tortilla makers is to me the sound of rural Guatemala.
Corn cobs grow in a bewildering range of colours, from white and green to red and purple black. Tortillas also come in various colours, white, yellow and blue, and apparently they vary in nutrition value and taste, besides colour. I like the blue ones the best, not because they are supposed to be better for you, but because they look so weird, an ash-blue bread. Maize contains no gluten, so it can't be coerced to rise like a wheat flour dough, and corn breads are dense and thick. While they are fresh and warm, I found no fault with tortillas. Once they cool off, corn starch turns gluey and unappetising. Feeding regularly on tortillas calls for sleeping in a well aired room.

Guatemala was the heart of the Maya civilisation, and their most impressive ruins are found here. Tikal was called "Maya New York", for its grandeur and sheer size, while Copan was compared to Paris, for the beauty of its art. Both places are an easy bus ride from Rio Dulce.
Unlike Aztecs in Central Mexico, Maya never united in one centralised empire. Like the ancient Greeks, they remained an ever shifting mosaic of warring city-states with fluid alliances and pulsating borders, squabbling polities filled with never forgiven slights and vendettas.
Collapse of Classical Maya culture is the biggest puzzle of their civilisation. They were not wiped out by Spanish conquest. Their high society crashed about 500 years before Columbus first time blundered into one of their stray canoes in Honduras. It wasn't any cataclysmic fall. It took about a century for the large cities to empty of population and jungle reclaim the buildings, and the timing wasn't exactly same in all places, either. Some cities prospered for several generations longer, before they too were abandoned and crumbled into ruins. Historians, a self serving bunch of bickering old men, can never agree what brought the Maya down, if it was ecological collapse, overpopulation, too much emphasis on useless construction,

wars, disease or combination of above.
Only their complex court civilisation collapsed. Maya as peoples did not disappear, and their fabulously balanced agricultural practices are well and alive today. In the later centuries some areas partly recovered, organising post-classical societies, and those were wiped out by advancing Spanish conquistadores and the diseases they brought with them. Today an estimated 8 million people speak one of the 30 Mayan languages as their mother tongue, all living in their original home area. In Guatemala there are officially over 6 million Maya, half of the country's population. That does not count the half casts and Maya who speak Spanish as their first language. (Correctly applied, term "Mayan" refers only to their language, in every other meaning it's "Maya", be it singular or plural).
Literally hundreds of Maya sites dot the countryside, most of them known but not excavated. From time to time some northern university musters a grant to come and dig a few holes in the ground, and most sites were carefully measured and mapped, but only the most brilliant gems were cleared of jungle, their structures exposed and partially restored. Enormous task that took a lot of labour. Jungle is pushing in and without constant pruning the cities would disappear below the growth again.

Internet claims there are two dozen Maya sites around Lake Izabal, right near where we kept "Kehaar", but I could not find anything more about it, no matter who I asked or where I looked. About 5 years ago a German mathematician and a self styled expert on Maya glyphs announced that Dresden Codex speaks of an ancient Maya capital named Atlan which sank below the waters of Lake Izabal during an earthquake in 1224, taking with it 2156 tablets of pure gold, hidden in a stone sarcophagus, estimated value US$290 million. Supported by German gutter tabloid "Bild", Professor Emeritus from Dresden University mounted an expedition to Rio Dulce to recover the gold. After a lot of diving they found one empty pot of uncertain provenance, and nothing else, but it gave rise to a rumour you may hear around the waterfront bars in Rio Dulce, about the whole Maya town discovered under the lake. They got it mixed up with a real Maya city that is covered by a different lake, Atitlan, in the highlands.
"Professor" was a retired hight school teacher of maths with obsession about Atlantis, and his interpretation of Dresden Codex is as wobbly as those experts who extrapolated the end of the world from it for 2012, the "Maya Prophecies". Professor thought that a lost Maya city of Atlan, which does exist in Maya records, sounds similar to his pet horse, Atlantis.
As a language problem, Professor may have something there. Atlantic Ocean, with its fabled island of Atlantis somewhere in the middle of it, gets its name from the Greek god Atlas, who carries the heavens on his shoulders. The same deity gave its name to the Atlas mountains in Morocco, on the shores of Atlantic. Mercator put an engraving of god Atlas on the title page of the first book of maps ever made and ever since it became a name for geographical atlas as well. Origin of this bunch of words is a complete mystery. They are ancient, but they are not derived from any known European language, living or dead. It is unique in having an "atl-" group of letters at the beginning, something which is completely alien to Indo-European phonetics. This puzzle had the eminent linguists scratching their heads for centuries, and some pointed out that over, across the Big Puddle, Mesoamerican languages are quite happy with "atl-". In many of them "atl" means "water", so you find it all over the place. The legendary island of Atlan was the original homeland of Aztecs, before they migrated to Mexico. "Atlan" means "on the water" in Nahuatl, the language of Aztecs. How it all hangs together remains beyond the limits of this narrative.

Quirigua was the closest excavated Maya ruin, accessible from Rio Dulce as a day trip. About 70 km away, the site itself is a short walk from the main highway leading to the Capital. It is different from the monumental temples and acropolis of Mexican ruins or Tikal in Peten. Qurigua's main attraction are well preserved stelae, tall obelisks of sandstone, carved on all sides in enigmatic drawings and curling picturesque script.
You get off the bus at Qurigua Junction, and walk for a half an hour along a private banana highway, built by a banana company to cart bananas. The ruins were one of the earliest Maya sites to be excavated and set aside as a reserve in a patch of dense jungle, surrounded on all sides by banana plantations. Permanent workers' camps line the road, access through security gates, past armed guards. A lot of guys pedal their bicycles around, so the company set aside a wide lane on the road just for them. Tall hedgerows shade the lane and walking is pleasant. Bananas rule the country. They even have a right of the way over the cars. Heavy bunches of green bananas are cut off and transported by ingenuous system of cable cars, or flying foxes. Long wires suspended in movable steel arches cross the fields, just high enough to walk under them and hang the bananas on the hooks. Travelling the other way, from the shed to the plantation, small flat trays suspended from the wires bring in fertiliser, seedlings, irrigation pipe,

anything needed on the site. When the cable-way has to cross the highway, a low boom gate bridges the gap. Banana train approaches the crossing, a guard stops the car traffic and swings a boom by hand to close the road. Boom end clicks into the end of wire way, bunches of bananas slowly trot across the road like a miniature train, barely clearing the ground, then the boom is swung back and traffic resumes.
The banana highway ends with a locked gate, in front of which a dozen trucks wait their turn to load bananas, drivers dozing in the shade under the trucks, swinging in their hammocks. You pay a hefty fee and enter a well maintained tropical park. Two plazas, large cleared spaces of flat ground central to all Maya ruins, are covered in short grass, the only open area in the city. All around you huge trees of the dense forest are pushing in. Around the edges of the plazas narrow stelae stand erect under their protective roofs of palm leaves. The tallest obelisk in the whole of the Maya world stands here, a 10-metre long block of hard sandstone, carved all over. Top part of carvings are fantastic representations of the ruler who paid for the building of the stela, wearing a nightmarish four feet tall head dress that takes half of the picture. Surrounded by diminutive figures of captives, slaves, scribes and priests, the whole is framed by Maya glyphs describing when this happened and to whom. Half of all carved glyphs are calendar information, a true obsession of the ancient Maya. They used several interlocked counting systems, so complex it defies reason.
Maya ceremonial calendar is based on a 260-day year. There is no celestial event that repeats every 260 days, and Maya were careful observers of the sky. Their calculations of the solar year are more precise than our Gregorian calendar, and they calculated the orbit of Venus which was only two hours out in a year. So the 260 days didn't come from astronomy, it had to be based on something else. The only remotely feasible period is gestation of a human baby; an average women is pregnant for about 260 days. Funny thing to base your calendar on. Besides the ceremonial count, they used ordinary solar year, divided into months and days. Overlaid over that is a third cycle, lunar calendar, two ways to count passage of the Moon, one based on its phases and the other on the number of days since the last new Moon. Then, every day was ruled by one of the Nine Dark Lords of the Underworld, and His Sign was yet another determinative of the date. To write a date in Maya was a task so complex that it was left to the High Priests, who were known as the Keepers of the Date. I was told that contemporary Maya still adhere to the 260-day cycles in their religious activities, but without further complications.

Beautifully carved Maya script defied attempts at deciphering for more than a century. It is complex, playful and unpredictable, but in itself it is no more complicated than written Japanese, which it resembles in its basic structure: a mixture of ideograms and short syllabic glyphs recording sounds. Biggest stumbling block was a lack of language to hang onto the signs. Haughty Mayanists in their university domains couldn't be bothered learning any living Maya tongues, even though Chol, spoken today by peasants in eastern Mexico, is virtually identical to the ancient formal language written by the scribes. Calendar signs were unravelled first, but a breakthrough in the understanding of glyphs didn't happen until second half of 20th century when some of the younger cryptographers went into trouble of learning modern Maya tongues.
In Classical Maya society commoners were kept illiterate, just like in European societies in the middle ages, and the Maya nobility spoke in a distant language, like use of Latin by Catholic church. All the inscriptions in the stone are in that same language, regardless of the locality, while the general populace speaks different Mayan tongues. Stone inscriptions are highly formalised accolades to rules and priests, telling us nothing of daily life of the people.
Only four painted codices survived the manic burning of Maya books by the Spanish priests, and they do not shed much light on the Maya society either. Maya were not interested in recording anything mundane or ordinary. Codex, slim book painted on folded bark, contains astronomical data and guidance to proper offerings to gods. It's like learning about a medieval Germany from three short prayer books and a stub of a travel guide, all written in liturgical Latin 500 years after German culture disappeared. One more book survived, Popol Vuh, a long epic poem dealing with the creation myth as seen by Highland Maya. It was written down shortly after Spanish Conquest in 16th century, using our own Roman letters to record Quiche, a Maya language spoken in the Highlands around Chichicastenango. Popol Vuh is heavily tinted by the opinions of Jesuit father who first recorded it.
Carving on stelae in Quirigua is crisp, sharp and the lines are easy to follow. I stopped at the more arresting glyphs and tried to draw them in my sketch book, but an army of ants attacked me immediately. Not the biting ones, just plain ants, but in numbers you do not see unless you step into a middle of anthill. Qurigua plazas are one continuous anthill. There is nowhere to sit down in peace, nowhere to pause, nowhere to stand a minute to execute a simple sketch. All the park benches are crawling with ants, all the

stone structures of the Arcopolis are crisscrossed with ant paths, ants rule the domain. Stomping furiously, sweeping the ants from my feet, I drew in my note book very fast indeed, but nowhere near as much as I would have liked. The sheer multitude defeated me and I kept moving around the ruins.
The most interesting sculptures in Quirigua are called zoomorphs. They are not found anywhere else. Huge isolated stone boulders, 12 or 15 feet across, laying on their flat sides, completely carved all around with interlocking patterns of huge animals, details of human faces, head dresses, elaborate jewellery and dozens of glyphs. It takes imagination to discern the pattern in the profusion of carvings, because the animal features are highly modified, interlocking into each other, flowing around the surface of the boulder, overlaid with other details, some parts belonging to two or more neighbouring images, morphing and flowing like molten metal. One zoomorph was taken away to a museum somewhere, but the rest of them are still in Qurigua. They are something indeed; I didn't even try to draw any of it, so mind boggling and complex the designs are.
How they managed to drag those huge boulders three miles from the quarry is another mystery. Maya invented a wheel but they considered it a useless concept, good for children's toys but not as practical technology. Central America had no animal big enough to domesticate as a beast of burden and their extensive trading networks relied on human porters and on boats. Not interested in recording things as mundane as building of a temple or erecting a 10-metre obelisk, they left no depiction of the process. We just do not know.

Map of Guatemala that I wheedled from a tour agent showed scores of triple red dots representing Maya ruins, scattered over the entire country, but detailed information was scarce. I found a website of Guatemala Archaeological Department, and reading through dry scientific monographs in Spanish I came across a map of a small area in Peten, hilly country at the base of Yucatan peninsula. The map showed a cluster of Maya cities centred around a small provincial town of Dolores, half way between Rio Dulce and Flores. Within a 5 mile radius of it lie five entire Maya cities, former capitals of independent states, plus another dozen of known sites. No guide book bothered with any of them, Internet had a sprinkling of information about three of the cities, and even the Archaeology Department itself was content with listing them in alphabetical order, and nothing else. Names by themselves were alluring, Ixtutz, Ixtonton, Ixec, Ixac Moquena, El Tzic, Sukche, Ixcoxol, Nocsos, Curucuitz, Ixkun, Ixcol, Mopan, Tesik, all within couple of hours walk from Dolores. "Ix-", pronounced "ish-", as in "Engl-ish", simply means "the place of -".
In Guatemala hitchhiking remains in its pure form; you solicit a ride by sticking your thumb out, and you pay nothing for the privilege. I love this form of transport because you meet people from all walks of life, learn a heap of interesting things you don't find in books, and surely get to practice your language skills. Guatemala truckies are a friendly bunch who often pick up hitchhikers. In Rio I met young feral gringos moving around by the force of a lifted thumb, some were even taking their dogs with them.
Hitchhiking out of Rio was easy. I had a cheap lunch in Dolores and followed the road signs to the beginning of a narrow dirt road heading out of town, meandering between steep limestone hills of bright green pastures towards ruins of Ixkun.
Middle of the day, stinking hot, but fine drizzle was misting down from every cloud and walking was a pleasure. Dolores lies in the middle of Peten, a large area of low limestone hills surrounded by swampy jungle. Forest has been cleared for pastures ages ago, small islands of homesteads nesting in the lee of the hills. Home gardens are based on trees, be it fruit, palms, cash crop or fodder trees, and in between them small plots planted to corn, squash, tomatoes and other vegies. Not a square foot of soil is left bare, exposed to erosion, everything is planted over. Fence posts are living saplings which sprout the leaves and form pleasant shadow hedges that shelter you from the sun. You feel that agriculture has been practised for millennia here, and the farmers got it right, harvesting all they need without too much effort, and without degrading and exhausting the soil. I remember the first permaculture wave in the 80ies came to Guatemala to study their sustainable farming ways. I felt the same in Rio Dulce street market, seeing little piles of alien vegetables displayed by the farmers: these guys have been doing it a very long time, successfully, and they are not interested in modern global agribusiness flogging the ground dead, driving the farmers to bankruptcy.
Traffic on the dirt track was nearly zero, and every farmer astride his motorbike stopped for a chat, amazed what the hell I was doing there, and where did I find out about the place. When I explained about Maya ruins, they would smile and wave their hands, yeah, there are more ruins down that way, and another city just outside the town, and if I follow the river, I will get to the old pyramids of Sacul… it was great talking to people, really talking, about their lives, about their country, about everything, a two-way communication you so seldom achieve in Asia. One of the guys told me an interesting thing: locals do not

think that nature covered the Maya cities with a layer of soil. They believe that old Maya themselves, before they abandoned their cities, covered all their buildings with a layer of dirt to protect them from elements. They intended to come back, but never did.
Ruins of Ixkun are about 8 km north from Dolores, surrounded by an island of original tall jungle, a patch of forest in the endless hills of pale green pastures. Locals have never forgotten about its existence, and even the authorities were aware of it since 1850ies. The place have been mapped several times, but serious attention was turned this way only in 1972 when a bunch of grave robbers from the capital came with saws and cut off the carved face of the best preserved stela. They pinched all the smaller stone monuments as well. The one large stela that remained standing is faded, its inscriptions partly eroded by weather. Some stelae are lying down, some are broken into several segments, their carving indistinct. There is no fence, no ticket booth, the lone guard who also acts as a grounds keeper and a guide was asleep in his hammock, barechested peasant in his underwear. It was a hot day, and I arrived during his lunch break. While he sent me scrambling up a hill to south to look at some masonry he got dressed in his uniform shirt and gumboots and gave me a short tour of the city. In the winter he said they get some visitors, but not now, not in the summer. The central plaza was cleared of trees, in the forest all around it unrestored partly buried structures were suggested by the shapes of terrain. Even I could pick a ball court, acropolis, pyramid. Besides calendar, four cardinal points were of high importance to Maya ceremonies, and they were marked by sculptures in four corners of a plaza. In Ixkun two better carved ones have been stolen, leaving two plain boulders on two other sides, backed by intriguing small hummocks hiding more structures. Ixkun is a powerful place, it would be great to sit down and just absorb it in peace, if you could get rid of the babbling guide.

Ruins of Copan are technically in Honduras, and one reason we came was to get another 90-day visa for Guatemala. The four Central American countries, Guatemala, Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras, form a Customs and Immigration union, called "CA-4". 90 days entry stamp in your passport counts for all of them. To get an extension, you either apply for one in an office, at a cost, or cross one of their borders and get a new stamp on return. After the first 6 months you have to exit CA-4 to elsewhere, like Mexico, Belize or Costa Rica and then come back. Easiest from Rio Dulce is a two hour ferry to Punta Gorda in Belize. Some guys who live here just send their passport for a run on a ferry, while they sit in a Puerto Barrios bar and drink beer. For a flat fee of U$100 an agent picks up their passport, have it stamped out, get another couple of stamps in Belize, and when the ferry returns the same afternoon a new Guatemala stamp is issued in Puerto Barrios.
Exact mechanism seems to differ at each border crossings, and the rules frequently change without a warning, so you never know how it will go. In Copan they just waved us through without stamping our passports, so when we came back three days later, it took half an hour and a $50 bribe, each, before they gave us another 90 days. Then when I was attempting to leave CA-4 in Nicaragua, the officer told me that what we did in Copan was illegal and I will have to pay another $90 fine. He held my passport and wouldn't give it back until I paid.

Nobody knows what the name "Copan" means. It was what the locals called the ruins when the Spanish first asked. Learned Mayanists tell us that its original name was "Oxwitik", or Three Witiks. What a "witick" was, nobody has any idea. Looking at the glyph of Copan itself, I'd say a "leaf-nosed bat".
Copan is only 5 or 6 miles from the Guatemalan border and its history was closely tied to the valleys to the northwest. Copan was a rival, overlord, and then a vassal of Quirigua on the river below the mountains. In modern Honduras Maya culture extended only in a narrow strip along the Guatemalan border. Small farmers scattered around Copan speak Chortli, a linear descendant of the Classical Court Maya. Unlike in Guatemala, Honduran government actively discourages use of indigenous languages, and Chortli is on a decline. People who work and service the Copan ruins are not Maya at all and they speak only Spanish.
Ten minutes walk from the ruins along a nice shady path, lies Copan Ruinas, pleasant little mountain town of about 3000 people, completely devoted to the ruins and their visitors. A dozen clean friendly hostels and restaurants, a few basic eateries, bank, steep streets cobbled in round boulders, unhurried atmosphere of the past. Everything is much cheaper than in Guatemala. Good brewed coffee, made from local beans, is served everywhere.
The main street of town is called "18 Rabbit", after the 13th ruler of Copan. His ancestors had equally quirky names, Smoke Shell, Waterlily Jaguar, Moon Jaguar, Smoke Jaguar and Rising Sun. At least that's what Clever White Men from the North tell us. 18 Rabbit was the greatest of their kings. He ruled for 43 years, erected a number of stelae, remodelled the hieroglyphic stairway and added many temples of his

own. Surprised in an opportunistic ambush, 18 Rabbit was captured by his own vassal Lord of Quirigua in April 738 and ritually executed six days later, as is duly noted in stone on an obelisk in Quirigua. Maya were real nerds when it came to calendar, we can date important events down to the exact day. After the grisly end of 18 Rabbit Copan started loosing its prominence as one of the four principal metropolis of scattered Maya world. Other three were Tikal, Calakmul and Palenque, all in Yucatan.

Every ruin in Central America has a ball court, no matter if it's Maya, Aztec, Zapotec, Mixtec or what not. More than a thousand of them are known to hide in the jungle. Most towns had only one, but in a ball-crazy district of Veracruz in Mexico some ruins have a dozen or more courts. Size of the court did not reflect the importance of the place. Tikal and Copan, both major cities, have tiny ball courts. Their design varies greatly and rules of the game remain obscure. Two stone rings mounted high on the opposing walls appeared only in the later centuries, and their purpose is clear enough: get the ball through the ring, like in some brutal version of modern basketball. Earlier courts of Classical period are bare of any suggestion. Looking down at the restored ball court in Copan from the ruined temple above it feels like watching from a grandstand of a rugby field where the goal posts were removed. Flat patch of grass devoid of any meaning. Something important is missing: a net, a hoop, a goal post, pails, something. Playing area in Copan is only about 20′ wide by 50′ long, so the teams had to be small. Two steeply inclined planes of smooth stone rise on either side of the field, and the whole area is L-shaped. Several original balls survived, solid rubber 4" to 8" in diameter. It would've hurt, kicking 6 pound of rubber around with your hips or shoulders as paintings suggest, and Spanish chronicles indeed record fatalities during the play. What really went on is a puzzle. It could have been anything. Mezo-American remains can justify volleyball, basketball, hockey, soccer and any number of games unknown. Variations in the playing fields and ball itself suggest that many different games were played. Solid rubber ball has been kicked around the entire Meso-America for 3000 years, so you would expect many different rules to develop.
Copan is famous for the quality of its carvings. Unfortunately the local stone they carved is soft and 1300 years of exposure to elements obliterated most of the details. The best preserved carvings were on the stelae, or obelisks, that fell flat on their face and stayed that way, or the images buried under the ground. The most spectacular carvings were shipped out to overseas museums in the early days of excavations, 100 years ago, which rises a touchy subject: where do you draw a line between an archaeologist and a looter? Carvings found more recently are housed in a museum on site, replaced by convincing replicas at their original place.
The longest inscription in the entire Maya world is the Hieroglyphic Stairway climbing the 63 steps of a pyramid on the Main Plaza in Copan. Each step 10 metres wide, over 2000 glyphs tell the story of this town, uninterrupted stream of history covering 400 years. Great? Like everything in Maya culture even this treasure comes with a big "but". Many glyphs were damaged by rain while still in place. Then a powerful earthquake brought the top section of the stairway crashing down to the Plaza. 15 bottom steps stayed put, while the top 48 levels tumbled down into a field below. Restoration took place in the enlightened 1930ies when academics believed that a bunch of naked savages in a jungle could have never evolved writing. Maya glyphs were thought to be pretty pictures devoid of rational meaning, so it did not matter where went what, as long as the result looked like a stairway it once was. We inherited from the experts a 2200-piece jigsaw puzzle with most pieces defaced. Which brings us to another ethical topic, fuzzy lines between excavation, restoration and destruction of a site.
Last year a beautiful touch was added to Copan. Scarlet macaw, a magnificent parrot nearly three feet long, was one of the Maya sacred birds, together with a quetzal. Over the centuries expanding human population wiped out the macaw from Honduras, while it remains plentiful in Amazon and Orinoco basins. Macaws are easy to breed in captivity, so few years back someone started a breeding program with the goal to reintroduce the bird in its original area, starting with Copan. Last year they released a dozen adult birds in the park next to the Plaza, and the parrots are thriving. Noisy squawking monsters in bright red, yellow and blue, like flapping flags of Colombia or Venezuela, nearly tame, they are being fed seeds, nuts and fruit several times a day, to a delight of camera wielding visitors. They fly to the nearby stone structures, perch on ruins, hang upside down from tree branches, real clowns of the grounds.

Then we went to Tikal, up north, in Yucatan. It towers a class above everything else left from the splendour of Maya. In its days of glory around 800 AD it was one of the largest cities on the planet; with its 100 000 inhabitants it was bigger than anything they had in Europe, and only Chinese had larger towns. Its ceremonial centre of pyramids, palaces, temples, ball courts and plazas stretched 5 km across. No raving of

mine will do it justice. Still in process of being excavated and restored, if there is only one Maya place you have time to visit, go to Tikal. You will not be disappointed.

The first place that most visitors go to in Guatemala is Antigua. When you speak of Antigua in Central America, you have to make clear if are you talking as a yachtsman or as a feral hippie. There are two equally well known Antigua's, a yachtsman's Antigua and a hippie Antigua, and one bunch of Gringos never heard of the other place. The first Antigua is an independent country in the eastern Caribbean, a member of British Commonwealth, a small island turned sailing Mecca, destination of the rich playboys and poor hopefuls who would like to sail the boats for them, or at least varnish their teak. The hippie Antigua is a former capital of Guatemala, it literally means "The old one". It was destroyed by an earthquake during the Spanish days and rebuilt into a charming little town in the mountains, an hour's drive from the new capital. Antigua Guatemala is sitting at the foot of La Agua volcano which towers 2000 metres above it. The town itself is about 1500 metres above the sea level, with pleasant climate and temperatures about 10 degrees less than the humid tropical lowlands. La Agua (Water), sounds like a strange name for a large perfectly shaped conical volcano, but the dormant crater was full of water when the Spaniards first invaded the country. They built their capital at the foot of it. A few years after the construction an earthquake split the crater rim, lake emptied and swept the capital from the slopes, together with all its inhabitants. Spanish moved 5 miles, to what is now Antigua, and for 200 years the place prospered, in spite of several earthquakes which kept demolishing masonry buildings. Finally in 1773 a truly big one rattled the country, their capital crumbled and the Crown in Madrid ordered it moved to a safer location, this time 45 km away, where it stands today. Another two centuries passed and in 1976 yet another devastating quake shook Guatemala City. There were calls to move again, but this time you were talking moving 3 million slum dwellers and nobody wanted even to think what it would take.
After the 1773 earthquake Antigua was ordered abandoned, but not everybody left. Town was rebuilt on a very low key. Only buildings of one storey were allowed, and even today a two-storey dwelling is a rarity, pointing to someone's pocked being greased over a sumptuous dinner. City streets are paved with rough volcanic rubble, irregular black cobble stones that can strain your ankles just walking on it. Amazingly many locals ride bicycles to work, testament to the tough build of highlanders. Antigua grew into a major tourist destination and that feeds the inhabitants, without need for modern industrial development. Hotels, boutiques, restaurants, coffee houses and craft shops share the old houses with tiendas, tortillerias, cafetins and panaderias.
Antigua is pretty and relaxed, but after a couple of days enjoying really good coffee you get tired of the hordes of tourists and associated hustle. You go exploring the neighbourhood. You can begin walking from the central park in any direction, and you will enjoy the stroll, as far as you will go. The old paved colonial roads lead to quaint mountain villages, easy walking distance, and when you get tired, just flag the first chicken bus that passes you.
For longer hikes you better ask around. The obvious target, volcano of La Agua rising above the town, is not a good choice. A bunch of thugs armed with machetes is taking turns watching the foot traffic at the beginning of the climbing trail, robbing the hikers as they pass. Local police is not interested and the licensed operators stopped their tours. In Rio Dulce I met travellers who had their friends robbed only days earlier. It is perfectly safe to walk along the old colonial road, Camino Real, all the way to the last village under the volcano, Santa Maria de Jesus. Villagers used to supply ice from the mountain to the colonial capital and they preserved their old ways, traditional dress, local Maya vernacular and indispensable public laundry pool in the main square, shaded collection of concrete laundry troughs around a large pool of water at waist height, where the women gather to do their washing and discuss the public affairs.

After Antigua, the next popular destination is the lake Atitlan, about 20 miles across, completely surrounded by tall mountains. And I mean completely, on all sides. All the villages are built at the foot of the hills, on flat ledges about 100 metres above the lake level, or directly on the steep slopes. Traditional communities all lie well above the level of water.
Every town along the lake has a distinct character. Panajachel is a tourists' ghetto. The actual lake front looks really messy, with many partly submerged buildings, gutted ruins with their feet in water, dead trees, swamped walks, rickety jetties slipping under water. It seemed like the level of water in the lake was slowly rising. How can that be? Global warming? Melting of polar glaciers? Global warming, my foot, we are 1600 metres above the sea level. Something did not make sense here.
Looking up from across the lake, at the insane angle of the slopes, you wonder how did they manage to cut the roads into those cliffs. I went on a chicken bus down one of those crazy tracks, from the highlands

down to the lake, and the hairpins were so tight that the bus could not take them. In five places driver had to do a three point turn. His offsider hopped out, stopped all the upcoming traffic while we backed up to have another go at the bend. No safety rails on the outer edge, a sheer drop into the ravine. Sections of the road were so steep we crawled down in the first gear, engine brake keeping us at a walking pace.
Hippies who come to stay longer catch a ferry across the water from Pana to San Pedro La Laguna, little town tucked under the dormant volcano of the same name. Hippies colonise the bottom part of town, along the lake, while the mountain half is a conservative bastion of Jesus freaks, with every wall covered in murals, graffiti and slogans glorifying the Son. Like in Panajachel, lake shore is studded with partly submerged structures. Abandoned sunken wharfs, skeletal concrete frames of buildings sticking out of shallow water, dead trees knee deep in the lake. Water is definitely on the make.
Santiago Atitlan is the largest lake community. Its' speciality are very fine embroideries, tiny little birds, an inch across, arranged in a grid across the fabric. Women's blouses, huipiles, can contain up to 200 individual birds, each different. Even older men wear birds, embroidered along the lower rim of their shorts. Venerable members of community decked out in calf long white shorts with dark vertical stripes, three bands of tiny colourful birds around their legs. Wearers seldom reach 5 feet of statute, they favour soft soled moccasins, wide embroidered sash around their waist and white cowboy hat on the crown. They look the real thing and they speak no Spanish at all.
From San Lucas, another lake community, you can walk up a narrow ribbon of bitumen a 15 km climb to Godinez through the clouds, mist and airy vistas, higher and higher, overlooking more and more of the lake. Atitlan fills an ancient caldera of a gigantic volcanic crater, completely surrounded by the mountains. No streams run into the lake, and no surface outlet drains it at all. Rainfall is much higher than the evaporation, so the level of the lake should be continuously rising. According to the old timers, lake undergoes periodical cycles of rising and falling water, with peaks every 50 or 70 years, going as far back as the communal memory runs. Lake is fed by rainfall, and water leaks out through the cracks and seeps in the lake bottom, appearing many miles away on the Pacific slopes as springs of fresh water. A hurricane sweeping by will dump enormous amount of rain, rising the level a couple of metres; a big earthquake in 1976 caused new cracks to appear in the lake bottom and the water dropped 2 metres during the following month. Right now the lake is rising, level being about 15 feet higher that it was a decade ago. That's the reason all the villages were built so far above the lake, and why no Maya will build directly on the shore. They build their dwellings on the mountain, leaving the shores to the tourists. They know their history. Ruins of a sunken Maya city of Sambaj, 55 feet under water, lie at the foot of Toliman volcano.

I kept walking, for days, crashing at night between the rows of corn in the steep fields. From Patzici another marvellous road drops down, 15 km hike to the village of Acatenango. Postcard views of a volcano of the same name and its active twin, Fuego, two towering cones rising from one base. Fuego woke up about four years ago and continues a low intensity eruptions every 10 to 20 minutes, with larger outbursts once every few weeks. Dense cloud of smoke billows from the crater every few minutes, rocks fly in the air, tons of ash fall on the downwind slopes, grey rocky desert with no vegetation. Even if you can't see the summit, you can still hear deep rumbling like a distant thunder. At closer quarters the rumbling is followed by the sound of large boulders rolling down the slope.
The ascend trail starts from a small hamlet of La Soledad, right next to its cemetery on the main highway, altitude about 2400 metres. Approach to La Soledad from the village of Acatenango is along a brutally steep farm road with stunning views of both cones, today in clear blue sky. First time I passed the beginning of the trail, around noon, a group of tourists were herded up the mountain by their guides. I asked a local lad if I really needed a guide. He pointed to a two metres wide farm trail: "Can you see this trail?" – "I sure can." – "Bueno, that's all there is to it." – There is no water on the mountain. There is no water on any of the mountains that I went walking in the Highlands.
A solid week of tramping the highways of the highlands paid off, I was fit and acclimatised, and when I came back to the trail the next morning, climb to 3987 metres did not take long. I was shod in a pair of dilapidated Crocs, so it can't be that hard. Guided tours stretch it into a two-day hike, sleeping in tents in the crater on the top.
Trail leads up a deep erosion gulley, then meanders between the corn fields until about 3000 metres, where it dives into the cloud forest of big broad leaved trees. Being the rainy season clouds at my level sweep across the walk. My hair and whiskers starts dripping rain that condensate on my body, but it is not really raining, I am just walking in the cloud. Forest is full of orchids, bromelias, moss, ferns, long strands of weird vegetation swing from the overhanging branches of ancient trees, visibility 20 metres, fog, cloud, biting cold cross wind sweeping the mountain side.

Above the cloud forest grow the pines. About ten years ago a major fire swept the mountain, burning the pine forests. Weakened trees were attacked by wood borers and died. Now the people are replanting the entire forest with tiny seedlings they bring up with pack horses. Every time they go up the mountain, they carry a few seedlings with them. Horses bring with them thistle seeds in their guts, and thistles are spreading fast along the trail.
Replanting the burnt forest is pragmatic, as the pines are regularly harvested. They don't cut them down for timber. Many a mature pine is deeply scarred at their foot, machete notches where slivers of timber were chopped away. Wounds are covered in globs of pine resin, the pitch, which is the object of the exercise. Guatemalan pines, ocote, Monterrey, Caribbean and many others, produce fragrant smelling resin, incense of Maya rituals. Generic name is "ocote", and you can buy various grades of ocote in the markets, both resin and the splinters of wood saturated in it. Ocote resin is ephemeral and fragrance evaporates fast. If you keep it for six months, it will degrade into plain firewood, with no smell at all.
Emerging above the pine forests, you reach the false summit, Yepocapa, at 3880 metres, one of the recent volcanic vents which erupted in December 1972. Clouds thin out for a moment, you can see down the valleys and ahead of you a long black ridge covered in ashfield leading up to the main summit, a steep slippery slope built out of tiny ball bearings. Then the cloud covers you again and you curse and swear all the way to the main crater, slipping on the devilish rollers, not seeing a thing.
The main summit blew up the last time in 1924 and kept at it for three years. Today the crater is a dismal bleak place, a shallow dish about 100 metres across, full of coarse black volcanic ash that fell from the neighbouring Fuego. The main summit may be classified as dormant, but it is breathing all right. Along the crater rim I found active vents, burrows into the bowels of the earth. Leading horizontally into the slope, size of a wombat hole, they were blocked about a metre in, full of small white crystals. Hot gas was emerging from the vents. I sat down on top of one hole to warm up as I scribbled down my rough notes.
In many cultures the crater of an active volcano is seen as an entrance to netherworld. In here the main public entrance was obviously the spewing crater of Fuego, and these sneaky little vents were side doors to Hell, or as my love put it, the Staff Entrance.
I collected two big handfuls of volcanic ash from the vent, to put into my Elegguá. He is an Opener of the Doors, and a door to Hell was opened right here, under my bum.
Complete white-out on the summit, visibility 10 metres. I built a few simple cairns to find the way back, walked around the rim, stopped at every white memorial cross, then I sat down to wait for weather. The only orientation came from periodic explosions of the Evil Twin less than a kilometre away. There is no independent trail up to Fuego crater, you have to summit Acatenango, descend into the saddle between the two, then climb to the crater. I would have loved to climb the active crater of Fuego, but in a white-out I would loose far too much time blundering around, blind. I had to be content with an occasional glimpse of Fuego below me when the torn clouds let in a few rays of sun.
In spite of my cairns I soon lost the track on the return trip, but corkscrewing down the slope, guided by the sound of eruptions over my shoulders, I rejoined the trail below the ash fields. As soon as I slid behind the ridge, freezing wind dropped and conditions improved. I was in no rush to get down. In this miserable weather no guided tours went up and I had the whole mountain for myself. I took my time coming down the trail and reached the road in the late afternoon. Very little traffic, and none driving north, my way. I did not care. I had a great day and did not feel like facing the rush of the world just yet. The trail starts at a cemetery, outside the village, where superstitious peasants seldom go. At the trail head villagers built several simple kiosks, to sell drinks and trinkets to the tourists. In the falling darkness on a bleak day they were all deserted. I picked the most cosy one, put on all the warm clothes I had, crawled into the sleeping bag and stretched on a bench. Another perfect day.

I spent a month in the Highlands. First fortnight we went around together with my love, doing the tourist things, then testing the craft market circuit, to see what, where and how much. Depositing my cat safely on "Kehaar" in Rio Dulce I hitchhiked back alone, to scramble up the volcanoes, pound the cracked bitumen of the narrow mountain roads.
Highlands are densely populated, narrow roads lead everywhere and for all its apparent chaos transport is well organised and travelling is easy. I mentioned hitchhiking already. On the main highways trucks will give you a ride, in spite of the armed bandits preying on them. One driver explained it to me: the only trucks targeted by robbers are goods carrying vehicles, stuff that can be quickly sold for cash. Delivery vans, domestic goods, Coca Cola deliveries, even drinking water (they carry cash). High value goods carriers now travel with armed guards to protect them. Trucks carting cheap cargo, like tankers full of crude palm oil or liquid oxygen, concrete block deliveries, cattle trucks, these are of no interest to anyone,

and their bored drivers pick up hitchhikers without fear. In the outlying provinces, sparsely populated, with hardly any traffic on the roads, you can rely on the first or second car passing picking you up. I rode on three-wheeled cargo tricycle, inside of an ambulance and with countless cocky farmers on their way to the nearest town. Nobody ever asked for money.
In the crowded Highlands it isn't worth the trouble hitchiking, towns are so close together and bus fares so cheap. Backbone of public transport are "chicken buses", a deprecate sticker applied by some early American traveller for large bodied American school buses. Even today some blog writers rave about riding in a bus together with chickens, goats and pigs. Pure horse shit. In a month on the chicken buses I haven't seen a single chicken transported, not because they became extinct, but because there is no room for them. Chicken buses are crammed beyond capacity with people, with more hanging like clusters of grapes in the doorway. As for goats, they are hardly any goats in Guatemala. And pigs are moved on hoof, led on a string.
Chicken bus owes its origin to an American law that General Motors once pushed through the Congress (remember? What's good for General Motors is good for America?) By that law after certain number of miles all school buses in USA have to be sold and new vehicles purchased, supposedly for the safety of the children. That prescribed number of miles is being constantly reduced, to feed a demand for new buses, keeping General Motors in business. After measly 150 000 miles, while the vehicle has another half a million in it, Blue Bird from Indiana is sold down to Guatemala. Bigger engine is installed, together with a split dif and a mountain gearbox, brakes are beefed up. Body gets a colourful paint job, some Jesus stickers, original hardback seats are compressed to squeeze 71 people sitting, plus 20 standing on one leg in the minuscule aisle in the middle. Highlands are so crowded that every few minutes there is a brightly painted chicken bus thundering down the road, all filled to capacity. Fares are dirt cheap, people tolerant and operators helpful when you are not sure where exactly you are heading. Just don't drag a big backpack with you. Sure, they can tie it on the roof rack, but getting it down is a fast manoeuvre. Buses don't dawdle, not even on the major stops. Brakes squeal, people hop off, their bags are dumped from the roof into the dust of the road, meanwhile new passengers were pushed in and the bus roars off, conductor sprinting behind it at a fast clip. Screaming along the mountain stretch of 4-lane Pan American highway, taking the tight bends at 3G, gas pedal flat on the floor, big Caterpillar engines roaring in the thin air of 10 000 feet altitude, all the adrenaline for a price of a dollar. My kind of travelling.
If you have time, weather holds fine and your swag is manageable, a stroll along a mountain road is as good as a hike. You can pick any mountain road, even in popular areas like around Lake Atitlan. Outside of designated Gringotenangos you will meet no other tourist, you will walk through the coffee and corn fields with hardly a car passing you, tramping for hours up and up and up, amid the million dollar vistas and airy lookouts that will take your breath away. I love Alta Verapaz in particular.

My favourite place in the Highlands is a small market town of Chichicastenango. Central America is full of place names ending "-tenango". In nahuatl it means "the place of". Nahuatl is not a language of Guatemala. It was spoken by Aztecs from Central Mexico. Spanish conquistadores, pushing south from Mexico, hired nahuatl mercenaries to help them subdue the Maya Highlands, and these guys named for them the local geographical features. "Chichicaste" is a nahuatl name of a plant, a particularly nasty kind of a stinging nettle common in the Highlands. How bad the sting is, I am not sure, I wasn't stupid enough to experiment. Place names can be so revealing: I can see the barefoot Mexican army cursing their way through the stands of particularly nasty stinging nettles, taking their revenge by naming an important town after them.
Chichi is conservative. I heard from Quiche traders that when they go into remote villages in the hills, buying their hand woven fabrics, they have to come with a local contact, who will introduce them and will vouch for them, otherwise the villagers will not deals with them. And that's their own Maya people. Imagine what a foreigner is facing. He can pass, with no problems, but no one will interact with him at all. 98.5% of the Chichi population is pure Quiche, with about half of them speaking no Spanish at all, after 400 years of Spanish domination. Now that's a strong culture. Maya society has always been xenophobic, and keeping the bloodlines pure was the major task of their kings and rulers. A lot of this attitude remains, otherwise Maya would have intermingled much more with their invaders. Pure blood lines may explain why the highlanders remain so short in stature. Guatemalan women are shortest in the world. Imperial College in London puts them at 149 cm average, 4'10". Report notes that Chapinas grew 4" taller over the past century, 1911 census put their average at 139 cm. Their men are only marginally taller.
Splashed down the slopes from a sharp ridge about 2000 metres above the sea level, Chichi centres on the church of St. Thomas with a large square below it. Church itself is massive squat earthquake baroque, no

different from many other catholic edifices, but the way locals treat it is different. Spanish built it on top of an old Maya ceremonial platform, 18 semicircular steps leading up to it, each step for one month of Maya calendar. To this day Maya priests and seculars alike venerate the white washed steps, more than the church built on top of them. At the very bottom of the steps a large flat stone hosts a sacrificial altar. The flat stone is the altar itself, with incense offerings that has been smoking continuously for centuries, fed with fresh resin every day.
Several market stalls below the church sell different kinds of crude incense, resin, candles and aromatic kindling. Some wrapped in a leaf of maize, some worked into sticky balls, some sold as bundles of twigs, it's hard to figure what is what. I bought a few bits of each, for the day when I will cast my Elegguá.
First thing in the morning, I am sitting on top of the Maya steps, on a stone bench in front of the church, overlooking the awaking plaza. Lazy smoke from wood fires curls up from the market, pats-pats-pats of women slapping the first batch of tortillas, hairy dogs with broad chests curled in the corners, shivering porters awaiting a customer. Steps were swept clean of plastic rubbish by the Municipal cleaner, and now a Maya priest in Adidas sneakers comes to renew the fire on the altar. Helped by a bespectacled middle class acolyte in a business suit they build a small circular pyre from a bundle of candles and various kinds of resin, then light it with a piece of crumbled newspapers. Mumbling his benedictions in Quiche, waving his hands over the smoking pile, the shaman also lights an incense holder, an old can from Nestle powdered milk, full of resins. As soon as it's smoking profusely, priest walks into the important points along the steps, swinging his can, mumbling incantations. Meanwhile people walk up and down the steps, bunch of women sell flowers half way up the stairs, other folks light their own Nestle incense cans, porters nod on the topmost bench, market dogs prowl around looking for a feed, life goes on unaffected by the rituals. The next morning a different shaman takes over, keeping the offerings smoking. Dressed in a tracksuit and sandals, their actions feel natural and commonplace, none of the formal church ceremony.
Topmost step around the church ends in a stone bench running the length of the church wall. Porters hang around here the whole day. Their tools of trade are a head band and a piece of string. They seem to drink the meagre income as soon as they get some. Alcohol and hallucinogens were always parts of Maya life. By the afternoon drunks are lying dead all over town, stretched on the pavement, some even snoring in the middle of the road. Porters are all drunk by mid afternoon, barely able to climb the church steps so they can roll onto the bench and fall asleep. Ten minutes later a client may summon him by a gesture. Porter stumbles uncertainly down, his course all over the compass, yet a few moments later you can see him mincing his tiny steps down the road, perfectly coordinated and sure footed, bent forwards, his cargo sash across the forehead, holding enormous bundle of merchandise on his back, stall table balanced on top of the load, wooden trestle across his chest, in a low whistle demanding a right of the way from the pedestrians. Everything is carried slung from the head band.
Chichi is famous for its craft market. The largest and best collection of Maya handicrafts, handwoven fabrics, embroidery, pottery, masks, everything. Intermingled with hand made items are machine made textiles, some looking as good as hand made ones and you have to know your stuff to judge correctly the value of items you are buying. Asking prices are outrageous, but spending an extra day in Chichi, getting to know the local dealers, will bring the prices to reasonable levels. I came back to the highlands specifically to buy in this market, and my love returned on her own a fortnight later. Anything you can find in the whole country is represented here, traders bring their merchandise from the whole of Guatemala. There is a place in the centre of the market, craftily hid from the casual tourists browsing the isles, where the local women buy and sell their own clothes, second hand, the famous hand woven huipiles in black, purple and red designs. I found that corner, backing the Municipal Theatre, and I bought some fabulous pieces, for a fraction of what they were asking in the front stalls.
I brought home a sack full of hand woven fabrics and embroideries and I brought home inspiration. The most important written Maya document that survived Spanish destruction was preserved in Chichi. A copy of Popol Vuh, a long epic about creation of the world and early history of Quiche people resurfaced in the early 18th century, before it was hidden again by the shamans. Chichi is proud of their heritage, and many contemporary murals are related to stories from Popol Vuh. All along the Municipal Hall, inside the covered market, in odd corners, whacked out murals were painted by local artists in the past two decades, and they inspired my own reinterpretation of Maya motives. You don't have to understand what the murals literally mean. To Maya they mean one thing, and to me something completely different, but they talk to all of us. Back on "Kehaar" I got painting again.

At the end of September my love took a plane home. She stopped for a month in the States to visit her brother, then on to Darwin. We planned it that way from the beginning. She had her two year holidays in

South America and what was left to the trip was not her forte. Pacific is a lot of sailing with a few short stops in between and my love does not enjoy sailing. I was going to bring "Kehaar" home by myself.
I still wasn't sure which way I will go. In the first days in Rio Dulce I found Carlos the Welder and I went to talk to him about towing my boat on a trailer to the Pacific coast. Carlos is well known. He is busy and nobody has anything nice to say about him. He is welder and a wheeler dealer. He spent a long time working in USA and he came back with a strange attitude: he despises his clients. When the job works out, everything is fine, but when he makes a mistake, he refuses to accept it. He would throw the welded bits to you onto the floor like a bone to a dog and insists you pay. If you don't like the way he did it, pay up and get the hell out of here. Take it somewhere else to have it fixed.
I met him a number of times, Rio is a small town. He took me to have a look at his boat trailer, too. He built it himself, a four-axle 16-wheeler capable of taking 20 tons, a deep slot in the middle to accommodate the keel. 14 wheels were currently missing, "someone else is using them," he said. Trailer has to be custom rebuilt for each job, and your boat is welded into a cage, once it is sitting on a trailer.
Sure, he will take my boat to the other side, US$ 3500, not negotiable. A bit steep, I thought, but I had the money. It wasn't the price that put me off, it was the man himself. Better I got to know him, less I felt like entrusting him with my boat. Once she is out of water and on his trailer, he's got you by the balls. And by all accounts that's when he will squeeze. None of the locals would outright badmouth Carlos behind his back, they all needed his welding services, but strange and alarming stories were floating around. Carlos himself kept coming with surprises. One day he asked me how tall is the boat. I showed him a photo of "Kehaar" and told him. – "Too high," he said, looking at the picture, "we have to cut that seat on the back. Don't worry, we'll weld it back." – He pointed at a seat on my transom that supports the solar panel. His chosen route leads under a low bridge and "Kehaar" would not fit. I wasn't happy about cutting anything off my boat in hope he will feel like making it right later on, not with his reputation.
Then came the business of the mast. He rigged up a derrick on his trailer, to take the mast down, then step it up again. I looked at the spar he was using as a gaff, an old flimsy mast from a 30-foot yacht, and it was clearly not strong enough for my job. We needed to lift a quarter of a ton steel lamp post 8 feet up through the mast collar in my deck. It's one thing lowering a lightweight mast stepped on deck, and another thing altogether, keel stepped spar. I know, I stood up my stick without a crane in the Philippines. Hiring a crane in Guatemala would set me back a $1000, I asked.
On the Pacific side he will drive the trailer down a ramp and tide will float the boat up. The only ramp suitable is inside a Navy Marina, at US$ 40 a day. That's also the only place you can tie up. Then comes stepping of the mast, rigging it up, welding in the seat, stocking up the boat and all the inevitable jobs you never thought of. At $ 40 a day I could see how every mishap will pile up the additional costs. About that time I discovered that all the permits and paperwork I paid hundreds of dollars for became redundant, as government changed the rules, and I will have to cough up $ 400 more just to get an outbound clearance from Guatemala. Locked inside a Navy Yard I couldn't do a runner, I'd have to pay the fees. And then a bloke I met told me how Carlos once stopped his convoy in the mountains and demanded more money from the skipper, or else he will walk away and leave the trailer with the boat right there. It started to look like a $ 5000 nightmare.
September was far too early in the season to move. September is the worst of the hurricane season. I had to wait till the end of November, before we could start, whichever way it will be. Logical arguments lined up both ways, about fifty-fifty each side, for and contra. I went for two months bumming around the Central America. When I made the final decision in November, it came from the pit of my stomach. And it was clear, without hesitation. It was "No". I did not trust the guy.

Chapter 14: To make Elegguá

People often ask me: "What do you actually DO all that time, out there at sea?"
Let's dispel a common misconception first: "Cruising is moving a boat across the sea." Most of the time on a cruise is spent on everything else but moving a boat across the water. Even while tying a loop, the standard Trade Wind Circumnavigation of the globe, cumulative time actually spent at sea is no more than 8 to 12 months, depending on the size of your boat. A quick loop takes about three years, which means that two third of time is spend in a harbour or in a marina. So the question really is, what do we do in the harbour, for two years?
Cruising scene is dominated by post-middle aged retired couples, self-opinionated snobs who dragged their suburban values and bigoted outlook into marinas. Small trickle of money is the only thing they are sure of, in every other aspect their insecurity is glaring. They regularly contribute to cruising websites, describing

their hair rising adventures, like when they had to anchor for the first time, after two years of cruising, because their engine broke down and they could not enter a marina. Blow by blow account. Friendliness and competence afloat decrease sharply with increase in waterline length. So does linguistic and cultural prowess.
Once safely in a haven, most people spend their mornings on the local radio net, shooting breeze with other sailors. Daytime they are working on their vessel, keeping up its resale value for the day when it's finally over. Before sunset they would have the "drinks" and on some evenings they visit other boats parked nearby, their cruising buddies from the previous harbours. Cruising community is broken up by the language spoken, and even within English as native tongue ingrained cliquishness keeps the former colonies apart. Contact with native population is naturally avoided, and even white inhabitants of floating ghetto are kept at a distance unless they are introduced by a trusted friend. Only Aussies and Kiwis are friendly to everyone. Slavs afloat are a law unto itself.
On "Kehaar" it works different. We have no radio, so we don't waste time on morning net. Value of my boat was zero when I built her, and it's been hovering either side of zero ever since, so the only work I do is keeping her seaworthy, which takes about a week of work and $1000 a year, on average. Between us we do speak a number of languages, but we seldom find a common topic of conversation with neighbouring crews. We don't watch TV, I have no shares, no properties back home, no blocked credit card, nothing to fix on the boat, so nothing to talk about with the skipper. Socialising is stiffly old fashioned: cross-gender conversation is rare. Boys talk to boys, girls talk to girls. My love found the cruising ladies utterly boring in their blinkered existence.
There is a youthful backlash to this trend. You will not meet them in respectable marinas, they do not vent their opinions in the forums on-line, but in the shallow ends of free anchorages you come across a new generation of intrepid sailors. Young kids, second generation sailors, who were born and grew up on boats while their parents cruised the world 20 years ago. Predominantly French, with a sprinkling of Poms and a few Hispanics, they are typically in their early twenties, on their second or third boat, unpainted 30-footer that they bought for peanuts in some forgotten fishing harbour and sailed across Atlantic to the warmer climes. They are always broke, and their CV make them unsuitable for traditional employment, but they are not concerned with regular income, they know money comes when you need it. They all speak a handful of languages, they can sail anything anywhere, have no problems talking to anyone and they are not afraid to venture where noonsite.com says it's too dangerous to go. They party hard and live their lives the way they want. We met them in Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala… Martinique is their favourite base in Caribbean. They are always looking for a chance to make a buck, and end up with jobs no-one in their sane mind would approach. When they come unstuck, they don't cry for help, but climb out of the hole by their own wits, helping each other.

Roland took a shady job with an elderly Swedish yachtsman. Roland grew up on a boat, then married a young French lady, a fellow bird of passage. They live on a neat 36-footer, where they raise their two small kids. Loath to return to the Metropolitan France just to earn money, they battle along on local opportunities. In Venezuela Roland was asked to skipper a boat to Grenada. The yacht in question had a history. Her previous owner, another Swede, fell foul of Venezuelan authorities and his boat was confiscated. The old man was dying and couldn't care less what happened to his vessel, so he sold her cheaply to a fellow Swede, a certain Bjorn. New owner didn't know a thing about sailing, he tried to have the vessel released, but bureaucracy was too complicated, so he hired Roland to help him do a runner. It's only 200 miles to Grenada, an independent English-speaking country where paperwork can be sorted out easily. Yacht was tied up in a marina, and one night boys dropped the lines and motored out of Puerto La Cruz.
The boat hasn't moved for 5 years and her engine lasted several hours, getting them a few miles away from the beach. By the first morning motor was dead. Coast of Venezuela is very light on wind, and heading for Grenada you are pushing into it, against the current. They were not making any progress and Bjorn decided to sail into the next harbour, Cumana, to fix the engine. A cardinal mistake: once you did a runner, you never come back, under no conditions. As their luck had it, Venezuelan President was arriving that very day to Cumana to inaugurate a new Coast Guard program, to intercept smuggling out of his country. Bjorn and Roland were caught in the dragnet. Without proper departure papers they were arrested and boat impounded again.
Bjorn shouldered the blame. They hired a lawyer, who got Roland out on bail, while the boat was lifted out of water and Bjorn placed under house arrest. Both their passports were confiscated so they could not leave the country. Conditions of the release were clearly spelled out: upon payment of US$10 000, each,

their passport will be returned and they can go.
Roland declared he had no money at all, and no possessions to offer. Officials shrugged their shoulders, deciding that if they keep him long enough, he will borrow money somewhere and pay his ransom. He was allowed to move around the state surrounding Cumana, but not further, and every week he had to report at the court house. Lawyer was a lawyer, sucking money, filling paperwork, dragging his feet, achieving nothing. Roland tried every possible legal way to sort out the morass, but nothing worked. French Consul washed his hands, declaring it was an internal problem of Venezuelan Government and the only thing he could do was to issue Roland with a Safe Conduct to Grenada, to the nearest French Embassy.
Roland knew that the moment Venezuelans got the wind of his true situation, he will loose everything. His own yacht was tied up in our marina in Puerto la Cruz, with his wife and kids awaiting his return. First thing they did was fly out his family to Martinique. Then his mate, young Maxmillian, another boat-born Frenchman, flew in from Guadeloupe and took over Roland's yacht. We were watching their departure next to us. Officials smelled something fishy about that boat, and they dragged the paperwork for entire week, but finally Max was free to sail out. Once the word came back that Max made it to Martinique, Roland had to get out himself. The nightmare has been dragging on for 8 months now. All that time the lawyer was spouting rhetoric, sponging money, producing nothing. I saw Roland loose his temper with the slimy bastard and give him an ear bashing over the phone in deep gutter Castellano that taught me a few expressions.
Boys arranged the get-away like a military operation. Roland is a dark-skinned Mediterranean type, speaking flawless Spanish, and he can easily pass for a local. Dressed in cheap rags he paid fishermen to take him out to Testigos Rocks, the furthermost point of Venezuela, out in Caribbean sea. A small Coast Guard station and a few fishermen's huts is all that you find on Testigos. That night Maxmillian swung by with his own yacht and sprung him out. Two days later they were in Grenada, and out of the quagmire.

Back to Elegguá. So what do we do all that time on "Kehaar", with no-one to visit? I hope this book gives an idea what can be done during an extended cruise. Learning new languages and their cultures, travelling overland by local transport, dabbing in art, craft and music, that sort of things. All of that can be part of most improbable projects. I can't discuss it with other yachtsmen, they think already I am completely nuts, no point confirming it.
I will let you in on my current foolishness. A side project I've been slowly picking on for a year now, an absolutely useless and unnecessary endeavour that's been a heap of fun. I am building myself an authentic house idol, according to established rules of "Santeria". A little stone effigy. I am serious. A statue to inhabit our house shrine, the way they do it in tropical America. Which means it can't be that serious, if it comes from Central America. Those of you with deep religious prejudices, please skip the rest of this chapter. You are too straight for it and I do not want to offend your feelings. Seriously. Sort of.

Like every heretic I am deeply religious. Don't get me wrong. I didn't catch religion in my dotage. I would describe it as a fundamental awe which I feel every time I contemplate the esoteric questions about this life and world. A wide-eyed "Whoooow!" Maybe more reverent.
I was brought up a stern atheist, as befitted a son of a dedicated communist official in Eastern Europe of the Cold War days. I was always curious about everything, but my inquiries remained on cerebral level. I kept questioning everything. I studied Bible, not as a holy book, but as a text, eclectic bunch of ancient writings about long dead kings and peoples in faraway lands. A doctrine that approves incest and enshrines confused notions of sin was repulsive to me. You want to base your morals on what?
As an alternative to unsatisfactory western religions I read widely on Eastern esoterics, essential core texts, serious treaties, whacked out derivatives, everything. I found many parts interesting, some concepts rung a bell of resonance, but on the whole it didn't sound practical.
The other end of metaphysical spectrum fared no better. My maths and physics are sound and at University I devoured fat volumes dealing with particle physics and relativity. Better I understood the concepts, more bewildered I became. This is physics? This is science? It sounded very much like Eastern sages. I could see why the leading physicists of the day were inclined to mysticism. The glorious Big Bang is nothing more than a nod to creation, as described in the opening paragraphs of Genesis: something sprung from nothing. Actually, everything sprung from nothing. This is the best that science can come up with? Tell me another one.
While trading along the East African coast I begun leaning towards folk Islam. Not the deranged fundamental version, but the simple honest ways of the village mullahs. I found the teachings and ethics much more palatable than Christianity, and I lived their life style already, but again, the very notion of

unquestionable doctrine felt like a straight jacket. Thou shall obey. Who says? By what right?
Parallel to my search for a personal world view I had several profound experiences which made me question the general notion of cause and effect, flow of time and relation between mind and matter. Nothing mystic, no visions, no meditation, no drug induced states. Strange and powerful occurrences in my daily life, a few crucial moments that sent my life rolling in unexpected directions, things which could not happen in an orderly materialistic world, if it was working along the ways that we were taught at school. I wrote about that in "Out of census." It went way beyond coincidences and synchronicity. It seemed to suggest that powerful emotions, coupled with deep need and a totally focused mind can alter material reality in fundamental ways. Experiences so weird, that I had to loosen the fabric that held my world view together. I was no longer sure of my materialism.
In Tasmania it was dealt the final chop. Living on a block up in the mountains I got involved with country dowsers. None of the new-agey hokus-pocus, just a bunch of down to earth pragmatic farmers helping their daily lives any way they could. Our chief was a true red-neck, an ex-patrolman from New Guinea, a cop. On retirement he moved to Tasmania to run a dairy. And his cows started dying one after another, while experts had no answer. Finally an old dowser went for a walk over his paddocks with a rod, and came back with a simple statement: "You have a selenium deficiency, mate". The old bloke was right, and a salt lick rich in selenium fixed the cows, none died after that. The retired copper scratched his head and asked the dowser to teach him the craft. That was a start of a remarkable career which centred on solving problems. We had no theoretical framework to hang our successes and failures on, but we had practical results. Water wells, improved pastures, limiting pest infestations, one older biddy was really good in her medical diagnostics.
I was into earth energies. I was dowsing for "stones", pebbles which seemed to help sorting out problems. I had no idea how it worked, but it worked fine. Amongst other things I cured my friends' two year old son from a chronic ailment that no doctor could even diagnose. I didn't ask the rod what was wrong, I asked what could be done to help the kid. Answer was a river pebble I located a few miles away. Kid put it under his pillow and his ailments disappeared. His fits never returned, not even when I quit this line of work.
Mostly I was working with my own farm, an impoverished bush block in the headwaters. We were placing coils made of fencing wire, here and there in the paddocks, in specific places, in specific ways. I still had no idea what was happening, but it worked and my farm slowly improved. Possums stayed out of my fruit trees, garden was prospering where before it was a battle. Then one day I tripped. I placed a new coil under a huge spreading blackwood tree growing alone in the middle of my pastures. I knew right away that I did something wrong, I felt that the coil I stuck in the ground wasn't quite correct, but I left it there. Three days later I went back to check on the sheep that used to camp under that blackwood tree, and that tree was dead. My blood froze in my veins. Every leaf of that massive healthy evergreen was brown, every twig withered, small branches already dropping to the ground. My coil killed it. In three days.
I was stunned. It shattered what was left of my previous world view. How could a simple loop of wire stuck in the ground just inside a drip line kill a mature tree? I stopped dowsing, for good, then and there. Imagine it was that kid and not a blackwood tree, when I made a mistake?

So where do I stand? Honestly, I have no idea how this caboodle, our daily world, holds together and what makes it tick. The most sensible idea seems to be physics of David Bohm with his hierarchy of orders and his Holographic Universe, but it is only a speculative mathematical model, it's thin, it gives little practical framework to hang your believes on. So I am left with that awe I mentioned in the beginning, and from time to time I feel like saying "Thanks you". To whom or to what I am saying a thank you, I have no idea, but the feeling of humble submission is there. I firmly believe that human being is far from the top of the heap, there are things and orders much higher than us, but we are probable unable even to grasp how much higher they are, not to say what they are.
My believes have no formal rituals. After every ocean passage I light a candle in front of my altar, to say "thank you". I made that altar in Palawan, in the Philippines, when we were living on the beach. A bit of fancy carpentry, laminated hardwood shrine about 16 inches high, a corbelled arch with little doors on the front. The whole inside is a naive painting. Night scene in a desert, pretty and romantic, but I always felt the altar was not complete. The space inside is empty, but I did not feel an effigy would belong in there. Something else was missing, but I didn't know what. Until a Customs' inspector in Cuba provided me with the answer.
One of the ways to improve your language is to read books in it on a subject that you are really interested in. In Venezuela I bought a few slim Spanish volumes dealing with "santeria", a religion originating with black slaves transported to Caribbean islands. I got engrossed in the subject. Not as a religious study. I

treated the whole more as an artistic inspiration, and it seeped through into several of my paintings from that period. More I read on santeria, more I was enjoying myself. Such a playful way to deal with such a grave subject.
There are several related systems of believes in tropical America, santeria, candomble and voodoo. Experts call them "syncretic" religions. Syncretic means a mixture of two religions, but in these cases it's a grossly unbalanced mixture. Slaves borrowed names of Catholic saints and overlaid them on African Orisha deities, but the myths, legends, morals and stories were not contaminated by Christian doctrine. Orishas, old Yoruba gods from Nigeria, were androgynous shapeshifters, changing their sex and form as it suits them, and they behaved like the most depraved human beings. Incest, rape, murder and cannibalism are common and never questioned nor condemned.
Santeria was born and developed by blacks in Porto Rico and Cuba, and emigrants take it with them wherever they move, so currently Cubans are spreading it over Florida, Venezuela and parts of south America leaning left. Porto Ricans brought it to the States, with strong presence in New York. Fidel Castro never meddled with religion of his people, so you can talk to Cubans openly about santeria and they are happy to take you along to see their local "babalao", the priest, in his shrine.
Our very first hour in Cuba, as we were going through the customs check in, "Kehaar" was full of uniforms, all poking their noses into every drawer. One of the officers searching the boat looked at my wooden altar in the corner and tapped his finger at its shut doors: "What is this?" – I opened the little doors to show him. He smiled: "Ah, … Elegguá," he nodded his head in understanding. Elegguá, The Lord of the Pathways, The Opener of the Doors, one of the principal Orishas venerated in Santeria. Every Cuban house ought to have its own little Elegguá to guard the doors and lead your path, and no ritual of santeria will succeed without his help, without him opening the Doors of Perception. In spite of the solemnity of the moment, the entry formalities into communist Cuba, it was like a globe suddenly lighted up inside my noodle. I always knew that my ships' altar was incomplete, but I could not hit on the right ingredient to finish it. Now I got it. Nothing physical was missing, what I was lacking was understanding of what I already had. My altar did not contain Elegguá, my altar WAS Elegguá himself. That chap from the Customs recognised it for what it is.
Altars of Orishas, called "cauldrons", do not have codified shape or form. Every babalao builds his own the way he understands it, following only the roughest of guidelines, and my altar could have easily fit one interpretation of Elegguá. I had built myself a little "Opener of the Doors" without knowing it.
When the officials left, I sat down behind my chart table and turned back to look at my new found Elegguá. My altar was finally complete. And I knew that I had to build another Elegguá for our big boat in Darwin, consciously, starting from scratch. You can't buy Elegguá in a shop. The only way to come by Elegguá is to make one. When a babalao dies, Elegguá from his shrine is retired. Nobody will use one made for someone else, for it is not a likeness of a deity. When properly made and initiated, it is the deity itself and the maker puts something of himself into the statue as he completes it. Every Elegguá is made specifically for an adept, by a long and complex process. Instructions are not secret, and I found several descriptions in the santeria literature. They varied to a such a degree, that it gave me a lot of artistic leeway. That's the project I've been working on. I was building myself a house idol, somewhere to direct my "thank you" to.

There is no prescribed shape how Elegguá is meant to look, but most examples that I saw were grey dumpy roundish statues, like an egg standing on a flat base, or a sugar loaf. In size they ranged from about 10 inches tall to over two feet. The big one was in the beer garden of a bar that babalaos frequent in Santiago de Cuba. Statues are shapeless grey eggheads with few details. For eyes, ears and mouth they all had small cowrie shells set into the stone. Cowries are important in Santeria. No, babalao does not accept payment in cowries, that's in the Pacific. Caribbean babalao is happy with dollars, pesos, cigars and grog as his wages. Cowries are used in divination, throwing them on a mat and reading the pattern they form. Other than a few shells, Elegguá's head is bare. And a simple head shape is all there is to him. A lump of masonry sitting on the ground.
The main ingredients of Elegguá are soils; dirt collected from specific places. Being the opener of the doors and a guardian of the paths, localities tend towards openings and pathways. One authoritative text lists the following:
-earth from the crossing of four ways,
-dirt from jail
-from the atrium of a church
-earth collected from bakery

-from hospital
-anthill
-the stones of an open field.
Into that you stir herbs sacred to Elegguá, honey, grog, 29 coins of specific value, and a turtle head. The whole is held together with cement. Ordinary Portland cement from a hardware. Technically Elegguá is not a stone carving but a lump of concrete. It has always been done that way. Santeria is practical and cement has been around for centuries. Romans built their aqueducts out of concrete 2000 years ago.
Santeria has no sacred books, no codified instructions, no dogmatic rituals. Babalao pass his handwritten notebook onto his disciple, so no list is binding and every babalao adapts it to his or her liking, the way they feel about it. In Caribbean you can do what you get away with. I scanned the list above, to see how I felt about it. I did not like the hospital in it. I do not see hospitals as openings into anything, except maybe an netherworld. We go to hospital to die, in which case a cemetery would be more fitting. I substituted "cemetery" for a "hospital" in my own cooking list. Mulling over it, I thought the list was unbalanced, it lacked soil from more spiritually profound gates. Church was a gate up, but where was a gate down? I scribbled in a "gate to hell". In many traditions active volcanoes are held to be entrances to underworld, so gravel from a crater of active volcano will do. Maya hold that cave entrances are also gates to netherworld. Fine. Give me a cave.
Next I looked up the herbs in my list. I recognised cinnamon, but my dictionary did not have any of the Spanish names of the flowers mentioned. The author, a respected Porto Rican anthropologist, included a few Latin names. The first one I checked was a scientific name of an earth worm, not a plant at all. I was taken aback and consulted another source. Same result. Worm, not a flower. The dear lady pulled her Latin names out of her … conical hat, I guess. So much for authorities. In another book I found yet another list of ingredients, and it was quite different. Oh, good. To hell with anthropologists. I will play a babalao.
By the time I was done with research and started collecting the soils we were in Cartagena, in Colombia, a fantastic walled city with a number of arched gates punched through the fortifications. I counted on the map the gates leading into the city. There were seven of them. A magic number. Perfect. My Elegguá, Opener of the Doors, will enjoy the power from them. I added "soil of the seven gates into a walled city" to my list and a tick next to it when I brought home scrapings in a jar.
Next my love brought me sweepings from inside of a recent tomb that she scored in a cemetery. It was a hilarious story that could not happen outside of Latin America. My cat went for a visit to the country with her friend, and stuck waiting in front of the Municipal Hall till her friend finished her affairs inside, she wandered over to the village cemetery. To practice her Spanish, she engaged in talk with Andres, the graveyard keeper, and asked him if she can take away a handful of soil from his cemetery.
The cemetery was swept clean, concrete all over, but the cheery old fellow obliged by opening a recently emptied tomb and scraped the inside for her with a rake. Without a single question, not batting an eyelid. In Latin America mundane, esoteric, sacred and profane mix freely in everyday reality and a lot of things that would lift an eyebrow in the west are accepted as normal. Girl is asking for a handful of soil from a cemetery. Clearly she has a need of it, what for is no business of mine. So I got my "soil from a cemetery". Right from the inside of a tomb, in a little screw top plastic bottle we labelled "restos de un cadaver desconocido", remains of an unknown body. Five months later, on the day of The Making, I unscrewed the lid, and ominous long "psssst" escaped from the bottle. We exchanged a slow silent look with my love, but we refused to speculate any further.
Some of the soils were easy to gather, some unexpectedly difficult. There is a place called "Four Ways" in Guatemala highlands, Quatro Caminos, a major highway crossing we have passed several times, so that one was easy. Bakery was a hard one. Every bakery I know is spotlessly clean, nowhere to gather even a semblance of dust, not to say soil. I had to settle for the dirt from their driveway. And have you tried to separate anthill from the ants without being bitten scores of times? Gates to hell were a breeze, though, both of them. Volcanic ash from a side vent at the top of Acatenango, and an un-named cave we explored at Coxlampon, complete with pre-Colombian pottery we found right in the back.
29 coins of specific value. I never found what is meant by "specific value", so from my cookie jar of small change I picked 29 coins to represent the world as I know it. My coin collection are leftovers from my pockets which I empty into the jar every time I leave a country. Coins for Elegguá came from 14 countries, on all 5 continents, leaning heavily towards Africa and tropical America, where Santeria lives. I mixed in a King and a Queen (of Swaziland and England), I included several martyrs and saints, (Rizal, Marti, Cabot), several different trees, including Ceiba, the holy tree of Santeria, and a range of animals, from Australian echidna to golden frog of Colombia. Colombia provides one ingredient I did hope to substitute: the formula insists on a turtle head. 1000 peso Colombian coin features a front end of sea turtle on the face. I feel it is

an adequate substitute, without cheating.
The actual making of Elegguá was simple, quick and easy. On the Sunday of The Making I cleared the back deck on "Kehaar" and lit all kinds of scented holy smoke I collected from the highlands, Maya offerings of copal, ocote, candles, pitch and resins, sweet smoke curling over the waking marina. The previous day I scored a can full of Portland cement from Elvis, our mutton chop neighbour where we were buying ice and bananas. In a large stainless bowl I mixed all the dirt, herbs, coins and stuff, adding a dollop of honey and a content of a hip flask of Aquardiente, the meanest cheapest fire water sold to sink the peasants into oblivion on Saturday nights. Smoking a fat Havana cigar, Elegguá's favourite, I shaped a loaf out of concrete and slapped it on deck to get the bottom flat. Five cowrie shells as eyes, ears and mouth and I covered the whole with a damp rag so it didn't dry but cure. The next day I collected a bag full of leaves of sacred ceiba tree and wrapped the image in them. I left the lump cure in damp leaves for a month, sitting on my chart table.
You have to sacrifice a black chicken over the cured effigy: I settled for the blood of a dark booby that I caught during the Pacific crossing. And we have an authentic Elegguá to look after us in Darwin.

Chapter 15: Bridge between two oceans

The isthmus that joins north to south America consists of Mexico and seven banana republics. In the atlas they look like a bunch of bugs squashed between two big blotches of blue, Caribbean and Pacific. They are not as as small as they look on a map, country I grew up in is smaller yet.
"Banana republic" is a disparaging term coined in American jail. About a hundred years ago, during the great "banana boom," a young American named William Porter arrived in Honduras. He was wanted in the United States for bank fraud in Austin, Texas. Rather than face a trial and a certain verdict of guilt, Porter fled the country and spent about a year in Honduras. He was a keen observer but otherwise little is known of his activities. When he received a news that his wife back in the States was dying of TB, Porter returned home and served a three year stretch in jail.
In prison Porter began writing short stories about Central America which he submitted to magazines under a pen name "O'Henry". In a collection "Cabbages and Kings" he introduced the idea of a "banana republic", a small Central American country totally dependent on a goodwill of large American fruit companies who did as they pleased, dictating economical as well as political terms that furthered their interests. You can find another take on the same theme in Gabo's "100 years of solitude".
Central American countries differ in landscape, history, economy, people, the way they go about things. Each country has its own currency, too, peso, quetzal, lempira, cordoba, colon or balboa. Panama and Salvador use US$ as their currency, good to remember if you need to plunder an ATM machine for genuine greenbacks to change on the black market in Venezuela. Belize stands apart altogether. Former British Honduras, it's flat as a pancake, people are black, they speak English, play cricket and take no part in the Central American squabbles.
Each of the republics have a different relationship with military. In Guatemala and Panama army takes over the government every time they do not like the politicians. In Honduras army is seen as a steadying influence. In spite of countless coups, revolutions, civil wars and uprisings, army has never usurped the right to rule. In Costa Rica their Constitution prohibits the very existence of armed forces. They abolished the Army after a civil war in 1949.

Honduras

Harry Franck, university educated American hobo, a polyglot turned travel writer, walked across Honduras around 1914, from Guatemala to Tegucigalpa, a revolver in the pocket of his trench coat. He walked because the only other option, riding a mule, took longer. He was not impressed, he complains about the endless steep climbs and descends that followed each other, day after day, with trails knowing only how to scramble up or tumble down. That was before the first roads were pushed through, before the era of cars. I was riding "Kraken", my recumbent bicycle, in his footsteps 100 years later and the only thing that changed was the magnitude of the climbs. Nowadays it's a 14km continuous uphill, steep as hell, then 18 km swishing freewheel down, followed by 13km ascend and a 15km drop. Not my preferred cycling country, I like flat deserts. Honduran mountains have no clear backbone, they are not a string of ranges, but a loose jumble of disconnected ridges and valleys running any which way. In Guatemala you climb into the Highlands and hold your elevation. In Salvador and Nicaragua you stay near the sea level. In Honduras it's a scramble 1000 metres of altitude up, scream the same down, push the bike 1500 metres up, 20km

ride downhill.
Roller coaster starts in Quirigua, on Guatemalan side of the border. I took a short cut through a small mountain town of La Union. On the map it looked like the road ends in La Union, but I thought there will be dirt tracks leading further, over the hill to the border and to Copan.
In La Union I asked a tricycle driver. Sure, there is a track, a whole spider web of them, he pointed behind the church up a steep ridge. Not many people drive that way, it's too steep, but once you are over the hill, down on the other side there are villages, roads, people, transport. Just be careful, when you come to the cross road, turn right, that leads back to the highway and the border post. The left branch runs directly to Honduras and cops don't like gringos going that way.
The hill above La Union was so steep I could push only 50 metres at a time, then I had to stop for a rest. No cars passed me, only an odd motorbike grinding up. 5km to the saddle, then 15 km descend by a roughest wildest most potholed track I've ever ridden. My bike was bouncing like a bronco over the boulders sticking from the road surface, spine jarring jolts in spite of my suspension. I kept the lookout for the crossroad that leads astray to Honduras. There were nine of them. At every junction I stopped and waited for the first motorbike so I can ask the rider which way to go.

Sun was setting as I wheeled my machine through the border crossing into Honduras. Border closes at dark. It's another 10 km to the first town of Copan Ruinas, but it's been a long day and I could not be bothered. I pushed my bike uphill, past the long queue of trucks waiting for the border to open in the morning, and I stretched my sleeping bag on the ground, along the road, hidden by a concrete barrier in a curve.
I did not sleep long. Rain started and we got hosed on. I quickly packed up and freewheeled in pitch dark back to the border, looking for a shelter. There was no shelter. Every roofed area was guarded by an armed patrol and none of them would let me stay. I waited in the closed Customs booth for a break in the rain, and set off for Copan.
Drunken dregs, evicted from the bars at closing time, were stumbling all over Copan, singing in Spanish. I guessed it was after midnight. There was no point looking for a hostel. They would be all closed. In the main square a couple of homeless were sleeping under a roof protecting grandiose entrance to the Municipal Hall. I quietly wheeled my bike under the same roof, leaned it against the Mayor's door and stretched my sleeping bag along the wall. When in Rome, do as Romans do. Chucho the garbage man woke us up long before the sunrise, crushing empty beer cans with his boots.

Southern Highlands of Honduras are a remote country of thickly wooded mountains, small hamlets and isolated shacks, mistrustful reserved peasants and quaint little hill towns every 100 km or so. Further up the mountains, above the forest, it's all pastures. A lot of small dairy farms. Level of hygiene is shocking. Cows are wading in a foot deep mud and shit in the holding pens, their udders encrusted in the same murk, coming out of milking as filthy as they entered. Water in all the creeks and brooks is contaminated, even the poorest peasants have to buy drinking water which is sold in little plastic sachets.
It rained, several times a day, every day, and the climbs became longer and longer. Access to a pretty mountain town of La Esperanza was 30 km uphill climb, and from there this amazing downhill when I did not touch my pedals for 26 km, chasing a crowded minibus in front of me all the way. It was to be the "Kraken's" swan song. The next day my back wheel disintegrated. In Colombia I built a new back wheel, using my old rim and a new hub. In Honduras the rim collapsed, after 8 years of abuse and several serious long rides. Side wall of the aluminium rim broke off. Ground down thin by brake pads, pressure of the overloaded tyre blew it out. I tried to wheel my bike to the nearest town, but the tyre wall blew out next. I was stuck. There was no way to repair my machine in Honduras. On a recumbent bike all the weight is on the back wheel, so it has to be strong, stronger than cheap Chinese crap you find in provincial bike shops.
I sat down next to my bicycle and in a calm mind I assessed the reality. The back wheel was not the only thing wrong. The whole bike was a wreck. More important, I was sick of it. Sick of endless climbs, sick of kids jeering at me, sick of rain, sick of mechanical breakdowns. I felt I became chained to my bike. Instead of means of liberating, it became a weight around my neck. This was not the way to travel. It was fun, but now I needed a change. Without any emotions I unstrapped my backpack from the bike rack, took the handle bar pannier and a sculpted brake lever as a memento and I walked away from my trusty mount. I did not turn back to look at it once as I set off downhill, tramping the 10 km to the nearest town.

In the next few days I walked a lot, feeling free as a bird. Not once did I regret abandoning my machine in such a callous and cold blooded way. I continued with the original itinerary, only now I was walking instead

of riding a bike. I did not want to go via the capital, Tegucigalpa, so I set off boldly south, along the Salvador border. My road map was detailed, but far from accurate. After blundering a whole day down little country alleys and narrow bitumen trails I emerged on a magnificent new 4-lane freeway not marked on any map. It seemed to lead in the right direction, but it carried no traffic whatsoever. I asked a passing peasant if it went to Lamani, next town marked on my map. Yes, Lamani is just over that hill, turn left from the highway.
Lamani was shown on my map as a proper town, not a village, and from a distance it looked big enough to have a hotel and a few shops. I turned off the freeway and walked in until I came to a bunch of guys playing domino at a small table in front of their house. I stopped and asked if they have a hotel in town, or any other form of accommodation. – ”Sure, the hotel is just at the top of this street, you can’t miss it. “ – I followed the direction the bloke indicated with his hand and found the hotel. Single storey, rooms opening into a courtyard. Through the fence I could see the doors of rooms open ajar, rooms empty. I rung the bell. I young lad opened the window in the gate and with a surly scowl asked what I want. A room, that’s what I want, for one night, please. He looked me up and down, thought for a long while then declared that he has no room for me. I turned to look at empty rooms gaping into the yard. He ignored me. Well, no room for me, fair enough. I turned around to go. – “Where you from?” he could not hold his curiosity. My answer was short and unprintable.
I passed the domino players. They were surprised. – “What? No room? Hotel is empty.” – I know. Never mind. Anything else I can try in this town? They suggested professor Lim, one block back from the main square, he lets rooms.
I found the square, I found the house of professor Lim, but his windows were boarded up, no light under the doors, no amount of knocking elicited any answer. Dejected I returned to the park on the main square. Lamani was a strange town. It got dark as I made a round of shops facing the square. I entered a grocery shop and asked the woman behind the counter if they are still open. She looked at me for a good while before she barked: “No,” and disappeared in the back of the shop. A little stall in park sold tacos so I ordered a serve. Girl brought it, passed the plate to me but before I could ask her anything she turned around and went away. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with me.
I ended sitting in park on a wrought iron bench under a tree, right in front of the police station, my little swag between my legs. Park was busy, barely lit by a few street lamps. Teenagers were dating, horsing around, doing their smart phone thing. All very clean and harmless. One character caught my attention, though. A middle aged bloke, a really big man, built like a brick shithouse, stealthily circling the park in the shadows, always looking in my direction. I was tired, it was getting late and I started dozing off. Every time I nodded off, bloke would come much closer and stretch his arm. As soon as I opened my eyes, he scurried away like a kicked dog. On his third attempt I got it. He was trying to steal my backpack. And I saw his face from a close – the guy was a nut, crazy as a coot.
By 10 in the evening most teenagers went home. Door of the police station opened. Three cops with two offsiders came to talk to me. I explained who I was and why I was sitting in the park. – “You can’t sleep here in park,” was their answer. – “I do not want to sleep in a park. Any suggestion where can I go?” – Silence. – “Do you have a jail?” – “No, we don’t have a jail here.” – I told them I’d normally sleep in the fields, but it looks like rain tonight. They were horrified at my suggestion. No way, countryside is too dangerous, you are safest right here, in the main square. After more unproductive chaff they returned to the cop shop. Crazy sneaky thief started his dance again. At one point a cop came out and saw him on the street. They had a heated argument, obviously they were no strangers to each other. Small town. The only thing I understood was cop telling him to leave the damn Gringo alone, or else.
Around midnight door of the police station opened again. An old copper in a singlet, towel around his neck, tooth brush in his hand. He called me over. He led me through the only room in the police station, two chairs and a table, bare walls. At the back, behind the guard room, they had an enclosed court yard with large covered veranda. Cop pointed to a mattress in the corner. – “You sleep here,” and he left me. I heard the key turn in the lock as he closed the door on me. I was literally locked up, happy as a lark.

Before daybreak I woke up the duty officer and with an empty stomach I resumed my march. In Honduras cafe’s, eateries and kiosks open late. Another thing I remembered from Harry Frank’s narrative. I did not feel like waiting in Lamani half a day just to get a few stale tortillas from yesterday.
The road was a surreal experience, something from a post-apocalyptic sci-fi. Imagine a brand new four-lane concrete highway, complete with centre dividing strip, curbs, gutters, drains, culverts, bridges, signs, all shining white concrete, but no traffic on the road. An odd grandma carting a bundle of firewood on her back, half an hour later a caballero riding a horse, some kids playing in the drain. An odd car that passed

was so decrepit, it only drove from one neighbouring farm to the next. Highway was climbing beautiful wild mountain scenery, completely empty of people, no villages, no hamlets, no settlements. Street lamps were patrolling on the crossings but crossings were leading nowhere, smooth concrete branches ending 10 metres from the highway.
I walked for three or four hours before a farmer gave me a ride on the back of his truck. In all that time I have not seen half a dozen vehicles. As if humanity died out. Creepy.
I watched the new painted kilometre markers. At km 61 of the new road the farmer dropped me off at a dusty crossroad in the middle of nowhere, right where the super-duper highway ended. Four lane expressway stopped as if cut off by a knife, turning into a tortured potholed dirt track barely navigable by a truck with high clearance. On a distant hill I could see a wide cut where the earth moving machinery started on the next section of the highway but work was abandoned. Half a mile further a large locked yard full of machinery, concrete plant, mobile offices, all deserted. Money ran out, project was suspended. 61 km of a highway lead nowhere.
I was told to wait at the crossing, around noon there ought to be a bus continuing to Caritas, down the left branch of the track. Road sign pointed right, saying Caritas was that way. I hefted my swag and set off where the sign was pointing. We crossed a wide river on a narrow bridge and half an hour later I stopped to consult my map. It did not show any of the roads, but geography suggested we blundered into Salvador. Road could easily lead to Caritas this way too, but via Salvadoran territory. The river was the line.
Border between Honduras and Salvador is marked only on the maps. On the ground it has never been surveyed, its exact position is contested and locals move across the line at will. You can drive from Honduras to Salvador with nothing to tell where one country ends and the neighbours begin, no posts, no signs, no guards.
I turned back and on the crossing I found that the bus meanwhile went by. There could be another one around two in the afternoon. This time I sat in a shade and waited. The ramshackle eatery sold no food, not until the evening, but I talked the lady in the kitchen into making me a cup of coffee.
On the two o'clock bus I understood why there is so little traffic on the new highway. It really goes nowhere. There is no town nor a proper village in the mountains until you reach the Pacific lowlands. The track we were following was atrocious. 25 km to a little picturesque village of Caritas high up the slopes took over two hour. A proper Honduran road venture, steep hill up, steep hill down, stony ford across dry river bed, scramble up a high ridge, on and on and on, the way Harry Frank complained about it a century ago. Beautiful wild country, very thinly peopled by subsistence farmers.
From Caritas my map showed a thin red capillary heading south. It does exist, but it's too rough for regular transport. Only Bajaj tricycles, like mountain goats, climbing the convoluted dirt trail, then finally dropping down to the wide valley below. Only from there I could continue by a battered minibus. I squeezed in and hoped it will take me somewhere they sell food.
That night I slept on a bench in a park dedicated to the memory of heroes fallen in the Football War between Salvador and Honduras in 1969. Hondurans do not call it Football War, they have a heady patriotic euphemism for it, but it started over a disputed soccer match between the two countries. It would be funny, a war fought over a footy encounter, if it did not cost the lives of 2000 innocent civilians and a quarter of million displaced refugees, landless Salvadoran squatters evicted from the fields they grabbed in the emptiness of southern Honduras. It wasn't about football at all, it was about land.

El Salvador

I love Salvador, because of its people. Salvadorans are the nicest, friendliest and most open minded people of Central America. Salvador is tagged as the most dangerous country on Earth. That's statistics, accurate sums of inaccurate numbers. Yes, disproportionate number of people are murdered in Salvador, but most of it is gang violence in the cities. It does not reflect the relaxed atmosphere in the countryside.
Maras, as gangs are termed, is an urban thing. Country dons, the drug lords, successfully resist maras' push into rural areas. In Salvador I heard stories of cars full of mara members arriving in small country towns, attempting to set up their protection rackets. Outraged local traders, who never heard of paying money so they could practice their livelihood, complained to their patron. Several days later a short paragraph buried on the page five of local newspapers would report four young men found on a quiet country lane, sitting in their car, neat bullet holes in the backs of their heads. Police did not investigate.
Both main gangs, Barrio 18 and Salva Trucha, owe their origin to Los Angeles' streets. During the 70ies civil war thousands of Salvadorans fled their country for the promised land of California. Their kids, with no

skills, no education, no English and no hope to make it in the tough world of immigrants, drifted into the local street gangs. In a few years they took over the scene by their sheer number. Maras started as and always remained gangs of street kids, youngsters. The oldest members are the upper echelon of the leaders, and none of them are 40.
As the gangs matured, Yanks got serious. After jail terms young thugs were deported to their country of origin. They brought back their gangs with them. Disciplined, organised and ruthless, they run protection racket in large cities. Everyone who wants to operate a business of any kind has to pay them off regularly. Alternative is a bullet in the head, during broad daylight, in public. Every day newspapers bring stories of bus drivers executed behind the wheel of their buses because they could not or didn't want to pay. Gangs spread from Salvador to Honduras and now they are pushing into Guatemala. There are no mara in Nicaragua. Daniel Ortega's Marxist government does not put up with that sort of things.

Only once I have run directly into maras, in Honduras. Riding up an interminable gentle hill out of small town called La Entrada, narrow road lined on both sides by slums of temporary shanties, mile after mile. It felt more like an edge of a metropolis than an open country. I was wondering if I got too close to the capital already, something I wanted to avoid.
A black SUV overtook me very slowly and pulled up in front of me, blocking my way. Four guys in T-shirts and sunglasses got out, two blokes covered completely in tattoos, even their hands and faces, and two clean cut playboys. All were in their early twenties. Strangely, the most smooth looking goon was the scariest one. He came over and looked for a long time at my recumbent bike before he dropped the first question: "Catracho?" asking me if I was a local. People in Honduras call themselves "catrachos", after a famous 19th century general. I told him, no, I am an Australian. That word did not register in his dictionary. – "I like your bike," he ventured. My stock reply to that is saying that I like my bike, too. – "How much did it cost?" – I explained that I did not buy my bicycle, I built it myself. It does look that way. He gently grabbed my elbow: "You come with me, you will build me a bike like that." Still sitting in the saddle, I slowly twisted my arm out of his grip while I was describing to him what it took, a workshop, welding equipment, parts, pipes. By then the guys checked me out; it was clear that I had nothing valuable on me, I was just an old bum. The chief pulled out a smartphone and wanted to take my picture. He had no idea how to operate his gadget, obviously they stole it recently. His mates grew bored and two of them returned into their car. After a long time cussing and pushing buttons on his phone the driver gave up and got behind the wheel. As I pushed into the pedals, they drew level at my side, following at the snail's pace as I struggled up hill, before they finally took off.

Trick to safe and enjoyable travel in Central America is to stay away from the big cities. Which makes it travel along the back country roads and forgotten trails not marked on any maps. The main drag, the PanAmerican highway, connects the capitals, which all lay deep in the interior. No road leads along the Caribbean coast of mangroves and swamps. On the Pacific side some bits and pieces may be connected by road, but only 200km stretch in southern Costa Rica has a decent sea front highway. The rest are back lanes and rural roads with very little traffic. Hitchhiking is tedious and local buses so cheap that waiting for a ride makes no sense unless you are flat broke. You spend more money on food and water, while you are waiting for your ride, than it costs to catch a bus. On the back roads buses only go to the next town, so you hop from bus to bus. Fancy long distance coaches run on the main highways inland. They are much more expensive, and they do not stop to pick up strays along the way.

Salvador has good surf. You are constantly reminded of it as you walk along the disused gravel track that hugs the Pacific ocean. There is no traffic on the road and very few people live near the water. Yet in every cove they erected road signs I have not seen elsewhere: "Careful. Surfers wander along the road". I am not sure how many stoned dudes come here in the season, but during the rains there were none. Only locals bobbing like plastic bottles near the headlands, waiting for the wave.
Western half of the coast, from Guatemala border to Libertad has an easy road access. The other half, towards Honduras, is a wilderness. I met two Spanish surfers at a bus terminal in San Miguel and I went with them to La Cuca, one of the few beaches in the east that you can reach by bitumen. Guys were staying further out, in a neat little hideaway two hours walk along the rough coastal track, as far as the regular transport goes. One rickety bus a day, departing in the morning, returning in the afternoon. Nearest shop is 10 km away and it sells very little. You stock up on staples in a supermarket in San Miguel, and top it up with perishables every time ambulant vendors drive by. A loaded pick up selling groceries comes along every other day, as is a fruit and vegies man. Baker's van beeps his horn every morning. Even

an ice cream van swings by in the afternoons and bottled water truck twice a week. Landlord knows where to get local fish and she will buy you some. You cook it yourself in the communal kitchen. It's a real country set up, slow, friendly, cosy and convenient. Unknown number of unmarked bungalows and informal hostels line the surf. They show no signs, they do not advertise. Surfers' grape vine brings their clients. You can rent a cabin, or a bed in a dorm, or for $4 a day you can sling your hammock from the rafters, and use the facilities, shower, toilet, fridge and a kitchen. Perfect place to hole up and have a break from travelling.
In Salvador local buses do not travel at night. First bus leaves about 4 in the morning, the last service about 5 in the afternoon. I was still skirting around the large population centres, sneaking along the secondary roads. One afternoon I got stuck in a small fishing village of Perla. Bus I was riding turned off into the mountains above. It was still daylight, but the last bus heading west, along the coast, already left. I tried to hitchhike, but it was raining and traffic on the road was nil. No trucks use this tortured twisting coastal road, they all run along the straight and easy highways inland. I loafed under a roof of an abandoned shack, hoping against hope that some good soul will roll by and give me a lift, but the narrow ribbon of bitumen was deserted. I could hear the dull rumbling of surf below me, but there was no one chasing a wave today. A couple of locals ambled over, standing under the same roof, imparting the local wisdom. As it got dark I accepted that we will go no further today. The first bus will leave at four in the morning. It was parked at the crossroad in front of me. Until then, deluge of rain.
Hungry, I asked the bloke next to me where can I get something to eat. He motioned with his chin, pointing down the road. – "She cooks meals." – I wandered over to a lonely house across the road that he indicated. No sign, but one of the open walled rooms had two tables and two chairs, a bare dim globe of electric light hanging from a wire above the table. In the next room, also without walls, and old woman was stoking up fire under her tortilla plate, ready to cook. Two old men were sitting on a bench next to the stove. I asked politely if this was a private house or if they cooked for outsiders. – "What do you want to eat?" woman asked. I admitted I will eat anything she will serve. She indicated I sit down in the next room, at a table, and wait. About an hour later she shuffled over with a plate of beans, a scrambled egg, dollop of cream and three tortillas. – "Anything to drink?" – I am not sure why she asked, all she could offer was a glass of water from a tap. I wolfed down the lot, with thanks. It cost a round dollar. The other two patrons relaxed and started plying me with questions. In the end, looking out into the rain, they asked me where am I going to sleep. I shrugged my shoulders. – "I could put you up under the house…" woman started. Eagerly I butted in: "I have my own hammock." – "You have a hammock?" her man said cheerfully. – "Come with me." – He led me down the stairs, and there, under the house, two big steel rings were set in the concrete slab overhead, to sling a hammock. He pointed to the rings and left me to it. Never occurred to them to charge me for the night. So different from treatment I got in Honduras.

You can tell a lot about the country by the red tape you face at the border. More confident the country feels, less hassles. Visa, yellow fever vaccinations, ticket out of the country, proof of sufficient funds, I faced all of them in Central America. In Salvador there is no paperwork when you enter. No visa, no embarkation card, no fees, no stamps, nothing. The officer looks at your passport, checks that you stamped out from the last place you came from and he hands you the passport back without asking a single question. Then he smiles: "Welcome in Salvador". Same when you leave. You are going? Have a nice day. It makes sense, South Americans can travel around by showing their laminated ID card, nothing else. They get no stamps, so why should we.

Nicaragua

Americans accuse Daniel Ortega, Nicaraguan president, of being a dictator. They do that to every leader leaning too far left. For all his faults, Ortega defies such a simple labelling. He led a guerrilla war that overthrew Somoza's dictatorship, which ruled Nicaragua as their private fiefdom for four decades. Then 10 years as an elected president, fighting brutal American sponsored insurrection, the Contras. Ortega lost the next election. People saw him as an incompetent corrupt politician. Ortega dully stepped down, something that south American rulers seldom do, and he spent the next 16 years sitting on the opposition bench. His antagonists were even more corrupt and bumbling than he, and popular vote brought Ortega back to power in 2006. Today newspapers are strongly critical of him again. Not a CV of a typical dictator.

Defining feature of Nicaragua is a huge natural lake. 80 miles long, lake Nicaragua spreads at low elevation, hogging half of the width of the isthmus. In theory it looked like an option to get "Kehaar" to

Pacific. All the plans for a Canal to connect Caribbean to Pacific count on running through this shallow lake. I asked a number of people in Nicaragua about the canal. All agreed it would be a good idea but nobody believed it will happen. Three groups oppose it: environmentalists, indigenous leaders and Americans. So there will be no canal. Not because of the greenies or Indios, but when the Big Boss says: "Hop!", you ask: "How high?" And the man behind the canal, bloke with the money, is a Chinese telecom billionaire from Hong Kong who apparently lost his fortune in a stock market crash last year. No actual work has been done on the diggings, and officially the canal reached the stage of "intent". Again.
As for trucking my boat all the way across the isthmus in Nicaragua, no one though it a realistic option. Country does not have any port on the Caribbean side, not even a large village. Only one narrow road runs across, in the far north, and it leads to nowhere. Mosquito coast is so remote, wild, swampy and underdeveloped that it is a goal of adventure safaris. Looking for a truck and a crane would be a real adventure I could do without. So another theoretical option collapsed into reality.

I like Nico's (that's what people call themselves), proud, friendly, inquiring people. Coming back from Costa Rica I got to the Nicaragua border around sunset. By the time I did the paperwork, paid the fine for not having yellow fever certificate, changed my remaining colones into cordobas, it was night. I stepped out of the terminal into pitch dark. No street lights, no restaurants, no Moon, creepy darkness all over. A crowd of cab drivers rushed in: "Taxi! Taxi!" – I elbowed my way through the wave, telling them I am taking a bus. – "Too late, Mister. No more bus. You take taxi." – I kept walking on and few metres further I saw a barely lit chicken bus full of passengers, revving his engine, ready to leave. I hopped onto the front step and we were off. I squeezed in between the people to get inside, bus was crammed full of Nico's returning from a shopping trip to Costa Rica. Happy that they slipped past the Customs officials, they were shoving, shouting, arguing, laughing, singing, joking, showing each other what they got through the check post, bus was alive. We reached the main highway and really started moving. Someone finally noticed me, at 6 feet 5 and with a long beard I stick out like a scarecrow. All the seats were occupied, so I was standing in the isle, wedged between two passengers. Ceiling of the bus was too low for me to stand straight, so I was crouching like a cripple, every bump and pothole made my head knock into the ceiling. Nico's thought it was hilarious, and they started teasing me, hanging shit on a gringo beanpole. All in a good humour. It felt great. After a fortnight of serious straight faces in Costa Rica with no communication it was so good to be amongst normal people who know how to laugh.
Ordinary people will be good to you; anything to do with tourism and gouging money out of foreigners attracts yellow slimy scum. Pimps, touts, tour agents, guides, anyone connected to tourism is an open in-your-face rip-off artist: "Give me your money Gringo and fuck off." They do not even pretend to put on a civil face. I heard so many stories of blatant rip-off, contempt and patronising greed of tourism jerks; it can completely distort visitors' impression about the people. I go my own way, so my personal experience with Nico's was great.

Latin America is full of well preserved colonial towns, gems of medieval architecture, living museums turned into tourist centres. Nicaragua has two – Granada and Leon. Granada sits on the shores of the Lake Nicaragua. It turned its back on it, though. The city centre is eight blocks from the water, and the lakefront itself turned seedy and neglected. Murky brown water churned by strong breeze, garbage covering narrow beach, thick haze cutting the horizon to a few miles. I could not see the island, volcanoes, nor the opposite shore of the lake.
Town itself is clean and well looked after, like in Cuba. It does not matter that it's looked after by a force of a whip. That's the only thing that average yobbo understands, a whip. Granada is sleek and well set up to extract dollars out of visitors. Rip off is crude. Overpriced restaurants, stale food, pushers angry when you don't buy anything from them, tour touts grabbing you by the arm off the street. I did not like Granada. I came there looking for a lake ferry to take me across to the southern lobe, to San Carlos on the Costa Rican border. Alas, that boat no longer operated.
Leon is the other colonial relict, and I liked it very much. More relaxed than Granada, more run down, more lived in by ordinary folks. Town planners left the old trees standing, shading the sun drenched streets. All you can see from the second storey window of the hostel is an occasional church spire sticking out of the sea of green. People are easy going and relaxed. Buying local newspapers, I ask the vendor first, which is the most serious daily. In Leon the scruffy guy selling the paper looked at the pavement where his rags were laid out and he scratched the stubble on his chin: "Let me see. This one is garbage. That one is lies. That one lies as well. You want most serious one, huh? Take that one over there, it has the most serious lies."

Socialist government spends a lot of money on education, health care and social projects. In unguarded moments Leon felt like Cuba. With one big difference. Food. In Nicaragua there is plenty, it's cheap and it's good. Further away from the Maya heartland you get, fewer tortillas will turn up on your breakfast plate. In Nicaragua they will share your plate with rice. In Costa Rica it will be rice, no tortillas.

Volcanoes was my thing in Nicaragua. A couple of famous ones stick out of the middle of the Lake Nicaragua on the island of Ometepe, twin photogenic cones rising from mist covered lake. Today it is a prime tourist trap and I gave it a miss.
Leon lies at a foot of grandiosely named Cordillera de los Maribios, a short string of active volcanoes running from a perfect smoking cone of San Cristobal in the east to a perfect smoking cone of Momotombo in the west. In absolute elevation Nicaragua volcanoes do not sound impressive, tallest ones summit about 1400 metres above sea, but they start from a flat plain near sea level, unlike in Guatemala where they grow out of highlands, their feet 2500 metres up already. In here the entire elevation is a cone you are looking at. They look fantastic. I spent hours and hours sitting by a roadside gazing at them.
You can go scrambling up the smoking hills by yourself, avoiding unpleasant dealing with organised operators. Crime rate in Nicaragua is lowest of all central America, better even than Costa Rica, and peasants you meet on your way are friendly and helpful, the very opposite of their neighbours in Honduras.
First I went up Telica with its awesome crater. It is an easy day tour out of Leon. At dawn I caught a first chicken bus to San Jacinto. Looking out of the bus window I got off when I felt I was as close to Telica as the road will take me. I could see the volcano towering in front of me, so direction was obvious. I asked every farmer I met, where is a trail heading for the summit, and friendly unhurried folks showed me every time what is the easiest way towards the main trail. There are no roads, no track wide enough to take a vehicle. Foothills are crisscrossed by foot trails. Centuries of erosion turned them into deep ravines, gullies 10 or 15 feet deep, on top overgrown with a canopy of shrubs that shade your hike. Horsemen ride up to their fields, mules cart the produce down to the valley, peasants in gumboots tramp with their hoes. Everyone would stop for a chat as we passed. As you emerge above the gullies onto higher slopes, country opens up. Forest has been cleared centuries ago, it's all farmland. Fields all around, maize, beans, farmers spraying with herbicides, pumping the handles on their square spray cans slung from their backs. Several times I took a wrong path, and the farmers way up the opposite slope would whistle to me, pointing with their hands the right direction. On the last stretch the trail climbs through rubbish undergrowth of shrubs and stunted trees. All up it's 4 or 5 hour hike from the bitumen, but you do not even notice the time passing.
Near the top, below the summit cone, lie open meadows with a few skinny horses grazing. Puddle of water remains from the last rain. About half a mile from the summit a farmer built a simple lean-to with a tin roof. Corrugated iron is pierced by a dozen jagged holes where the fiery rocks from the volcano dropped down on it. Tin roof is not a shelter during an eruption. On a quiet day, in a light breeze, it was very peaceful, no one around, few stunted date palms, sunny day but no heat.
Crater is huge, an inclined hole about 700 metres in diameter, with inward slopes falling almost vertically into the guts of the earth. The edges look crumbly and there is no way to climb out if you slip into the crater, it's so steep. Heart of the crater, about 200 metres below the lowest point along the rim, is filled with debris fallen back during the last eruption, several noisy gas vents and rumbling sound coming from a dense cloud of vapour in one corner. An awesome sight, and a good bit frightening.

The most exploited location around Leon is a little Cerro Negro volcano, about 20 km from town. Until 1850 there was no such a thing as Cerro Negro, only a patch of dry scrub at the foot of La Hoya volcano. In April of that year the Hell broke loose, opening another emergency exit, spewing lava, rocks, cinder and sulphur. Deposits became known as Cerro Negro, a Black Hill. In the following century and half it erupted a dozen times more, the last time in 1995. There is nothing pretty or picturesque about Cerro Negro, a black cinder cone 4 or 500 metres tall, rent by a double crater in the middle. Overall elevation is about 1000 metres, dwarfed by the neighbouring La Hoya cone.
Cerro Negro may be an ugly duckling, but it's active all right, smoke is rising from dozens of vents along the rim and from a deep sulphur rent in the middle of its cone. Volcanic rock breaks down to form fertile soil, so older volcanoes are smothered in greenery, but Cerro Negro remains a bare black desert because it's too hot for plants to grow. The whole cone is hot to touch. At the top I found a smoking bit of ground, scraped a shallow hole in it and buried my stainless steel coffee mug up to its rim. Filled with water and two spoons of coffee, in ten minutes I had a perfectly drinkable cuppa. It was not boiling, but it was too hot to drink right away. Then came the problem of finding somewhere to sit down to drink it, without

having my nuts parboiled as well.
People climb the 400-metre summit of Cerro Negro to slide down on a toboggan. They call it volcano boarding. Surface is coarse loose gravel, like a sand dune made out of large ball bearings. Walking down the slope you sink above your ankles at every step. Walking up is a murder. Everything is black. Luckily there is an easier ascent trail winding in a wide loop, following hard ground on cooled off lava flow.
Volcano boarding was invented by an Australian. I never found out what he called himself. He tried a surf board, he tried a fridge door, he tried a mattress, anything to go down. Gradually they developed a bob sleigh from hell that is used today by the tour groups, a sheet of plywood about 4 feet long and 18 inches wide, shod in Formica on the business side. Front end is slightly curled up and a small bar across helps to brace your feet against. A bit of rope to cling to complete the vehicle. No skill is required to ride it. Four out of five first timers I watched ended up in a spill midway down the run. No big deal, punters are dressed in stiff padded overalls, thick gloves and green goggles supplied by the company. It will take 2 or 3 runs to get the hang of it, but alas, one schluss is all you get from a tour. After the first downhill they herd you into the truck and off you go to Leon. I have seen photos of guys standing on snow boards, zigzaging down the face, but that would take quite a few tries.
In here French daredevil Eric Barone established an absolute speed record on a bicycle in 2002. Hurling down the 41° slope on a standard mountain bike, his equipment clocked exactly 100 mph, before he crashed and spent three months in the hospital at Leon. While he was recovering in hospital, an Austrian came along and clocked 102 mph, which stands as a record today.
I was going to hike from Cerro Negro further on, but looking down from the summit I saw that the recent lava flow obliterated all the trails to the north. It would be insane, threading my way in Crocs over the fresh lava surface, so I returned to Leon the way I came, 20km hike down a narrow sandy lanes.
A jovial fat caballero on a horse caught up with me and slowed down his steed to my pace. We had a marvellous yarn. With iron-clad peasant logic he tried to convince me that the Earth was flat.

Costa Rica

Costa Rica is an odd one amongst the banana republics. Prosperous, stable, ecologically conscious, expensive and boring. Country buses are fancy and clean, tap water safe to drink. Economical success came at a price. Tico's live in bland American suburbs, their towns are nondescript consumer conglomerations, they have no distinct food, dress or music. Street life and street vendors died out. Affluence bred mediocrity. Huge disparity in wealth remains, though, but even the poor are boring.
White tourists scared by the crime statistics of the neighbouring countries come here to surf, watch the rainforest and volcanoes, or live out what's left of their suburban lives. Costa Rica opened their borders to rich white retirees. Residency is not for the beggars. You must invest US$ 200 000 and show a regular income of $1200 a month. Investment usually takes form of real estate, you buy a flat or a house to live in. The two populations do not mix socially, native Tico's and the pensioners. They do not like each other at all.
Many laws are poorly defined, creating grey areas. You can live and work here without any permits, as long as you are discreet and do not step on someone's toes. If some local fancy buying out your business, you sell. If you don't, he'll dob you in to authorities, you lose your business and get deported. Government is paranoid about drugs. One joint of grass is enough for deportation charges, even if you do have a resident permit. The only time I have been searched on this trip was a surf beach in Costa Rica. Cops were very thorough, too.
Good folks who come here to retire have never lived in a third world country. They imagine they can spend their summers in the States and escape the winters to their tropical paradise. They buy a condo on a beach in a locked compound and leave it for a half a year in care of some local dude. Caretakers will beg the season's wages in advance, sell the furniture while the owners are in the States, then walk away leaving the flat to mould, spiders and anyone who wants to check what they left. Many ex-pats find the corruption, bribery, petty thieving, high cost of living and everyday hassle just too much and they leave after a couple of years, very bitter. Same story like in any other developing country, retirees in paradise of the Philippines, Thailand, Madagascar.

The first thing I noticed when I crossed into Costa Rica at Peñas Blancas were groups of thin tall Africans hanging around the border crossing, standing in groups, sitting in the shade, begging from the lined up tourist, playing with their smart phones, just passing time. They are all young, skinny and very dark. They are not going anywhere. There was about 8 000 of them stuck at the border, and more were arriving by

bus loads every day. They all say that they come from Africa, either Angola or Congo, fleeing the repressive regimes, but many of them are in reality Haitians. They all came here overland from Brazil, all heading as refugees to USA. Real Africans flew into Brazil from home. Haitians came after an earthquake a few years back demolished most of their country. They worked in Brazil as labourers, building the facilities for the Olympics. Now that the Games are over and Brazilian economy in deep shit, there is no more work for them and they joined a black river that is flowing North, towards Rio Grande. They all walked on foot across the Darien Gap, lawless 100 kms of swampy jungle between Colombia and Panama. Six day trek often took 8 or 10 days. Many of them died in there, guides abandoning them in the marches. Panama has a policy of letting them through, as fast as they can move. They did not really allowed them into their country, but no one is guarding the border in Darien, and once in Panama, it's best to pass them on. Make them somebody else's problem. Costa Rica, with it's unblemished humanitarian record, does the same. Nicaragua changes its policy every few months. Right now they clamped down the borders and will not allow any undocumented Africans into the country. Not without a visa, which means a plane ticket out of the country and sufficient funds.
Makeshift camps sprang up a few hundred yards back from the actual line, at first just plastic and cardboard, then government and some NGO stepped in, building a tent city with essential services, toilets, running water, soup kitchen. Some of the guys catch a bus along the border, looking for their own private way forwards. Some make it. In Rio Dulce cops caught a bus full of Africans heading for Peten and jungle border with Mexico. Cops stopped that bus but who knows how many get away.
I have a very personal attitude towards refugees that nobody wants. 40 years ago, after I ran away from the communists, no government would touch me with a ten foot pole, they all wanted to send me back, where I came from, or at least move on, somewhere else. I spent more than a decade as an illegal alien, hounded from country to country, looking for a place where they would let me live in peace as another nobody. I can't really help those guys in Costa Rica, but I know where they are at.

Roads in Costa Rica are bitumen, but they are narrow. Even the Pan American highway is only two lanes, no shoulder. Hitchhiking is difficult. I would walk 15, 20 km before someone gave me a ride to the next town. Longer rides came only from foreigners, a Peruvian family on holidays, Honduran race horse fixer on a mission, an old Gringo heading for surf. The only locals who pulled up were working class with their jalopies. Better off Tico's either ignored me or they shook their fists and yelled abuse out of their windows at me. It's a great way to really see the country, half walk half hitch, but to get anywhere it's cheaper to catch a bus, food being so expensive,
Country is certainly picturesque. Even the cultivated parts, endless orange groves along the Lake Nicaragua or thousands of acres of African oil palm in the south. Rivers and creeks are all clean, you can have a wash and swim without worrying that you may catch a typhoid fever. On the coast leafy tropical Riviera of restaurants, hotels, chalets, plenty of roomy bus shelters to sleep in. No one is allowed to kill any animals in the wild, not even vermin like feral goats or pigs. Everything is protected. Wildlife roams around unmolested. In the forest scarlet macaws, red howlers and lots of funny looking birds. Fluorescent butterflies are massacred by hundreds by passing car traffic.
Steamy jungle barely stops at the edge of bitumen. It's like driving down the Botanical Gardens full of billboards. For sale, for rent, for lease, restaurant, villa, condominium, National Park, beach, school…Huge signs every few metres. And it rains and rains and rains, from border to border, every day. I've seen it rain so hard that bus was wading in water a foot deep and when it stopped to let people off, they refused to get down into the torrent raging on the bitumen. It isn't called a rainforest for nothing. In the south where the big mountains crowd the Pacific coast rainy season lasts the entire year. It can rain any day, and on most days it does. Who would want to retire into that sort of weather?

Panama

I first got the idea of walking across isthmus of Panama when I was at High School, reading travel books of Richard Haliburton. Rich American brat, between the two world wars he rode across the Alps on an elephant, he jumped into the holy Maya well at Chichen Itza and he swum the length of Panama Canal as a registered ship "Richard Haliburton", displacing 154 lbs. Yeah, in those days the Canal management was sensible. Haliburton sailed under at the onset of WWII. They left Hong Kong on board of a Chinese junk, bound for San Francisco, and a passing typhoon wiped them out. No traces of them were ever found. I did not want to repeat any of Haliburton's stunts; but his stories spawned crazy dreams shooting off on a tangent. Walking right across America in a few days was one of those dreams.

People were hoofing it across the neck of America ever since the white man first landed there. There was no other way to get from Atlantic to Pacific for 350 years. Vasco Núñez de Balboa was the first one in 1513. He started from San Blas Islands, at Bahia Carreto, a few miles from the modern Colombian border, and his guide took him across the cordillera to the Gulf of San Miguel. Spanish then built their capital, Panama, on the Pacific side. Riches of Peru arrived by ships to Panama and they were ported by mules and by men overland across the isthmus to Portobello, terminal of the great galleon route to Spain. The portage led up and down a paved mule track called Camino Real. Malaria, yellow fever, dysentery and host of unnamed diseases paved the trail in bones. Another way was from Panama on foot to the headwaters of Chagre river along the Camino de Cruces, then by a canoes to the Caribbean. In the rainy season there was enough water in the river to float down stream, making for shorter portage.
Today Spanish portage routes are flooded by Alajuela Lake, a reservoir created by the Madden Dam to control water levels in the Panama Canal. Enough of the paved track survived for an enterprising Fin to take tourists on two-day horse rides from Caribbean to Panama city. From the original Chagre river only two rat tails remain, top and bottom. Yanks dammed Chagre River to create Gatun Lake. At one point I thought, it would be cool, walking along the Canal itself, but even that can't be done, for the most part it is not a canal at all, but a many-lobed Gatun lake surrounded by pristine jungle.
In Panama there are two roads from ocean to ocean. One is the main transcontinental highway from Colon to Panama City, but who wants to walk down a 4-lane freeway in the diesel fumes of the belching trucks. The other road crossing the isthmus runs near the Costa Rican border from Bocas de Torro on the Caribbean side to the town of David on the Pan American Highway, about 100km of narrow bitumen, traversing impressive volcanic ranges on its way. That was the way I chose.
Bocas de Torro is a popular yachting area. Countless sheltered bays, islands, reefs, beaches, rainforest, no natives, Caribbean at its best, if you've got the money. All the clean touristy things are out on the islands. Mainland is such a grotty mangrove infested bunghole that cruising guides do not even mention it. Clearing into Bocas as a Port of Entry may hurt. My friend Paul was slugged US$ 700 for the paperwork alone.
The road touches the bay at the banana exporting harbour of Almirante, but a turn off leads to Chiriqui Grande in the southern lobe of the bay. Dirty little village full of drunks, rude Chinese shopkeepers, broken down jetty and no eatery worth entering in. In the late afternoon I dipped my toe in the oily water of the harbour, I bought a cheap umbrella in a Chinese shop, and with the rain threatening overhead I started my Walk Across America. Without a fanfare, sponsorship or blog, with no ideological baggage, spiritual quest or charity purpose, for no good reason at all, just because I felt like it.
It got dark as I was walking back to the main road from Chiriqui Grande. At the junction, in an all-night roadhouse, I had a Chinese meal and I retired into a nearby bus shelter for the night.
Daybreak saw me pounding bitumen uphill. In the lowlands forest has been cleared for pastures a long time ago, to feed cattle and horses. Near the settlements untidy gardens of coffee, cacao, sugar cane and oranges. Guava fruit that nobody bothers picking.
You follow the river valley up as the meadows turn into hills, then wooded mountains. I stopped to shelter in a bus stop as a first morning rain shower passed over. Above the last village of Mali the road gets really steep and forest closes in. Every tree is covered in climbers, creepers and epiphyts. Fence posts are alive, green copses sprouting new leaves. A couple of roadside eateries try to make living from the passing traffic, which is only Coaster buses, one every hour, and weekenders from Panama City heading for Bocas del Torro.
Further up you pass small indigenous hamlets, hard by the road, steep conical roofs of palm thatch with no walls, tattooed Indios lounging in their hammocks. Their naked children emerge from the forest, bundles of leaves in their hands. Mama will cook it for dinner. Beautiful square waterfall like a shining curtain framed by miniature green ferns is signposted "Angel's Hair". Then they spoil it a mile further by another beautiful waterfall, named "Angel's Hair II".
Last 7 or 8 km of climb to the top of the continental divide is murderously steep. You are 1000 metres above the sea level already and views back towards Caribbean are stunning, Bocas and the islands shining on the blue ocean 40 km away. Road continues climbing. The backbone of Panama is a bundle of parallel ranges, Cordillera de Talamanca, with the highest point at 3475 metres on top of Volcan Barú.
The road is snaking up and down the thickly forested mountains. Caribbean side is almost clear of clouds, but as soon as you climb into the first saddle, thick grey clouds blowing from Pacific envelop you in mist and it starts to rain. A true tropical downpour, hard, windy and cold. I snapped open my umbrella above my head, leaned into the wind, and kept marching, looking for a shelter. Roadside is lined with dripping forest, little brooks that a minute ago trickled down the slopes turn into raging torrents, water cascading from the cliffs in temporary waterfalls, whistling wind, pounding rain, climbing road. After a mile of misery I

ducked into a large culvert under the road, built for some reason high above the valley level, and therefore dry.
In a couple of hours rain eased off. It made no sense sitting in the culvert, waiting for it stop altogether. It could take days. On the Pacific coast, as we travelled south down the isthmus, it rained most of the time. In a lull I climbed back to the road and continued tramping, drizzle alternating with short showers, followed by dense fog, then more rain. Umbrella gave an illusion that we stayed dry where it mattered. Twice I came upon a crab sitting in the middle of bitumen, its pink claws raised, challenging me to a duel. Crab? 4000 feet high up in the mountains? And what sort of a crab? Pacific crab or Atlantic crab? Apparently maritime fauna of the two oceans is very different. I am sure some biologist made a career out splitting hair classifying them.
The first refuge I found was on the Fortuna Dam, a large hydro-electric project at 1200 metres elevation. Substantial brick shelter either side of the dam. I was surprised there was no security guard anywhere around the dam. These days they seem to guard everything, but here nobody cared. It was hard to tell the time of the day, everything merged in a grey cloud, mist and fog. Dam was near a mid-way point of our trek, I walked far enough for the day. We shall await the morning here, under the roof. Rain got harder, torn clouds filling the deep dramatic valleys around us. No one around, only an odd bus whizzing by, windscreen wipers swishing madly.
At dusk my solitude was broken by an Indio who appeared out of rain, a short stocky barechested peasant with a hoe in his hand. He stopped in the shelter to pour water out of his gumboots and to put a T-shirt on. He's been working his fields up on the hill, now he was returning home, a two-hour hike to Caldera. I knew from the map where that was, another 1000 metres further up, on the slopes of the volcano. Locals on the isthmus completely ignore rain, so used they are to it. I haven't seen anyone using umbrella, rain coat or any other protection from rain. One night on a cross road in Costa Rica I saw a girl, a maid from on a resort, in a uniform, hitchhiking from work back home. She was standing in a pouring rain, doing her smart phone thing, completely ignoring a dry clean bus shelter 5 metres from her.

Overnight it rained itself out into a crisp sunny morning. Tramping up and down the forested ridges, from a saddle suddenly opened a vista over the Pacific, endless deeply lobed stands of mangroves a good kilometre below us, and 50 km away. I felt like Balboa himself, first time seeing the Great South Sea from the top of Cordillera. We started descend. Three hour hike brought us down to the Valle de la Mina, with its eateries and coffee shops, scattered low key tourist hostels, restaurants and kiosks. Being a Sunday, everything was open, expecting a weekend crowd. I had a good meal, then decent coffee and a cake on a veranda, surrounded by majestic forests on all sides. – "Some of the most beautiful country I've seen in central America," reads my journal.
Gualaca was the first place below the mountains, a clean little village of prosperous cattlemen. I found no cheap eatery. Only meal to be had was at a fancy country club next to the rodeo grounds. On this Sunday some cowboy tournament was on, roping of calves, rodeo, that sort of a thing. Horse riders dressed like 19th century caballeros prancing on their sweating steeds, a bunch of blokes roping cattle in the arena with no one watching from the stands, their done up wives riding on white Arab horses down the sandy lanes. Some hitched their horses to the posts of the country club, others were being served their drinks in the saddle, but most cowboys were collecting graveyards of empty beer bottles leaning on the club tables. I had a big fancy meal and a coffee and pushed on.
Afternoon, big black cloud was enveloping the very mountains I have just descended from, black wall of rain pushing into the valleys. Watching over my shoulder I kept hiking, looking for a shelter. Country levelled out, pastures, pastures and more pastures. Deluge caught up with me as I was crossing a bridge across the Chiriqui River. I ducked under the bridge. Dry, quiet, clean. I slung my hammock from the bolts sticking out of concrete above me and settled for the night. River swollen by the rain was roaring below me, noise echoing from the bridge overhead. River level kept rising as I watched blue morpho butterflies fluttering around. Looking at the water I calculated how long it will be before I need to shorten the ropes of my hammock.
I woke up midway through the night because of silence. Rain stopped, river level dropped, sky was full of stars. I packed my gear and set off again. Country was so quiet I could hear the trucks rumbling down the PanAmerican highway 10 km away. The highway popped out of night with no warning, no road signs. Two 24-hrs petrol stations, both shut for the night, small village of Chiriqui (they do repeat themselves, don't they?). I found a covered basketball court and crashed asleep till dawn.
None of my maps showed any road south of PanAmericana, but it looked like 5 or 6 km to the edge of mangroves on the coast. I followed the village streets south, past the cemetery and I ended on a lonely

farm trail winding between the rolling hills of rich pastures, big Brahmin bulls curiously watching me over the fence. No one lives down that way, no one drives down that stony trail. Big trees line the road as fence posts, woodpecker with a red crown goes about his business. After an hour the trail ends at a muddy cattle yard and a locked gate. Peering over the fence I could see a stand of mangroves at the bottom of the paddock. Mangroves only grow in salt water, which means that tides from the Pacific reached until here. I could not see the ocean itself, but we arrived. The hapless expedition of Burke and Wills ended in the same way – the first crossing of Australia from south to north terminated in mangroves of the Gulf of Carpentaria, without them actually seeing the sea. What was good for Burke and Wills is good enough for me.

In the afternoon it started to rain again and I gave up and turned north, home, to Rio Dulce. I had enough of rain. I felt I was starting to sprout webbing between my toes. Besides that, October was progressing, and I wanted to catch the gigantic kites being flown in the Guatemalan highlands on the Day of the Dead, in the early November. Maybe even stick my nose into Mexico for a couple of weeks, before we go sailing again.

Chapter 16: Atlantic

My love was safely back in Darwin, after a month of adventures in the States, hurricane season was over, time to take my boat to Pacific and home. While I was tramping the highways of Central America I made up my mind. I decided not to truck my boat over the mountains of Guatemala. I was not going to put my boat to a ransom of a standover boilermaker. And I did not trust myself. If he stopped his truck on top of the mountain highway and demanding $1000 cash extra I did not trust myself to act as a meek sheep. Carlos, like all Guatemalan businessmen, walks around fully armed and I did not want to think where the confrontation could lead. The default option, Panama Canal, did not appeal to me either. Hanging around Panama, looking for someone to give us a tow through the Canal, begging the snobbish yacht owners… No. I wanted something more dignified. There must be another way into Pacific. Thus I thought in Rio Dulce.

Two natural routes connect Atlantic to Pacific. The NW Passage through the frozen Arctic of Canada was not realistic, even though an Aussie junk recently slipped through. They did a lot of motoring. In the far south Cape Hoorn and the Straits of Magellan raise goose bumps on my skin just thinking of them. I was coming from the wrong direction, in the wrong season. Freezing storms of 55° south in the middle of winter, with days barely 8 hours long… Too cold and too rough for a tropical bird. I have worked on fishing boats in New Zealand, chasing orange roughie that far south, and since then I have a healthy respect for the high latitudes. And that was in the summer, on a large fishing vessel.

A third option popped up during the past year, another place to lift a boat on a truck and drive it across the mountains into Pacific. Down south, where the American continent narrows into a cone. Rich yachtsmen of Argentina and Brazil, heading to cruise Chilean canals but not keen on rounding the Patagonian wilderness, have been using the service for years. From Buenos Aires in Argentina to Valparaiso in Chile. I had no details, nor a price tag attached, but several Argentine skippers insisted it was an ongoing business. Buenos Aires is a long way from Rio Dulce, but I had time. To start on a crossing of South Pacific on my way home I had to wait until April anyway, until their own cyclone season was over. Five months. Enough time to get there by a round about way, I thought. I was not going to bash 4000 miles across the Caribbean, against the Trade Wind and stiff current, around the Brazilian bulge. In Jacare I have met two boats who went that way, and I they both needed an extensive refit above the deck. All the traditional sources suggest a wide loop instead, via North Atlantic, Bermuda, nearly to the African coast, across the Doldrums and down to Rio del Plata. A long curve down the Atlantic, with a single stop at Capo Verde islands, a 9000 mile long swoop. Uruguay with its social experiments held a fascination of its own.

Departure from Rio Dulce was held back for ten days as I waited for a rogue late hurricane that was developing off the Nicaragua coast. Forecasted to cross the isthmus into Pacific, the season and the synoptic situation were exactly same as in 1998, when the depression became hurricane Mitch, a category 5 that wiped out the Bay Islands and killed hundreds of people in Central America. I waited.

In Mexico I bought from a native trinket seller a tiny ceramic pendant, a Maya glyph hanging on a string, one of their calendar signs. I turned it into a "quita-pena", a worry doll. They are a Maya thing, tiny little dolls you put under your pillow before you go to sleep. They absorb your nightmares and all the bad vibes. When they served their purpose, you throw them away, together with all your worries. I carried my quita-pena in my pocket. Every time my thoughts turned to the forthcoming trip I fingered the worry bead in my pocket and willed onto it all my uncertainties, ambiguities, guilt and frustration. It calmed me down a lot.

Little rituals and games we play with our mind. I had no illusion about the task I was undertaking. In the next 8 months I proposed to sail my boat 18 or 19 000 miles to Darwin. For comparison, Equator, all the way round the world, is 21 600 miles long,
The night before departure I walked over the Rio Dulce bridge and threw my worry-glyph into the river 90 feet below. All my worries went with it. We were ready. I had no doubts in my mind. A cocky arrogant bastard, as it turned out.

New set of government rules imposed insane fees on clearance papers out of Guatemala, after I paid hundreds of dollars in permits already. Indignant at constantly shifting laws, I Photoshoped my own clearance and with the hurricane gone and weather clearing up we dropped down the river at the end of November. Stray rust bucket of Guatemala Coast Guard came to check on us off the Cabo Tres Puntas. I told them I was out for a day's sailing, be back in Rio Dulce tomorrow. Not clearing out I still had all the current permits to stay in Guatemala, so they left me in peace. A week later US Coast Guard off Key West came in a fancy rubber boat, armed to teeth, but they were no wiser when it came to paperwork. Naturally their computer records did not match my papers, but their computer system is no problem of mine, right?

We picked up a fair current along the coast of Yucatan, continuation of the Travelator that brought us up the Guyana coast into the Caribbean a couple of years ago. Ocean currents do not spring out of nowhere, they are all connected to each other in a continuous flow like an endless ribbon. Yucatan current slips through the strait, turns right along the Cuban north shore and becomes the Gulf Stream, probably the only ocean current that people ever hear about.
Golf Stream is a huge warm river flowing down the middle of the ocean that mellows the winters in Europe completely out of proportion to their latitude. If it wasn't for the warming effect of the Gulf Stream, central and northern Europe would be frozen wilderness akin to northern Canada. For all its importance, it is hard to show you what it looks like. You can't take a convincing photo of the Gulf Stream. It has no shores, no definite boundary, it throws off temporary eddies and countercurrents, its edges swirl and curve all the time like a pit of snakes. Books state that you can recognise Gulf Stream by its deep blue colour. Horseshit. Any tropical sea deeper than 4000 metres is the same unreal indigo blue colour.
Golf Stream carries a lot of water. In Florida Straits it fills the entire width of the channel, 50 miles from Florida to the Bahama banks, and it's moving north at a fair clip. Do not attempt to sail down the Straits, against the current, without an engine. Every wind shift is preceded by lengthy calms, and the current is ferocious. Running at 2 to 3 knots it will flush you north. One February it was clocked at 5 knots. Rounding the southern tip of Florida we got hit by a solid Norther, blowing at 30-35 knots and gusting to more, one of those cold fronts that descend from the Plains every 5 to 7 days in the winter. Bashing close hauled into a nightmarish short swell, we kept tacking blind across the strait in a freezing sleet, using the shipping lanes as a guide how far we can go. At night Florida shores flare up with light pollution, distant illumination from the built up areas. The entire coast from the southern tip to Cape Carnaval is covered in bright orangey red glare rising high in the sky, like a huge bushfire. I didn't approach close enough to see individuals lights, but navigation was easy. "Kehaar" copped some serious thumping from the crashing swell, boat-stopping brick walls stacked up by the current running against wind, but we were progressing north at a rate of 75 miles a day, close hauled against the gale. All the gain was thanks to the current.
As soon as we cleared the Bahama Banks, I crabbed sideways, east, out of the current, into the open ocean. I did not want to be swept any further north. Gulf Stream copies closely American coast and around Cape Hatteras, when the blast of Norther hits, the seas build up to survival storms that caused many a cargo ship to founder in the monstrous swell. Some of the most frightening photos of freak waves 40 feet high were taken from freighters around 35° north in the Gulf Stream. Winter is not the time to hang around in this area.

We were in the open ocean, entire Atlantic spread in front of us. "Ocean Passages for the World" suggested I had to cross Atlantic first, nearly to the African coast. South of 25°N you are in the NE Trades with their own foul current and the progress east is reserved for strong vessels with long waterlines and masochistic crew. We would never make any heading there. The suggested track for south American ports runs at first east, along 40°N, flying with depressions, before it curves down towards Equator. In summer it would've been tolerable, but in the winter you are talking storms of freezing sleet and 50-knot winds. Hydrographer of the Navy speaks of "large sailing vessels able to stand up to, and take advantage of, heavy weather to be expected". No, thanks. That left me the belt in-between, the Variables, or the Horse latitudes. The strip of relatively benign weather is quite narrow. In the winter depressions are souring the

life down to 35°N. So we stayed between 28°N and 32°N, heading, east, east, east.
From Florida to Bermuda we were plagued by the Northers and the tail fronts from the depressions, but the winds were manageable, nothing over 35 knots. As we gained distance from the cold continent, every front became milder than one before it. Still, it was cold, four layers of warm clothing, hoodie and fingerless gloves. Nights in two sleeping bags, fully dressed. Beyond Bermuda, further east, we came to nudge the Azores High. It deflects depressions to the north, weather steadies and the predominant wind settles in NE. Some call it extension to the Trades, but the wind is shifty, SE can stay on for three or four days at a time, or you get a 24-hour flat calm, then very light easterly. Annoying current, about half a knot, runs against you the entire time, all the way to Africa. We lost 10 to 15 miles a day, every day. If we were racing at 100 miles per day, the loss would be tolerable, but close hauled into 4 knot headwinds we were lucky to make 40 miles a day, over the water, and a loss of 15 miles to current meant a depressing noon site.
Deeper into the high you get, lighter the winds become and more east is in it. Daily progress dropped to a sad joke. The day I made only 11 miles in full 24 hours of sailing, with no calms, I snapped out of stupor, consulted my charts, and turned right, SE, hoping that I was far enough upwind to lay Cabo Verde islands. I dreaded the idea that we would miss them, dropping too far to the lee of them. English pirate Bartholomew Roberts who used to sail from the West Indies across the Atlantic to loot along the coast of West Africa set off from the Virgin Islands for the coast of Guinea in 1720. Sailing roughly the way we were following, he was going to call in Brava, the southernmost island of Capo Verde, latitude 13°N, to take on water. It never happened. I'll quote an old scrivener:
"But here again by an intolerable Stupidity and want of Judgement, they got so far to Leeward of that Port, that despairing to regain it, or any of the Windward Parts of Africa, they were obliged to go back again with the Trade-Wind, for the West-Indies; which had very near been the Destruction of them all." To return back to south America "they had but one Hogshead of Water left to supply 124 Souls for that Passage."
Even with strict rationing water ran out before they arrived. Many of the crew died from thirst and hunger. Two days after the last spoonful of water has been used, they came into soundings and anchored in 7 fathoms on the coast of Surinam. Small boat was sent out and the same night brought back drinking water they found in a river.
The story shows that the old guys did not think a sail directly from West Indies to Western Africa was anything unusual. Roberts got a better pilot and the following year they fetched Senegal without problems.

Bermuda Triangle is a sheet of water bounded by three points, Bermuda, Miami and Puerto Rico. What really happens there is another matter that I will not debate here, books dealing with it cover several book shelves.
For me Bermuda Triangle has a very personal story. For many days we were following its northern boundary, the imaginary line from Miami to Bermuda. Not by any design, wind and current happened to put us there. Shipping in north Atlantic is really heavy. There wasn't a day when I didn't see a ship at least twice. Several times I had to change a tack to avoid a collision course. Singlehander can't keep watch all the time and inevitable will eventually happen. One morning at dawn we scraped paint from a Chinese bulk carrier. Considering number of miles I left behind in my wake, I was lucky that a collision with a ship hasn't happened before. My guardian angels work hard and this time managed to avert an outright disaster. I was plain lucky. At first light, you could already see, I was still asleep, he wasn't watching. We converged on a shallow angle, both heading in the same direction. Terrific gust of wind woke me up, wind that was deflected from the tall side of the ship. The gust acted like a buffer and threw us back after the initial contact. I stuck my head though the hatch, and I saw a vertical black wall moving in front of me from left to right. Before I could unleash the tiller and do something about it, I was reading the name on the transom: "To-Fu 8", Hong Kong. He wasn't going fast, thank God.
About a fortnight after we dipped in tofu we had another close shave. Shortly after sundown I scanned horizon: no lights, no ships, so I ducked below to start cooking. As I was fiddling with my Primus I heard a dull rumbling roar of massive engines. I stuck my head out and this big ship is overtaking us on a parallel course, not one boat length away. I am not exaggerating, to see his deck I had to crane my neck a long way back, his bow wave rocking "Kehaar" from gunwale to gunwale. Again, before I had time to alter our course, he was past. This one was powering on at a full bore, name on the transom "Agulhas Stream". He didn't look either. If he did, he would have seen us and he would not come so close. I watched him till his lights disappeared below horizon, he did not alter his heading at all.
At night navigation lights of a cargo ship can be seen from about 8 or 10 miles. VLCC from further away,

they are taller. If you estimate their speed at 20 knots, and you are doing 4 or 5, you have 20-30 minutes to get out of the way. Altogether you see the same ship for about an hour, approaching and receding from you. If I think that we are converging on a collision course, I have a half an hour to get out of his way. Depending on the direction of the wind I either bear away, or even tack to avoid him. In a flat calm it's a bother, the only situation afloat that I did not find a solution to, so far.

We only clipped the apex of Bermuda Triangle, but the fabled Sargasso Sea promised to provide a more lengthy experience. It is an odd one. A lot of pulp fiction has been written about it, virtually all of it without any foundation in reality. It is the only sea without shorelines, without clear boundaries and with no fixed position. Columbus is the best known navigator who crossed the Sargassum patch on his first voyage to Bahamas, but existence of a sea of seaweed has been known for millennia. Himilco the Carthage navigator spoke of it five centuries before the time of Christ, showing that the old folks ventured much further out than we give them credit for.
A huge area of seaweed is stuck in the middle of whirlpool created by currents, in the centre of North Atlantic Gyre, identical in position with the North Atlantic garbage patch, macerated plastic which is trapped by the swirling currents in the same place. I drew a long oval on my chart of Atlantic, where the books said Sargasso Sea is found. My course ran down the middle of it for 2000 miles, and I was looking forwards to a new experience, sailing through a legendary area of marooned ships, derelict hulls and eternal calms. I have read a trunk lot of pulp fiction in my time. Now I was going to see it.
It took us several weeks to cross the oval on my chart and I saw no seaweed at all. Not one strand of it. The whole area moves as the currents meander with the seasons north and south. Where we did see a lot of sargasso was much further south, along the north coast of Brazil, on our way to Guyana a couple of years previously. Days and days we were ploughing through dense ochre islands of seaweed strung in long streaks downwind, steel hull whispering with long drawn "swisssh" as it sliced through yet another little island. My love did get some beautiful photos of those seaweed islands as we cut through them, but at that time we did not realise we were actually sailing through the outer reaches of Sargasso sea, which was supposed to be 10° further north from our track.
Seaweed is broken up into clumps seldom larger than a ship, and it is neither deep nor dense enough to impede a progress of a vessel, not even in very light wind. There is no way that a propeller could get fouled by it. Sailing ships got stuck and suffered in the Sargasso sea not because they were trapped by seaweed, but because of frequent and prolonged calms and swirling currents of the Horses Latitudes, conditions which accumulated the seaweed in the first place.

Safely out of Sargasso Sea which did not happen, we picked up the NE Trades. "Trade" in the trade winds does not come from the meaning "to buy and sell" but from an older root that signifies "track". I love Trade winds, dependable, predictable, mellow, full of flying fish. Our daily runs became more comforting, and the line of our progress looked like we will weather the Cabo Verde islands all right, unlike Bartholomew Roberts in his day.
Cabo Verde islands were a spring board for long distance sailing for centuries, the last firm land of the Old World, a dozen of islands sticking out of the westernmost point of Africa, the last spring to take on water before the vastness of Atlantic. It is still the favourite place for yachties to stock up on the fresh perishables before heading for West Indies. Besides, it is a great place to visit, civilised version of Africa which does function. There is only one thing wrong with Cabo Verde islands. For several months every year they disappear from sight. They do not go anywhere, they just cannot be seen until you are right up to them, everything obscured by dust from Sahara carried over by harmattan wind.
Harmattan is a desert wind that blows in the same direction as the Trades. Full of sand and dust, it cuts down visibility to 2 or 3 miles, sometimes even less. Capo Verde islands are volcanic in origin, dramatic high scraggy cliffs, real big mountains, but in harmattan you can't see them until you are in the surf. Between November and March, which is the season to cross the Atlantic, harmattan picks up for a few days, then drops, then starts again. In spite of its dust content, you don't get spectacular blood red sunsets we get in dusty desert in Australia. Harmattan swallows the sun in its beige curtain and dissolves it in murk about 5 degrees above horizon. There is no sunset. Sky overhead is clear, horizon is sharp, so sextant navigation is correct, but islands are not there. Until the advent of satellite navigation it was a real pain, looking for them.
After 71 days crossing the Atlantic I was approaching Capo Verde islands fast. I could see the yellow haze hanging in the air, I knew harmattan has been at it again, and islands became invisible. I had to find them by sextant. My problem was, I didn't know what time it was, not exactly. During the trip my chronometer,

cheap Chinese watch, broke its wrist band and fell from its mount to the floor. While I was stitching on a new band, I accidentally pressed the buttons that reset the seconds of time. I pulled out my short wave radio to check the time signal, but three different radio stations gave me three different times. They disagreed by 20 seconds. 20 seconds on a clock translates into 5 miles on the ground. When visibility is down to 3 miles, error of 5 miles in a sextant shot is unacceptable. I could not head for the islands direct, hoping my navigation is correct to 2 miles, all that I could see ahead of me. I needed a margin for error. I could think of only one way to do that. I had to go back to what the old fellows did in the days before accurate chronometers: they run the latitude, which does not require correct time. You get onto the latitude of the target, then run dead east (or west) till you hit it. Swell was down, sky clear, conditions were ideal, I knew I will get my meridian passage at noon accurate to within one mile.
I tightened the sheets and went a long way around, until I was upwind from the islands, 25 or 30 miles. By dead reckoning I reached the estimated latitude and then I waited for the noon. Sextant shot gave me my latitude. Now I knew that exactly west from me, downwind, I had a string of mountainous islands spread in a belt about 20 miles wide, on an angle, from left to right, one after the other. Heading west I could not miss them. I crowded on the canvas and flew after them. I had until sundown to find them.
Running dead before the wind my windvane is magic to hold course, but she yaws a lot, the resulting course is an average of its meandering. It adds to the distance travelled. I settled in the hatch to steer straight course by hand, compensating for the current sweeping us SW. Under the full rag "Kehaar" was flying at hull speed in gentle swell. I was wired up. I was twitching, my pulse was racing like after a third cappuccino. I only had one small coffee at 5 in the morning, so it was not caffeine. I was loaded on adrenalin, I could not sit still. It will be a close call, reach the islands before the darkness swallows them for the night.
I shot a position line, interpolating the time. Error wouldn't be more than 5 or 8 miles.
I guessed that about 2 PM I may see something. Half past one I started peering into the haze ahead of me, "Kehaar" barrelling at 6 knots, clocking a mile every 10 minutes. It was like looking into a pea soup. Perfect clear sky overhead, a total whiteout along the horizon. Ten to two I thought I could see a bit darker shape in the milky background haze off the bow. It wasn't changing its shape, the way clouds do. Five minutes later there could be no doubts. We found it! Triple shout rent the air, making my throat sore. We had a landfall! A big island with proper mountains, about 10 miles away.
I altered course a touch, heading straight for the foggy island. Within ten minutes I had a surf breaking on the rocks in front of me. It wasn't a big island full of mountains at all, much less 10 miles away. It was a tiny little island with low hills, barely a mile and half in front of us. From three miles we could not see it, so thick was the haze.
Altering course again I shot one more position line. It told me that we found a small uninhabited island of Santa Luzia. Our goal, San Vizente, was the very next one down wind. The strait between them is only five miles wide, but you could not see that far. We crossed the channel on a compass heading and now truly big mountains of San Vizente rose in the murk.
Following indistinct shapes in the haze we rounded the corner of San Vizente as it got dark. In the lee of the mountains visibility improved to about 5 miles and I could see the blinking city lights of Mindelo, harbour we were heading for. I do not like night entry into an unknown harbour, but in this case I did not hesitate. I found the place once and I am not letting it out of my sight until my anchor holds the bottom. I may never find it again, what with current racing through the strait between San Vizente and San Antão.

On this passage I really let my body wind down to hibernation level. With cold weather and monotonous diet I was eating little, moving only when I had to and without noticing it I slowly fell into lethargic stupor. There were no physical jobs to do, no breakdowns, no crisis, just a tedious slow plod against light headwinds, week after week. I turned into a barely awake zombie, my metabolism just ticking over. It became manifest a couple of days before the landfall, when I tried to move my ground tackle. On a long offshore passage I move the anchor and chain from the foredeck and stow it inside in the hollow keel. It does two things: it brings the weight where you want it, in the centre of the boat, below the water line, and it protects the gear from rust. A couple of hundred miles before landfall I drag it all on deck again. It is not a big job, and in a fit state it takes me 15 minutes. This time, after 70 days of lazy stupor, it was such a shock to the system, such a brutal awakening from a slumber, that it took the rest of the day to recover and bring my heart rate down to normal. I was well and truly hibernating like a bear.

Capo Verde is deep Africa, so you can drink water from a tap, Post Office works, supermarkets carry decent range of cans, and little dingy stores stock obscure items that I've been searching for in vain all

over central America. I know, not how you imagine dark Africa, but it is my humble experience.
400 miles down wind from Sahara, it hardly ever rains here. Only one big mountain on the northernmost island gets enough rainfall to grow vegies. And they do grow plenty of them.
Yacht Club in Mindelo gives you nothing but a place to tie your dinghy, for your $4 a day, not even access to a toilet or shower. That's reserved for the Marina guests, only. Luckily on shore there are public showers for 20cents. Clean but cold. Water is rationed, on tap for sale. Sahara. On the trip from Guatemala I only used 250 litres, so I bought that from the marina.
Anchorage in Mindelo varies between windy and very windy. Holding is all right, but rowing ashore directly against 20 knot breeze can be a battle. Most arriving skippers do not bother anchoring, they motor directly into marina, seeing it as safer and more comfortable option. It does not always work that way. Marina offers no shelter from the wind. On the pontoons it blows just as hard as outside on the anchorage, creating all sorts of problems. A few days before I arrived a large day-charter catamaran caused a nasty accident. A 60-foot cat with big cabin discharged its passengers on the walk way and was turning in a tight space, when one of its propellers snagged a floating rope from some mooring. Rope wound around the spinning prop and the engine jammed. In a stiff breeze the cat needed both motors to manoeuvre, and crippled on one side it swung around with the wind and hurled directly into the line of moored yachts. Pushed by strong wind it ploughed head into a 35-foot German sloop. The owner saw the monster charging and he ran. He jumped from his boat onto the board walk in time. His wife was not that nimble. Catamaran straddled their boat, the front bar joining its two hulls snapped the German forestay, then inner forestay and finally toppled their mast, straight onto the unfortunate woman. It broke her pelvis in two places. The whole thing happened so fast, that no one could do anything about it. It was over in a minute and half. As I arrived, floating community was organising a medical charter flight to take the wounded woman home to Germany.

So what was it that I've been chasing in vain around Latin America? Spare burners for my kerosene pressure stove, the old Primus. One of the anachronisms on "Kehaar", I still cook on kero. If I could find a safe place to store my gas bottle outside of cabin and some completely foolproof hoses, I'd be happy to switch to gas. Cooking on gas inside a cabin is a slow Russian roulette. I've seen far too many boats blown up by gas that leaked into the bilges, skipper then lighting dreamily his first morning joint. Booom! No more eyebrows. Even if you turn the gas bottle off after every use, one of your Chinese rubber hoses will start quietly leaking every time you cook, and it will fill the bilges with gas eventually. Gas is heavier than air, it slides to the lowest point inside the boat, and it stays there. Once the bilges are full, there are only two ways of removing it: instant combustion with a loss of eyebrows, together with neighbouring joinery, or laborious bailing out with a bucket. I have seen a madman walking with a dry empty bucket from his cabin to the cockpit, and with care and serious concentration emptying the empty bucket over the side of the boat into the river, then going inside for another load. He was not mad, he found a gas leak. Using a vacuum cleaner to suck the gas out is equivalent to turning a light switch on – sparks in the electric motor, assured boooom! and a spectacular disintegration of a vacuum cleaner. We have seen that one, too.
Once upon a time in all the poorer areas in the world were cooking on Primus stoves, when they could not use wood or dried dung. In South East Asia street food vendors are still frying their greassies on Primus derivatives. My own stove has served me for over 30 years, and I bought it secondhand in Camberwell flee market in Melbourne. In the Philippines the pressure tank sprung a leak, so I got a local village tinkerer to resolder all the joints; it's been 15 years since. Every few years I have to replace certain parts, most often the burner.
As progress moves into rural areas, messy kerosene stoves are replaced by cleaner and more convenient gas. Last time I came across a shop selling kerosene stoves was in Richards Bay, in South Africa. I bought a whole new stove then, as a spare, and a number of burners. Alas, I am burning through them, we do a lot of cooking. Now I was on my last burner and it was spitting, burning sideways, begging for a new jet. I looked everywhere we went in Latin America, but everyone was coking on gas. In Costa Rica I saw a beautiful burnished Primus as a display in a coffee shop. I asked the owner about it and she assured me that in town you still can buy parts for it. Where exactly, in town? The lady sent me on a wild goose chase around neighbouring farm towns. In pouring rain I went from hardware to hardware, from junk shop to junk shop, drawing zilch. Nobody uses kerosene any more. Lady in the coffee shop was living 20 years in the past.
In Rio Dulce my love bought me an entire second hand stove on-line, on the e-Bay. Logistics of getting a $10 item from UK to Rio Dulce took three months and involved my brother in-law in the States, a dodgy fixer in Miami, and a courier from Guatemala City to marina. Transport cost arm and leg, but the stove

arrived, a shiny original Primus, made in Sweden. Unfortunately some bastard swapped an incomplete blow torch burner for the proper cooking head and the unit did not function, neither as a stove, nor as a blow torch.
Coming to Capo Verde I was secretly hoping I may score in there. For two reasons. One is the history of the place. It used to be a Portuguese colony, and it retained close ties with the old country. Portugal manufactures genuine Primus parts, I have used them in past. Second reason is: Capo Verde is Africa, and in Africa strange things happen.
In Mindelo I pocketed an old Primus burner and started on a round of hardware stores. I showed it to the salesmen with predictable result: they all recognised it, but no longer stocked the line. Kerosene is expensive in Capo Verde, and no one cooks on it any more. I persevered. We are in bloody Africa, come on…
Asking in yet another large hardware, I became aware of a short barefoot fisherman buying some hooks and lines next to me. Blood shot eyes, crooked teeth, splayed feet, pair of patched shorts, a T-shirt full of holes, he looked with interest at my old burner. When he finished his purchases, as he was walking out of the doors, he croaked: "You need to see Gaspar, he sells this sort of things." Before I could ask him about Gaspar, bloke was gone.
Standing on the pavement in front of the hardware I scanned the passing crowd for someone who looked like he may know about Gaspar. In Mindelo everyone knows Gaspar. everyone I asked, anyway. His tiny shop is famous, tourists come in to take pictures of it. On a corner of a block in the old town, with no name, no sign, nothing to indicate that the triangular little room is actually a shop. Tall dark cavern is crammed full of junk and daily necessities. Toiletries, school supplies, wire and fishing gear, second hand spare parts scavenged years ago from defunct machinery, dusty handicrafts, cigarettes, grog, nails and old tools, hoses, baskets hanging from the rafters, dried herbs swinging next to them, coathangers with clothes that were fashionable a generation ago, all lurking in a gloom of dimly lit room.
Gaspar is a small spare man in his 60ies. I showed him my burner. He raised one eyebrow, moved his bifocals along his nose, minutely inspected the burner and declared that there is nothing wrong with it, it just needs another jet. He turned to a tall antique wall cupboard behind him, dull shine that you only can get by a lifetime of touching wood with your hands, opened a drawer and pulled out a sachet full of Primus parts. Jets, leather washers for the pump, dish for heating the metho, pieces that I also needed. I bought three of everything. And a burner? No, my friend, I do not have a complete burner. But I know who does. Zefferino. Up on the hill. Yes, I am sure he does. How do I find Zefferino?
He took me to the door and pointed a street corner two blocks away. On that corner catch a bus number 5 going up hill. Tell the driver you want to get off at Zefferino's. Bus stops in front of his door. And it did, exactly the way Gaspar said. Zefferino is a nuts and bolts man's wet dream. Warehouse selling spare parts for every bit of machinery ever imported into Capo Verde. Half a dozen young men duck under garlands of fan belts, hoses and hydraulic connections, floor to ceiling cupboards full of drawers line all the walls, every possible bolt in any system of measurement, and somewhere behind there is extension to the kingdom, because when I showed them my burner, the young man disappeared somewhere in the hinterland and didn't return for five minutes. He came back with a new burner, made in Portugal. I sent him out again, to get me one more.
On the way back to downtown I did not bother waiting for a bus, I walked the cinder block suburbs down the hill, spring in my step, my heart light and singing. I love Africa, for things happen there.

Economy of Capo Verde is supported on three legs: fishing, tourism and foreign aid. There is a busy fish cannery on San Miguel, and fish being cheaper than water or oil, their cans are full to the brim with fish, no skimping like in cans that come from Asia. Tourists have the beaches, and most spectacular desert hiking over the mountain mule roads on the outer islands. On the days that harmattan lays off and you can actually see something, views must be fabulous.
Foreign aid reflects in the shops. Shelves are well stocked, prices about what you would pay in Australia. Small shops charge less than big supermarkets for the same product. I bought biscuits from India, canned mushrooms from Spain, strawberry jam from Belgium, popcorn from Argentina, Nestle cacao from Mexico, canned meat from Holland and Denmark, whatever the donor country was dumping at the time. I stocked up well, trying to put some variety into my menu. Stoking up in Guatemala for the previous leg choice was limited. Ubiquitous tuna cans, four kinds of dried chilli peppers and little else. I bought a 100 tuna cans, and in Capo Verde I still had 24 left in the bilge.
I only stopped in Mindelo for a week and a bit. I did not want to get stuck and stale. I could see it easily

happening, Cabo Verde is a good place, but I had a mission. I was going home. It was still a long way to go, and the first hurdle on the way were the Doldrums.

Equatorial Trough, Doldrums, ITCZ, Intertropical Convergence Zone, Tropical Front, Sheerline, it's all same one thing, different names for a headache near the Equator where the two Trade Wind belts meet head on, blowing from opposite directions. We do not have Doldrums in the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific, on account of monsoons.
Doldrums do not mean calms, and calm is not their dominant weather. Naturally you do get calms, short ones after every squall that disrupted the air flow, and longer calms before major wind shifts, but most of the time you do catch some wind. I only got one 20-hour calm, before the final exit. Otherwise it was light and very light breezes, 2 – 3 – 5 knots, from any odd direction. On the winter side it is more firm. February is the winter in the north, so we had steady light northerly nearly all the way to ITCZ. Exiting on the summer side, south, it was calms, squalls, thunderstorms, patchy S – NW – S – NE – S for five days before we crept across the Line where the SE Trade ends in February. After that it was light southerly with rain squalls 2 or 3 times a day, but no more calms, and wind steadying every day, backing to SE.
Doldrums move with the Sun, north and south, lagging about 6 to 8 weeks behind it. They also pulsate within, shrink and expand, depending on the strength of the Trades either side of it. In the Atlantic they are always north of Equator, 200-300 miles wide belt of variable light winds with frequent squalls. Wind in squalls is unpredictable, some carry none, bigger ones come with a 15-20 knot blast, then calm in the middle.
I have on board 3 accounts of crossing the Doldrums by singlehanders without an engine, by Slocum, Moitessier and Knox-Johnson, plus the British Admiralty "Ocean Passages" with its seasonal analysis. The Hydrographer of the Navy ends his learned discourse by stating that "actual weather in the Doldrums is poorly understood." I believe him. Some cloud formations that I watched sure behaved baffling.
In Capo Verde I spent two afternoons on the Internet pouring over the current satellite photos, synoptic maps and data from ocean buoys. Trade winds are not uniformly constant, they fluctuate. It blows harder for a week, then they die down for a few days. Cycle is regular and fairly predictable. You'd want to time your departure from Cabo Verde so that you arrive in the doldrums with the strongest wind behind you. It will carry you most of the way across, and strong Trades compress the doldrums into much narrower belt. I decided to go closer to the African side than usually advised, and I crossed the ITCZ around 18°W or 19°W. Convection was meant to be weaker at that end, meaning less lightning storms, and it gave me a better angle against the wind when the southerly picked up below the Line. You have to plan for a strong westerly current you will meet right below the Line, flushing you towards Brazil at a rate of 40 miles a day.

Traditionally South Atlantic was always considered free of hurricanes, revolving storms fed on warm water, with sustained winds near the centre blowing at 64 knots or more. During the past few decades Brazil experienced several tropical storms, a disturbance one grade below a full hurricane, and one such storm developed all the way, into a category 2 hurricane Catarina in 2004, while two more became borderline. Unlike in the West Indies, all the storms in Brazil are autochtonous, they develop locally. In northern hemisphere about half of the hurricanes develop locally, in the Caribbean, while the other half tracks across the open Atlantic, starting as a tropical wave in West Africa. In south Atlantic they all start in Brazil as a depression, move offshore, intensify over warm water and then move back to Brazilian coast. The most likely time to run into them is late summer, early autumn, February and March, time we were sailing through.

All too short ten days of glorious progress was over. Southern limit of Trade wind runs from Saldanha in South Africa to Ilha de Trinidade. The change is abrupt. Instead of predictable SE to E of the Trades with clear sky we entered the belt of ever changing wind shifts of passing fronts with heavy overcast. Every 5 to 7 days the winds did a complete turn around the compass rose. Front itself brought several hours of rain and a change into southerlies, which became the dominant direction of the wind, between SE and SW. As we progressed south, every front grew stronger, wind in the change more violent. I stayed 200 – 300 miles out from land, I didn't want to get caught on the lee shore. That kept me in the main body of the fair Brazilian current, too.
I did not turn towards the land until I reached the latitude of my goal, Montevideo, at 35°S. Sea gets progressively more shallow, changing colour from deep blue to grey, then bottle green, and finally murky brown. Approaching La Plata river, pushing into the teeth of a NE gale, I kept shortening the canvas, yet my boat was still out of control. Deeper reef, deeper, until I was down to one tiny triangle of the sail.

Surely it can't be blowing that hard, I thought. Reefing this deep is reserved for 50-knot winds, something we did not experience since rounding the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. The next gust carried away my wind vane. It snapped it clear off, leaving the bare shaft of the trim tab sticking into the sky. Maybe it is blowing that hard.

I steered by hand the rest of the night and at daybreak faint blinking of the light house at Isla de Lobos told me we were at the entrance of Rio del Plata. They call it "rio", a river, but at that point it is over 100 miles wide, between Uruguay and Argentina. Rounding Punta del Este we got into the lee of land, but complex currents, outflow of the river and persistent NE made the progress further a battle. Punta del Este is the main playground of sailors in Uruguay, overdeveloped, expensive and snobbish. Everyone coming to Uruguay clears into Punta del Este, but to me it looked like a very difficult entry. After several hours of tacking I wasn't getting any closer, current sweeping me sideways. I checked my stash of charts and found one of a place called Piriapolis, about 12 miles further up the river. On the chart it looked like they had a small boat harbour, so I loosened sheets and run for Piriapolis, another beach resort. That's all I knew about the place. Another nasty front was breathing down my neck: after strong NE it usually turns into vicious SW. In the open sea you are fine, but this close to land I had to find a shelter.
Those 12 miles inland make a big difference. By the time I anchored in front of the breakwaters at Piriapolis, conditions were mild and pleasant. In the morning Armada towed me into marina, just as a stiff SW set in, blowing hell for the next two days.

Chapter 17: Uruguay

I had two good reasons for the 9 000 mile detour via Uruguay. One was a nagging rumour about the trucking service across the Andes to Chile. It was more than a rumour, I have spoken to Argentines who have actually done it with their own boat. Looking at a chart of La Plata estuary, silted over and crisscrossed by narrow dredged canals full of commercial shipping, I decided to stop in Uruguay first, to get more detailed info on the approach to Argentina. Just as well. What I heard on the waterfront put me off sailing directly to Buenos Aires. Extend of the red tape was frightening and arrogance of the officials boundless. Entry by sail alone was forbidden, only by motor. Traffic was closely monitored. Advance notification and constant contact by VHF radio on the penalty of impounding of the vessel. Australians have to pay a $100 fee prior to arrival, online, by a credit card, otherwise they are refused entry. To stamp out corruption, cash payment on arrival is not possible.
I heard many bizarre stories related by Argentine sailors. A Yank sailed into a small port in southern Argentina. Some petty official fell in love with his boat and decided it was going to be his. Yank was refused clearance out on the pretext that he broke Argentine regulations, as his life raft inspection was out of date. The only place to upgrade his life raft was in the capital. He was forced to send his life raft to Buenos Aires. Three months later he was informed that his life raft was lost in transport. There was no other life raft to be had on a short notice. His boat was confiscated because he "refused to comply with Argentine regulations" and he was deported, leaving his boat behind. The fool is still fighting in court.
The stories I heard may be isolated incidents, but Uruguay marinas are full of Argentine yachts that will never cross the river to their own country for the fear of loosing it to corrupt officials. I met several owners who were on their second boat, the first one lost to greedy bureaucrats in Buenos Aires. I decided to check on the transport over the mountains starting directly from Uruguay, it was only 200 km further than from Buenos Aires.

Second reason for Uruguay detour was Pepe Mujica, until a few months ago their charismatic President. In the 50 years of following international politics I came across only three statesmen who I admired whole heartedly. Not for their ideology, but for their personal integrity. Fidel Castro, Václav Havel and Jose Mujica. I do not necessarily agree with their platforms, and there are plenty of arguments I would pick with both Fidel and Havel, in case of Fidel I am strongly opposed to his basic premises, but for their unwavering honesty and total dedication to serve their people without reward they have no equal. In this day of beige limpwristed non-entities hogging power from White House to Kremlin, those three guys stand out as spiritual giants. Friends in Piriapolis offered to take me to Mujica's farm at Rincon de Cerro, to meet the man himself. For decades he's been holding an open court in the evenings, legendary all-night philosophical discussions, like the sages did in the ancient Greece, with bottles of wine and no security guards. I was shy to accept the invitation, for it would be a one-sided meeting. I would be only taking, I had nothing to offer the old man in return. Leave him in peace, I thought, he deserves it, he's done

enough for people.
On the street people told me, "we can afford to be relaxed and easy going, we are not afraid, of anyone and anything". It does take civic guts to elect as your president a former bank robber and one of the leading terrorists of his day. Pepe Mujica was one of the chiefs of legendary Tupamaros, urban guerrillas of the 60ies and 70ies, fighting an armed struggle in Montevideo against the current military dictatorship. Mujica got caught four times, escaped from jail twice, and got riddled by a shower of bullets. Till this day he packs his Beretta wherever he goes. Army kept him in jail without a trial for 13 years, out of that 11 in a solitary confinement in an old water tank. When the dictatorship fell in 1985, Mujica was set free. He publicly renounced violence, growing flowers for living on a farm he bought with his lady, and he entered politics, rising progressively from a deputy to senator to President. Convinced practising anarchist, he refused to wear a tie, even during the audiences with crowned heads of state. He kept driving his beat up VW Bug from his farm to the Presidential office and he donated 70% of his salary to a fund to build cheap accommodation for the poor. – "Being a president is just another job, like being a plumber," he said, alluding to the shit blocking the system that he tried to move. By his law every elected Major had to put a large sign on his Municipal Hall stating his name and his current salary.
Mujica is a visionary, he looks 30 years ahead. Unfortunately in short 5 years of his tenure he was not able to break through the stranglehold of vested interest and implement his main objectives – streamlining of bloated bureaucracy and reform of ossified education system. Entrenched paper pushers beat him. He will probably go down in history for one of his lesser interests, what youngsters call "Mujica's Laws", legalising of marijuana. Personally he is against marijuana, but being a realist, he recognised that prohibition does not work, if people want to use something, they will always find a way to it. So if you can't beat them, join them, then take over. His goal was to rid the country of narco traffic. He succeed in that. He did not scrap the anti-drug legislation, he turned the state into the producer and supplier of ganja.
As I arrived, two years after the laws passed the Parliament, they were finally being implemented. Possession of up to an ounce (25 grams) was legal. People can grow up to 6 plants for their personal use. If you got together five or more people, you could register as a farm co-op, and then you can grow 100 plants between you, as farmers. The state remains the sole producer of commercial quantities, licensing several big farmers to grow ganja, while the government remains the owner of the crop. Every adult Uruguayo can register with the health department as a user, which then entitles them to buy 10 grams a week from the pharmacies. Best stuff goes for $50 an ounce and that's the standard price, both official and informal. There is no black market rate. Uruguay is not a third world country, $50 does not go far. Food costs about same as in Australia.
Everyone I spoke to loved the Mujica's Laws. Drivers kept their dope openly in glass jars on the dashboard. Students came in the evening to the park around marina, watching sunset over the river, happily rolling joints while sipping mate from their gourds. Pepe was elected a President by a 55% majority. 5 years later when he left the office and decided not to go for the second term, because of his health (he was pushing 80), his approval rating stood at phenomenal 82%. Pepe is one of the new wave of populist leaders in Latin America. They rejected unmuzzled greed of Reagan-Theatcher capitalism, they turned their back on 19th century illusions of communism of Castro and Chavez, they are trying to find a dignified system for the 21st century. Economic growth and profit for the multinationals is not the main concern. They measure their proposed laws against a different yard stick, asking: "Are my people better off under this new law?" If not, the proposal is dropped. Uruguay has currently three opposing parties, with three senior statesmen leading them. Regardless of their disparate ideologies, those three guys get together regularly to thrash out the current problems, until they reach a consensus. Only when they agree, a new law proposal is brought before the Parliament, it is passed and implemented immediately. If no accord is reached, they scrap the idea and start thinking again.
Reforms do not come from above. People are deeply involved in civic life. They are aware of the problems their society is facing and they think for themselves, what to do about it. Their philosopher-president leads them that way: "I do not wish that you agree with me. I want you to think for yourself," he said. It happened that I stopped someone on the street to ask directions. We'd start conversation, in a normal way of two curious strangers, and two hours later we'd be still standing there on the street corner, discussing populist economy of Ecuador or the problem of unemployed school-leavers. ("Draft them into the Army for two years, on full pay. It will give them extra skills, tickets to drive various machinery, it will put a backbone into them, teach them discipline and it will help them to save up a bit of money to start a life with".)
Montevideo is no longer covered in extended slums. Government program provided people with decent accommodation, but most of the work was done by the residents themselves. First of all, municipality

recognised de-facto residency and gave the people legal title to the scrap of land they were occupying. Government paid some architect to draw basic plans for cheap small housing, they approved it and posted the plans for free on Internet. You download the plans, have them printed and start building. Plans were approved already, so there is no paperwork. Government provides a grant of $2000 in material, and services of one experienced carpenter to lead a gang. Neighbours all chip in their labour and in four weeks they have a real house. Small basic unit, unpainted concrete blocks with tin roof, but it is structurally sound, with power, water, sewage and legal right to extend it as the money come in. I walked through one of the former slums, every house painted a different colour, laundry hanging from the lines, herbs and flowers growing in the pots around the entry doors, and mama beckoning me in for a cup of tea, to show me their new house. Pride and dignity they displayed was the best of it.
Government, unions and Army are very strong in Uruguay, and it is not always for the best. Some of the rules are ridiculous. Government decided that salt is bad for you, so now by law all the restaurants and pubic kitchens cook without salt and salt shaker is not placed on the table as a matter of course. You have to ask for it.
Theft is not an issue and marinas are open to public. In Piriapolis families walk down the marina fingers to look at giant sea lions sleeping in the sun, sprawled on the back steps of luxury yachts. Two huge bulls climb every afternoon on the jetty in front of the coffee kiosk to sleep their siesta, totally oblivious to the mobs of camera totting visitors.

Sitting in Piriapolis marina, waiting for that first gale to blow over, I looked over my boat. First priority was fixing the windvane. The vane itself carried away, but the trim tab and the locking mechanism remained intact. I had to weld a new vane to the assembly. Uruguay uses the same power supply as we do in Australia, 240V. I could run my welder directly from the grid, but you are not allowed to do your own welding in a marina. They have an in-house boiler maker to do it for you. Like every boilermaker the world over, I could not afford him. German couple on the next finger needed two brackets welded on their aft davits, two 6-inch runs in stainless, half on hour's work. They called the local boilie to do the job. Four guys arrived, they spent 6 hours on the boat, and the bill came to US$ 360.
My only neighbours at the far outer finger was a 40-foot steel work boat, supplying crew changes to the passing commercial ships. In the week that I saw them they have not left the wharf once. Two guys on duty lived on board. Bored out of their wits, they did some half hearted fishing from the boat, then spent their afternoons welding up a bracket to house a satellite dish for their cable channel. I got to know the engineer, Ruben, a good hearted middle aged fisherman with Antarctic experience. I mentioned that I need to do a bit of welding on a quiet. I have all the equipment, I just need a power supply. Ruben waved his hand: "That's no problem at all, we run a lead for you from our engine room. " – I checked what connection he had on his lead and bought one in a hardware for my own machine.
Priapolis is a beach resort. There is exactly one welding shop, on top of the hill in the suburbs. I asked about some steel. Guy shook his head. He does not have a single bit spare. He pointed to a flat bars lying on the ground in the workshop: he orders only the exact amount of steel he needs for a job and the dealer brings it from Montevideo. He can spare nothing. – Anyone else in the game? – No. Not in this town. And anyway, everything is closing down for the Holy Week. You'll have to order your steel from Montevideo after the Easter.
The vane I was going to build was Jeremy Mark VII. In one of the previous incarnations I bolted a plain sheet of plywood to two cross bars. It performed satisfactorily for several year; until it carried away when "Kehaar" rolled over 360° in a typhoon. I looked around the boat again. We will use what we can get. Two flat bars on the back seat never did any work. We can chop them off. Inside the cabin I found a 2-foot long thick-walled stainless pipe that will form the new axle.
I walked back to town to hunt for plywood. Shops were closing for Easter, but one hardware sold me a full sheet of cheap 10mm plywood. A bit thick, and quality was awful, but with a n entire sheet I can afford to change the vane when it delaminates in the weather.
On the Easter Sunday I connected all the extensions, chopped off the stainless that was part of my boat, and struck the arc. I knew that the security guards will be down on me as soon as they see the welding flashes across the water from the office. Indeed, as I was running the last seam, the acme faced youngster with a note book was walking the long way round to put an end to it. As he approached, I took my welding helmet off. I did not say a word, I just peacefully stared him down. Peacefully the way my Russian friends define it: "I am quiet and peaceful as a boa constrictor." At that moment Ruben emerged from his boat an cheerfully called over: "How did you go? Did it work?" – "Just about done," I replied. The boy wrote something in his book to report in the office and walked away.

Even with winter rates slashed to one third, Piriapolis marina was too expensive. Gale over, I walked to the Prefectura and got a stamp out of the harbour. Cops like to keep track of all the boats in Uruguay. If I was leaving the country, I wouldn't bother, but I was moving about 100 miles further upriver, into a much cheaper marina, still within the country. As I was sorting out the ropes on deck before raising the sail, two cops came running down the wharf: "Stop! Stop! You cannot depart without a VHF radio. Chief says you have to install a radio before we can let you out." – I explained, pleaded, promised, no amount of arguing would get me off the hook.
Dejectedly I walked around, till I ran into a rich fixer I knew. He never did anything for me, just talked a lot, but this time he offered to lend me his hand held VHF. I called Prefectura, requesting permission to leave. – "Hang on there, we will come to check your radio installation."
Handheld VHF was not allowed. I returned the set to the fixer and walked around the place, looking for a bolt-on unit. I bought the only one I could locate and connected everything together. Cops came once more to approve my set up and only then they allowed me to leave.

Seeing how people took their lives into their own hands and tried to make something out of it was inspiring. My other objective, dragging "Kehaar" to Pacific, was anything but. I started inquiries as soon as I stepped ashore in Piriapolis and I did not slacken for a moment entire six weeks. I spoke to Argentine skippers, to local fixer, to every truck driver who gave me a ride while I was hitchhiking, to everyone willing to listen. I scoured glossy yachting magazines, telephone directories and marina brochures. I followed up every phone number and every e-mail address I was given.
It was like hitting an invisible rubber wall in a Kafka novel, or wading through thick molasses swamp that morphed as you looked at it. As soon as one door closed in my face, another slammed shut. All the advertising in Buenos Aires stopped about two years previously. Up till then there were several guys trucking the boats, from anywhere to anywhere. I looked up old issues of sailing magazines and tried to ring the numbers advertised. Every one was dead. Guys who were in business for 20 years suddenly disappeared. Argentines I spoken to on the wharf assured me it was a going business, but every single contact they passed onto me was was a dud.
Someone suggested looking into shipping "Kehaar" around the bottom as a deck cargo on a ship. I wrote to all 134 registered forwarding agents in Montevideo. Most did not bother replying. One asked if I prefer to do the transfer by plane or by sea.
Closest I got was a fellow building a boat yard in Juan Lacaze, the very harbour where we were parked. He had a truck, he had a 15-ton crane mounted on that truck. He was building wind generators for the government, but he had shifted yachts on his truck, within the country. He even figured out a rough quote, but after three weeks of stalling he told me that Department of Transport will not allow it, as he was not a registered international carrier. To register he needed six trucks on the road, and he only had two.
It just didn't make sense. I knew personally people who have done it, ads were splashed all over old magazines, yet no fresh scent. Only while I was hitchhiking across Argentina, north to the Iguazu Falls, that Brazilian truck drivers explained the conundrum to me. Border crossings may be open for the tourists, but for all practical purposes Argentine borders were closed. Due to some perceived slights, countries in the southern cone were quarrelling again. Many wars have been fought in the neighbourhood, every time shifting border lines a long way. Falkland War was just one of them, white man seldom heard of the other ones. Nobody was happy with the outcome. Buenos Aires still considers Uruguay its break-away Eastern Province. Truckies said that a well documented container will spend at least three days clearing a Chilean border from Argentina. Coming with something unorthodox, like a Gringo yacht, will have no chance at all. Officials will never say an outright "No". They will keep sending me back to the capital for extra non-existing permits, they will milk me dry until I run out of money, then they will take the boat away from me. Drivers were unanimous. Forget it. You will not get through. Not right now.
The week on the road in Argentina was great, and the Iguazu Falls defy description. I caught a bus back, it was cheaper than food for the week it would take me to hitchhike. Winter was barging in, weather was rough, cold and windy as hell. I was wasting my time. Every time a weather bureau issues a gale warning, cops close down all the ports and nobody is allowed in or out, until the headquarters deem the weather suitable. It does not matter what the actual conditions are, order is order, and doing a runner is severally punished. In autumn gales ports stayed closed on average 5 days a week. We had to get out.
I briefly considered returning the way we came, but rounding of Africa in winter did not appeal to me, and facing entire Indian Ocean in the wrong season would have been madness. Only one route lay ahead, with tail between our legs. Our default option, Panama.

Chapter 18: Panama

Panama was good to us. We cracked 1000 miles from Grenada in a week, flying before the strong Trade. About 10°N, as the Cordilleras behind the San Blas islands rose in the distant haze, wind cut off and we entered the Doldrums. The last 50 miles to Porto Lindo took three days.
I stopped in Grenada to get fresh fruit and veg, and also some form of clearance. I heard that in Panama they fine you $50 if your papers are not to their standards. Leaving bureaucracy-heavy Uruguay I deemed it easier to sail out without bothering them. We stopped in Grenada a couple of years previously, and paperwork was a breeze, then. This time I fronted a starch shirt of the Immigration officer with a dodgy piece of paper I claimed was my clearance. In Uruguay they did not give me any fresh papers at all. On arrival they stamped the back of my Capo Verde clearance and in every port the Armada added a few scribbles and another stamp on the same tired sheet.
"Where did you say you came from? Uruguay?" He booted up his computer and Googled "Uruguay". I heard him mumbling: "South American country, Spanish speaking…" He pointed to my dirty paper: "Is this in Spanish?" – I heartily agreed and pointed to the word "Panama" I earlier scribbled in with a ball pen between the signatures. – "I am sailing from Uruguay to Panama and I stopped here in Grenada for fresh provisions." The officer did not want to look foolish, so he didn't ask anything more and he banged his own stamp at the bottom and gave me 90 days' visa. When I told him I was leaving the same day, he then issued me with a nice officious clearance for Panama. I wish all paper pushers were so soft.
Rules for entry into Panama change fast. This time round changes made it easier. $100 visa fee was abolished and Porto Lindo was declared an official Port of Entry. A Kuna official was watching movies in his container office at Porto Lindo Marina. Chatting amicably in Spanish he filled innumerable forms, triplicate receipts and computer reports, then handed me the bill. I scanned the list of services I was paying for. One item caught my attention. – "Waiver of Vessel Inspection – US $ 20." – I turned to the Port Captain with a smile: "Does this mean you are charging me $20 not to inspect my vessel?" – He agreed, he was, indeed. – "Do you want to inspect my vessel?" – A slight shake of head cleared his position. He didn't give a damn about my vessel. This was a pseudo-legal way to get his cut of the proceedings. I could not be bothered angering the all-powerful Port Captain for miserable $20. I paid him then and there. He beamed, and readily cleared us out, bound for Australia, via Canal, leaving the departure date open. Anything for an extra bit of cash.
In the anchorage I ran into Hans Klaar. I haven't seen him since Durban, 20 years ago. I finally had a good look at his current boat, "Ontong Java". A magnificent 75-foot long Polynesian travelling double canoe he built in West Africa in 6 weeks. One hull is 10 foot shorter – "I ran out of timber," he said. Rigged with a crab claw sail, the first trial run was from Gambia in West Africa across Atlantic to Barbados.

Porto Lindo and Panama as a whole was right then a perfect place to hole up for a while. Friendly, cheap, just developed enough to live well, but not overdeveloped, not yet. Porto Lindo is on the end of the road, with cheap and reliable bus connection to Portobello and down to supermarkets of Sabanita and Colon. I was not the only one enjoying the low-key hospitality, and I met some memorable characters there.

My plan in Panama was simple: get the damn boat to Pacific. I pursued several avenues at the same time: 1- con my way through the Canal, 2- truck the boat 50 km across the isthmus, 3- unspecified "other". Basically, throw some money at it and make it somebody else's problem. Trouble is, on the waterfront 9 guys out of 10 are conmen who will take your money and deliver no goods. Trick was to find the tenth man who will actually do it. I must've run through all nine crooks before I struck the pay dirt.
Trucking "Kehaar" across seemed like an easiest way. Within days I was hustling on several sides. There was a fat Yank born in the Canal Zone, a slippery middleman who could not cut it in the States and came back to Panama to con his way around. He has carted large speed boats from Porto Lindo marina to Panama and he had contacts. At first we got along well, his estimate was reasonable, he sounded keen. As he discovered that I am waterfront myself, and that I will be present during the operations, he cooled off, started stammering idiotic excuses and after a week he slinked away.
In Colon I was referred to a local outfit of divers and underwater welding who routinely trucked yachts to Panama. Their manager, a sleek young black with impeccable manners, struck me as a straight sort of a fellow. Yes, they have their own truck and trailer, yes, they can, about $3500, yes, as soon as their crane comes back from the job, yes, most likely next week, next week, next week, next week… Pure humbug.
One day in Porto Lindo I met Jaap, young Dutch skipper of a 50-foot motor sailer. He offered to town me through the Canal. As a hired skipper he took another boat through a while back and he was confident we

can pull it off. We sailed the last 35 miles to Colon, on the northern terminus of the Canal. I booked the "admeasurement" at The Flats. Two inspectors came to check our boats. Jaap was accepted, "Kehaar" failed. Towing is no longer allowed. Under no conditions. Vessel has to "commence transit under her own power." Only if the engine breaks down mid way, Canal launch will tow the boat the rest of the way, charging US $ 14 000 in cash.
I was stuck in Colon. Contrary to Internet wisdom, there is a safe legal anchorage in Colon, convenient and free of charge. You don't have to pay a King's Ransom, trapped in the white ghetto of Shelter Bay Marina. Just drop your hook off the Clube Nautico, in NW Colon, 50 metres from the wharf. Holding is good, security not an issue, and you pay $3 a day to the Club to tie your dinghy at their wharf. Taxi anywhere is $1 or less, supermarkets handy to the Club. All the wharves around are industrial small vessels' bases, and I was soon negotiating with a Texan bikie who had a 500-ton crane mounted on a barge right next to the Club. His fees were reasonable, he had a mate with a truck, he knew the set up on the other side… didn't I hear a same story before? We came unstuck on the insurance I had to have on the other side, while launching the boat into Pacific from a marina. Nobody would insure "Kehaar". As the estimated costs climbed beyond my budget, I wrote to the Harley dude that he priced himself out of business. He was back, in person, the very next day, assuring me we can find some other way… More humbug.
Meanwhile I was sending e-mails all over the place. There are registered licensed agents doing Canal transit, expensive, but there are also unlicensed experienced "helpers" as well. I had several names and I wrote to them from Grenada, requiring assistance. – "Throw some money at it and make it somebody else's problem". – My two best contacts were silent. No.1 man was reputed doing time in Colombia, caught with a suitcase of cocaine, and No.2 man did not bother replying. Out of frustration I even tackled the "other" options. I started asking about a secondhand boat in Panama, on the Pacific side. It may be cheaper to buy another boat, load her with our junk and sail her home.
As I was pushing into desperate territory, my No.2 man, Tito, sent a reply. I wasn't particularly interested, if it took him three weeks to reply my e-mail, what could I expect from him? Tito was insistent. No engine? No problem. He done it before, many times. 25 years of experience, no fuck-ups. He did have a good on-line reputation, so after three days of haggling I agreed to meet him in "my" Colombian coffee place around the corner. Exactly one week later "Kehaar" was in Pacific.

Tito is a local lad. He grew up with fishermen on the beach in Colon, served as a seamen on ships, and when he got married, he settled down and went into "facilitating" business, helping gringos transit the Canal. Now, that a savvy sailor can do everything himself, on-line, Tito's business dropped off, and all he did was dodgy cases, like "Kehaar". He was working on permits for two other unsuitable yachts, but seeing that I did everything he told me to, immediately, and that I had no problem forking out cash, he backed "Kehaar" full time. Tito speaks reasonable English, but all his sidekicks speak only Spanish, so I went along with it. It helped a lot.
I understood that lack of engine was only one of my problems. "Kehaar" was missing number of other essential features I had to provide. Navigation lights, VHF, toilet, hand rails, shade for the pilot, lines, fenders, four line handlers… Towing was not allowed, but an outboard was OK, as long as it was operated entirely from deck and it could propel the boat at more than 5 knots.
We flew into it. Tito found a fisherman, Elias, who lent me a 30 HP outboard, nearly new, for a reasonable price. Elias came along as an operator, and to keep an eye on his outboard. Trust is in short supply along the Panama waterfront. Next to the Texan's barge was a large RORO ferry being refitted by a shady mob from Curaçao. I pulled "Kehaar" alongside her with ropes and her captain, cigar smoking jovial Cuban boilermaker, made up and welded on a bracket on our transom. We slung the outboard from it and on the first trial run we got 5 knots. Elias's two sons came with dive masks and scrubbed "Kehaar" below the waterline. Next test gave us 6 knots at half throttle. My electrics packed up in continuous overcast but in Colon you can buy absolutely anything, if you know where to go. A good cab driver can take you to the right place, for an extra dollar. I bought a new solar regulator and a car battery, installed Chinese grade nav lights at deck level, and my little VHF from Uruguay. I lifted all the ropes from deck to make plenty of room for the line handlers, I rigged up rope handrails and a shade tarp over the seat. Tito brought a portable chemical toilet, big bundles of one inch ropes, tyre fenders, everything we needed for an inspection. In four days we were ready and motored back to the Flats. Tito knows all the inspectors by their first names and we were accepted for transit.
That same day, with "Kehaar" back, anchored in front of the Club, we took a cab to a specific bank in Colon where you pay for the Transit. Boat up to 50 feet overall pays a touch under US$ 1000. You deposit another $ 900 as a buffer in case something goes wrong. Everything is paid in cash, no credit cards

accepted. Panama calls their currency "Balboa", but it's genuine US greenbacks. Independent country of Panama was created by USA early in the 20th century so they could dig their canal in peace. Servile attitude remains, to the point of American soldiers invading the country to remove a president that White House does not like (1989).
In the Thieves' Market we bought a bunch of plastic jerry cans from cooking oil, a dollar each, then filled them with fuel. It took nearly 100 litres to push "Kehaar" through the Canal at 5 ½ knots. The last requirement is food. You have to feed the pilot. Don't bother cooking pasta or rice dish. They like Kentucky Fried Chicken and Chinese take-aways the first night, and whatever sandwiches you can rustle up on the morrow.

Panama Canal is an impressive piece of engineering. Designed to operate by gravity, it's been running 24/7 for over 100 years. It only stopped four times in a century. Early in the 1900th a massive landslide closed it for a week. Once it closed for 20 minutes due to an industrial action of disgruntled pilots, and then during 1989 invasion of Panama general Noriega claimed he mined the gates and security had to sweep the locks. Finally in 2010 catastrophic rains filled Gatun Lake so high that it threatened overflowing and washing away the infrastructure. Traffic was stopped and Pacific gates were opened to let the water out.
Yacht transit starts in the late afternoon. A set of locks lifts the boat 20-odd metres above sea level. Concrete walls of the locks are scarred by thousands of ships scraping against their sides. Original gates are 100-year old riveted iron built in place. Gates for the new larger locks that opened last year were made in Italy and floated into place. Old locks are exactly 1000 feet long, and for decades ships were built to fit tightly into Canal locks, leaving only a couple of feet clearance on either side. There is no room in the locks to run tug boats. Gatun Locks on Caribbean end are three joined chambers, and ships are moved between them by little electric engines, like on Alpine railways, complete with a third rail in the middle, where the cogs hook into. Several sets of rails run parallel with locks, stout wire ropes from the ship hook to eight engines and they pull and push the mammoth in the lock. Sometimes a fully laden ship is too heavy for the tiny engines, and the ship has to engage its main propeller to help along. You don't want to have a yacht caught in the propeller wash.
Canal is a bit over 50 miles long, and most of the transit runs not in a canal but over a man-made Gatum Lake. After dark the first day you tie to a large buoy in the lake, not far from Gatum Locks, canal launch takes off the pilot and you spent the night with your line handlers on the lake. There was a crowd of us on "Kehaar", Tito, his teenage son and a daughter as crew (each paid $120 per passage), young fatso known as "Melon" who was the one doing all the rope work, Elias to run his motor and myself.
A different pilot came in the morning and we steamed zig-zag across the lake. Country is beautiful, with undisturbed jungle on all sides. We even passed a cayman swimming along. After the Gatun lake comes Culebra, 7-miles long artificial cut excavated across the main range of the hills. "Culebra" means snake, after its original tortuous shape, but a century of dredging, excavation, widening and maintenance straightened the snake into gentle curves. Maintenance continues all the time, and a lot of money is ploughed back into the works. On the Pacific side geologists found a tectonic fault just in the place where the locks were meant to go, so they split them into two sections, with a short lake over the fault itself. Pacific Ocean has serious tides, up to 6 metres in Panama, so the outside gates to the locks are by far the tallest ones.
Pilot was taken off at dusk by a launch in front of Balboa port and we steamed for another hour around the causeway to the free anchorage at Amador. Yachts and work boats cover the shallows, but there is room for everyone. Dinghy landing facilities change all the time. I was lucky to strike a free dinghy wharf at the Coast Guard pier, where the bus to Panama City stops. My crew got off with a bonus and we were bobbing peacefully in Pacific. Tito's share, including four line handlers, Cuban welder, rent of the engine, fuel, security guards on docks and all the extras, came to about $1300. I still think he was a good value. Our transit went like clockworks and two weeks later Canal Authority returned $ 900 deposit into my love's bank account in Darwin.
I did all the shopping in Colon, only fresh vegies and fruit waited for the glorious Central Market of Panama. Two days after transit we were gone.

Chapter 19: Pacific

I goofed. I didn't know that Central America has its own monsoon. So many things that I do not know! Word "monsoon" comes from Arabic "mausim" where it mean a "season". Monsoonal wind is a seasonal wind, monsoonal change is a seasonal change. Best known monsoon is in Asia. Its effects reach from

Madagascar to Japan and from Australia to Persian Gulf. In the summer Asian continent heats up, hot air rises and colder air from surrounding areas pours in. In the winter the pattern reverses, wind flowing out. Several other places have their own monsoons, on a much smaller scale. I have experienced a monsoonal winds of NE Brazil, I have read of monsoons of Western Africa, but I never dreamed that Central America has a similar pattern of its own, even though "Ocean Passages of the World" describe it in detail. Reading through I somehow missed the whole section.
In the summer North American continent heats up and draws the weather patterns a long way north. Pacific monsoonal trough, which is Doldrums, ITCZ, the narrow belt where the Trade Winds of two hemispheres meet head on, is sucked up north from Equator, on Mexican coast of Pacific slipping all the way to 14° or even 17°N. SE trades of southern hemisphere follow up, a long way north of Equator where they are supposed to end, and by the force of Earth's rotation they spin to become SW. The effect is most pronounced during the height of northern summer, in July and August, and slowly diminishes until it dissipates in the winter, from December onwards. Winter is the season to sail south from Panama, ITCZ hangs around 4° or 5°N and SE trades start around the Equator.
I left Panama in mid September. With five months' stores of food and water I set off on the Pacific crossing, first heading south, towards the Marquezas. I expected a very slow plod to Galapagos, then crossing the Line and a brisk passage across the Trades to Fatu Hiva. I figured, 6 to 8 weeks, maybe two months. Alas, three and half months from Panama I fetched an altogether different group of islands, anchoring in Maui, Hawaii, after a passage of 104 days. Duh!
I left Panama in a wrong season. Doldrums were hanging directly overhead, meandering around Colon, near 10°N. It was bucketing down every day, sometimes it rained so hard it filled my dinghy twice in one day. On the Pacific side, in Panama City, weather was fickle, any light wind we got was coming from land and sea breezes, tending towards southerly. A few days out in the Gulf of Panama it settled to SW and stayed there. Very light breeze, coming exactly from the direction I was heading for, dead on the nose from the day one. Unrelenting daily whisper of 2-3 knot SW, never varying. "Kehaar" does not point well into very light headwinds. Currents are a wicked mess, as the great oceanic streams coming from Pacific hit a solid continent and swirl in a cauldron of snakes. Plan called for a short stop in Perlas islands, to careen the boat, paint the waterline, slap another coat of antifouling on. I could not reach Perlas without a prolonged fight. I did not feel like a fight.
This stretch, from Panama to Galapagos, is a notorious motoring area. Even during the right season. You motor south across the Equator and pick up SE Trades there. You don't fool around with the currents or you may get trapped. Eduard Inglis on a balsa raft "La Kantuta" left Equador, in 1955. Too far north to catch Humboldt Current, it drifted to Galapagos, then got caught in gyre 600 miles across between Galapagos and Panama. After 97 days he was rescued by a passing expedition ship. Alberto Torroba left Panama in a large dugout canoe in the 1990ies and also got caught in the whirlpool between Panama and Galapagos. Not making any progress south in persistent calms, running out of provisions, he ended paddling his canoe back to Panama and started again.

I battled light headwinds for weeks, getting pushed close to the Colombian coast. At one point I was only 110 miles north of Equator. Then the mainland got in the way, with its contrary current, I had to tack offshore, and I never got so close to Equator again. With very light headwinds, SW and SSW, best I could do was head west, creeping at one knot. I stopped counting, time and distance, I stopped planning, I stopped thinking, it was so despairing. I looked no further than next meal, next break in the clouds to get a sextant shot. It was cold, Humboldt current coming up from Peru covered the sky in uniform cold grey.
I fought for 37 weary days. It took 30 days to cover the first 1000 miles. 30 days! The most abysmal performance of our career. A couple of days later I ghosted across the meridian of Galapagos, nearest island 50 miles to south, unseen. I was studying pilot charts and the "Ocean Passages", I was ready for the southerly wind shift they promised after Galapagos. It would allow me to crab sideways across the Equator into the SE Trades and head for Fatu Hiva. It never happened. In near calm this wicked eddy of a current swirling between the islands picked me up and flung me north, right into the Equatorial Counter-Current, and started pushing me back to Panama at a rate of 25 miles a day. With light SW breeze, I could not escape south. I tacked. In the next 24 hours I was pushed 3 miles backwards. I could not fight it head on. I had two choices: head back to Panama, after I fought for 5 weeks to get this far, or I could turn downwind and try to escape across the current, north.
I knew the consequences. Even before I could get across the stream of the counter-current, which I estimated 300-400 miles wide, I will fall into the Doldrums. And north from Doldrums are the calms behind the Mexican mountains, stretching for 2000 miles to the west. Any breeze I may get will then come from

north, and I will have no chance to regain the continent. All that happening during the tail of the hurricane season. The next realistic port I could hope for will be Hawaii, in the middle of the ocean, 3600 miles ahead. It will take me for ever to get out of the lee of America, into the open Pacific. I stocked up for the entire trip home, so I had food and water for another 4 months, but I told my love I would contact her in two months, two and half at the most. She would worry what happened, if I just disappeared for extra weeks.
I didn't really have much of a choice. I did not want to drift back to Panama, and from purely sailing angle, going via Hawaii made a lot of sense. It would not make the Pacific crossing any longer. I would be following the main track of Acapulco-Manila galleons, and I have read their accounts, once out of the lee of Mexican mountains, we would be flying. Hawaii is dead in the middle of Panama-Philippines run, 1000 miles closer to Asia than Marquezas would have been. In my original plan, from Fatu Hiva I would have had to cross Equator north again, on account of cyclone season in Southern Hemisphere, battle across the Doldrums and Counter Current (they both stretch right across the entire width of the ocean), and then head for Philippines. Via Hawaii I would have done the slow hard bits already.

For another 37 days I plodded along, across the Counter Current into Doldrums, across the Doldrums into the lee of Mexico, catching northerly breezes, sweltering in calms, riding with a slight current. Twice I dove under and scraped the goose barnacles growing on the hull. Countless times I lowered the torn sail and patched it the best I could. I mended the broken steering. I was making 40-50 miles a day, in the right direction, but it was so slow. Pacific is a big patch of water, 10 000 miles across.
"Kehaar" sprouted wings. Boobies' wings. I saw no fish at all on the entire crossing, but every evening a flock of quarrelsome fat boobies came to roost on my foredeck. So I was feeding on boobies instead of fish. Boobies are big birds with plenty of flesh in their flight muscles and they are the dumbest creatures I have ever met. Coming from the deserted islands free of human habitation, they have absolutely no fear of people and they are slow to learn it. Individual flock stayed with "Kehaar" for about 300 miles, then one day they would take off and another mob move in for the night. Either side of Galapagos, Clipperton and many atolls of Micronesia. Only dumb juveniles, with brown feathers, ever landed on deck. Overflying the boat, gearing for a clumsy landing, they voided their guts all over the sail. 14 birds roosting together on the foredeck fouled it so bad, that even vigorous scrubbing could not clean it. The worst was their demand to land on my solar panel, the highest comfortable surface around. As they landed, they shat all over it and no amount of shooing would move them. The only way to free the panel was walk up to them and grab one by the tail. No stealth required. A quick tap against the deck to kill it, then use the carcass to sweep the rest of them from the panel. When I caught one, the rest of them just stared at me without understanding what happened, none would fly away. As I swept them into the sea, they squawked and flapped their wings, taking off the swell, but five minutes later they tried to land on the same solar panel again.
I limited myself to one booby a day. I do not kill more than I can eat. I do not bother plucking the water fowl. I cut off the limbs and head, then skin it and gut it, keeping the liver and heart for a quick fry. On a booby, parts worth keeping are the pectorals, legs and neck. After boiling the neck for soup you throw it away. To keep the rest of the flock away I tied the wings all along the bar circling the solar panel. It kept this particular flock away, but at the change of the guard the new mob just landed right on top of them. Tying the dead wings to the rails on the foredeck was a waste of time. Boobies were not frightened at all. They may have found the landing on wobbly tips of feathers inconvenient, but they found somewhere else to land.
How do you cook a booby? Skin and gut the bird, then boil the meaty parts with star anise and chillies. Without a pressure cooked, give it about 45 minutes, then let it stand for a few hours in the hot (and cooling) water, to tenderise it. Debone the carcass, throwing the neck away. Chop up an onion, sweet potato, any vegies you have left. Boil until vegies tender. Before serving, tear two sheets of "nuri" dried seaweed into the soup. Serve with rice. Definitely worth the work, even if your bilges are full of tasty cans.
Between the inhabited islands, as in Indonesia, even young birds are smarter, and hunt is more demanding. Yeah, I can hear you. On a very long passage you do need to keep a tight grip on your mind. You don't necessary go around the bend, but you peek that way, and it looks interesting. In the absence of outside stimulation your world shrinks to the size of your head and you have to cope with that.
Stomach ulcer I caught in Atlantic flared up again. I countered with meditation three times a day. The "Guilty day", two and half months out of Panama, a cut-off date I promised a contact home, arrived and with it an epiphany as I was re-reading "Holographic Universe". I saw what is really important in my life and how to go about it. I started visualising healing of all the aches and pains that the old age and my

frustration saddled me with. Ulcer disappeared. I will not go into details. Rather personal stuff I will not bore you with.

On a day 76, I broke out of monsoon area into the open Pacific with solid NE Trade and we were hooting. In the next 14 days we covered 1500 miles. I woke up from lethargy and started writing letters in a longhand to everybody I could think of. Laptop charger died a few days out of Panama, so writing e-mails ahead was out of question. Embroidering wall hangings I understood the concept of embroidery as witchcraft, as practised by Nivki people from Sachalin. "Kehaar" carries one of their designs painted on her sail.

Milkmaid's counting had us spending Christmas in Hawaii. You know the thinking: "It's 300 miles to Hawaii. We are doing 100 miles a day. So, three days more." Naturally the very next day the Trades failed and we only made 29 miles made good. The day after we were down to 8 miles. Then a wayward eddy of a current swept us south and we had to close haul to regain the latitude. Christmas came and gone.

We only had on board a single photocopied chart showing the entire island chain. It was so old, that the title called them Sandwich Islands, the original name Captain Cook bestowed on them. I knew absolutely nothing about Hawaii. I had to look up in the Readers' Digest Atlas of the World, on which island Honolulu is. Oahu looked too far north for me. The first landmass you come to, the Big Island, has no natural harbours in its lee and no large town to seek shelter in. The next island, Maui, showed a deep bay in the lee of the mountains, with a gently sloping beach and a picture of an anchor to suggest a good anchorage. We were heading for that. Hawaii is USA, and I had no idea what reception awaited me, if they let me step ashore at all, without a visa. I was not worried. I needed an Internet connection to let my love know I was fine, I needed water and some fresh food. They won't refuse me that. I had money to pay my way. Everything else was optional.

Hawaii smokestacks can be seem from astonishing distance. The Big Island (Hawaii) was shrouded in cloud, but I caught a glimpse of Maui from 70 nautical miles away. On the other side, in the dry lee of the mountains, you see the top of Mauna Kea for two days, if you know where to look and what to expect. Volcanoes were capped by a crown of snow and they looked like giant cow pats, none of the steep majestic cones you see in Central America. Huge overturned woks, climbing to 4000 metres above the sea, with tiny pimples of astronomical observatories near the summit. We finally lost them to Trade Wind haze when they were 90 miles away.

Alenuihaha Channel between Hawaii and Maui is a classical venturi funnel, where the wind is squeezed by tall mountains on both sides. If the Trade is holding at 15-20 knots in the open, in the Channel it will be 30-35 knots, gusting to 40 or more. As soon as you round the bottom corner of Maui, wind dies and you are wallowing in calm, drifting slowly with currents.

On the New Years' Eve I was bobbing up and down in gentle swell, waiting for the afternoon breeze to pick up. The large Maalaya Bay we entered is a famous place to watch the humpback whales. Dozens of charter boats ferry the punters to tiny Molokini island, a sunken volcano, where they are guaranteed to see a breaching whale. We were becalmed two or three miles from the beaches of Maui, all the charter boats came from north, but as I was ghosting deeper into the bay, I could see neither forest of masts you'd expect in a marina, nor any breakwaters or other signs of a town. I knew I could anchor in the very head of the bay, another 8 miles further north, but where was the town? All those yachts had to come from somewhere. Or was there town here at all? My old chart did not divulge such details.

Several sail boats stacked with day trippers swung by to take photos of "Kehaar's" strange profile, and finally I flagged one of them down and asked the helmsman where is the harbour in this bay. – "Don't you know where you are going? Don't you have charts?" – I again asked about the town or marina, explaining that my chart is out of date and not very detailed. Skipper pointed north and said there was no real town, marina was tiny and full, no room for me, but the overflow anchored off the beach. He then gave me a copy of local chart to guide me in. As he was leaving, he threw over his shoulder: "You Dutch, aren't you?" – I shouted back: "No fucking Dutch here, mate" – "So what's your accent?" – "My accent is Russian." – I could see the skipper's eyes widen in horror as he grabbed a VHF radio to report a clandestine Russian boat sneaking into USA.

In the afternoon expected breeze picked up, sliding down between two volcanoes from north and we close hauled for the last 6 miles bash to the anchorage. About an hour later a sleek Coast Guard patrol boat arrived and cautiously circled "Kehaar". I had an Australian flag flying from the transom and a courtesy America flag I painted on a piece of canvas. Coast Guard closed in with us: "You are Australian?" – "Yeah, mate." – "What's your last port?" – "Panama."

Vessel drew away and started calling the base. Bit by bit they extracted whatever information they wanted,

every time steaming a bit away. Wind picked up in earnest, and we were hove to on an offshore tack, to make communication easier. Late in the afternoon, as we were getting too far from the coast, I asked permission to tack and close in with the land. By then they checked my passport ID and other things and they were quite friendly. They promised to organise the Customs' clearance, once I am anchored, they made sure I had all that I needed, they even texted my love in Darwin to tell her I was all right. As the afternoon turned into evening, they drew closer for the last time and the Captain asked me if I wanted a tow. – "Tow where?" – He pointed north, towards the beach I was heading for: "To the anchorage. We are heading that way for the night, anyway." – "Are you going to send me a bill?" – "No, no bill. I just hate to see you spending another night out here becalmed, when it's only a few miles to the beach." – It was New Years' Eve, and the guys wanted to have a quiet night themselves.
I gladly accepted the tow and the guys quickly rigged up a long tow line. I was impressed. Good seamen, professional, efficient, polite, yet friendly. Half on hour later I was swinging on anchor off Sugar Beach in Maalaya Bay. Officials were meant to come on board in the morning and I promised to wait for them before I came ashore.

On the New Year's Day nobody turned up. That did not surprise me, New Year is holidays in most places. But on the following day, again, nothing happened. That was strange. Did I upset someone? On the 3rd in the morning a big fat bloke with huge beard paddled his surf kayak to "Kehaar" and wished me a happy New Year, and do you know you are on the front page of the newspapers? I did not know and I launched my dinghy to go and investigate.
I landed on the beach, tied the dinghy to a tree and walked the two miles to the Coast Guard station in Maalaya. – "What? Nobody came to clear you in? That's not right." – Coast Guard rung whomever was responsible and I heard a slow southern drawl asking on the other side of the line: "Does he have his papers on him?" – Coast Guard bloke raised an eyebrow in my direction. I nodded and patted my pocket. I had all the papers on me. – "Yeah, he's got it all with him. Yeah, fifteen minutes. Thanks."
A cartoonish character of a sheriff's deputy, complete with beer belly, six shooter slung low and a set of monstrous handcuffs, rocked up and we sat down at a table in the Coast Guard station.
"Do you have a passport?" – I handed him my Australian passport. Satisfied he leafed through the pages: "Do you have a visa?" – I saved him the hassle of searching further: "No." – "Why not?" – "It was not my intention to visit USA. I am sailing from Panama to Australia and the winds did not cooperate." – Without even thinking about it he nodded in agreement: "Fair enough. We will waive the visa. How long you are staying?" – I have calculated that a long time ago. In a week I could do all that needed done. So I asked for 10 days. He was incredulous: "Ten days? That all?" – Bam! Entry stamp landed in my passport. He slid it across the table to me: "You need more, come to see me in the office. Welcome in Hawaii." He pushed his chair back and rose to leave. I was astonished. That was easy. What about the clearance out? – "You mean you are seriously intending to leave USA? In ten days?" – He sounded astonished. I confirmed, I was going home, to Australia, I had no intention of hanging around Hawaii.
He turned my entry paper to the other side and banged an exit stamp with a date on it. Then he pointed to the embarkation card I filled: "Before you leave, tear this bottom bit off and send it to me by post. That will be your clearance." He passed me a business card with his e-mail address and he was off. The whole thing cost US $19. For the second time I was impressed. I judge the country by their border formalities, and what Hawaii showed the world was a strong confident country not afraid of anyone.
I walked out of the Coast Guard office light headed and crossed the road to a burger bar. Hey, we were in! Maalaya is not a town, not even a village, it is a tourist trap catering to the whale watching business. I had a celebratory burger and a coffee which set me back exactly the same that Customs' did. A whooping US $19.
I glanced at the local newspapers left lying on the table. And here was "Kehaar" on the front page of "Maui News" with an imbecile article on the page 3: "Disoriented Australian sailor rescued off Maui's west coast". Over the years I have had similar run-ins with the news, but nothing this stupid. And it was only the beginning. Right after a New Year papers had nothing to write about, so the world wires picked up this stupidity and without verifying anything they blew it out of proportion. Guardian, Washington Post, Age… The worst were guys like Sydney Morning Herald who trawled Internet for my name and came up with disjointed hodge podge that Google threw up: "He's been known to sell coffee on the streets of Darwin…" Our local rag in Darwin contributed its two bob of wisdom rounding their rant with – "We hope he learned his lesson." Nobody came to talk to me, nobody contacted Coast Guard to verify anything.
Where did the story came from? From that dickhead skipper who panicked when he heard I had a Russian accent. He styled himself "a good Samaritan" who rescued me while I was disoriented. And how they ran

off on tangents, about the danger of being disoriented at hight sea etc etc. Googling my name, they found address of my love in Darwin, and unable to reach me, they pestered her for a "story" instead. Poor girl has just gone through a month of anxious waiting if I turn up alive, anywhere, all she had was a short text message from the Coast Guard, and here they were demanding podcast, interview, skype and what not. I was in the most developed country in the world, but my means of communication remained severely limited. There are no public Internet cafes in the States. Everybody has his own connection. Without a phone and no subscription to Internet I had to lug my un-dead laptop by public transport to the shopping Mall in Kahului on the north coast of Maui. Laptop had no battery, so I had to find an electric power outlet close to Starbuck's cafe, sit outside on the pavement and plug my machine in so I could use their wi-fi. After half an hour security guard would move me on and my connection was broken.
A heartening offshoot of the media slander was several eloquent people who stood up in my defence. Besides my love who really got her claws out, they were complete strangers who did not know anything about me. My friends in Darwin wrote to the local News in such a heated vein that the paper didn't dare to print their opinions. And the most brazen idiots I have dealt with myself, in no uncertain language.

From Hawaii you run straight ahead in the NE Trades until you reach the Philippines. About 100 miles before Mindanao the wind died and we turned left, across the Equator, across the Doldrums, across Indonesia, ghosting south in light variable winds and plenty of thunderstorms.
Passing Ambon we got hit by a lightning, in a very strange way. We have passed under a large thunder cloud that threatened more than it delivered. A few cracking thunderbolts but no rain. Just as we exit the cloud, with a strip of blue sky ahead, we were struck. I was sitting in the hatch watching the sky, when suddenly the stainless steel cleats half a metre away sparked like when you cut across high tension live wires. Flurry of sparks, crackling sound of their dance, then instantly a monstrous thunderclap right overhead. If it wasn't for the thunder, I would have doubts that it was lightning at all. Half a metre from it I did not feel anything. It did not hit the steel mast: top of the mast is well painted with epoxy. Lightning earthed in the very centre of the boat, next to my hatch, where a battery of shiny stainless cleats is welded to the deck. I ducked inside to check the electrics: LED lights were functioning, battery charge holding 13 V, everything in order. We have no other electrics on board.
In the middle of March, ghosting into light headwinds, we slipped between Sermata and Babar, the last two islands of Indonesia. With 300 miles to go we barged straight into a developing cyclone. You don't need a satellite weather fax to tell you there is a cyclone ahead of you. Huge SW swell, horizontal rain 24 hours, SW wind gusting 30 knots and more, low cloud ceiling… I reefed right down, turned around, heading back towards Indonesia, and slowly jogged away from the centre of depression. A category 2, Cyclone Marcus went on to maul Darwin the following Sunday, uprooting hundreds of trees and cutting off power for days. By that time we had flat calm, and we were anchoring with every turn of the tide. Last 20 miles home took two days.

There is nothing to add. Back in Darwin I came the full circle to the beginning, to our talks with Paul about difficulty in communication, futility of trying to share an experience, time wasted writing books. I wrote about it in the opening pages. In our Club, one of the stay-at-home philistines was saying, behind my back, not to my face: "What's the point? Doesn't Kris understand it has all been done before?"
By the same logic he could have asked: "What's the point living? It has all been done before."

1 THE END

Colophon

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