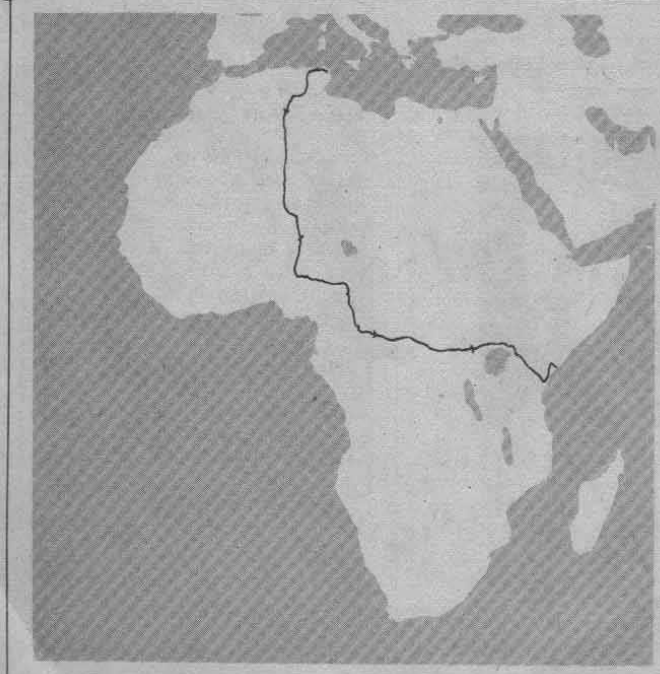

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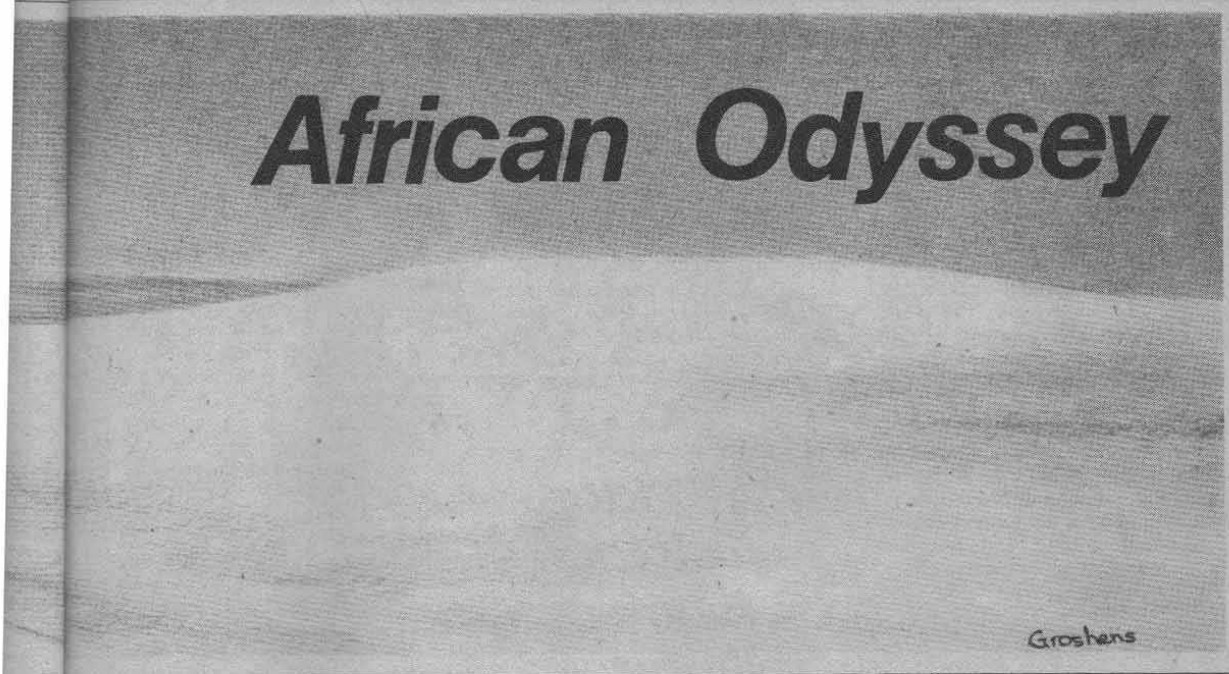
BY THE TIME I reached my fourth year at Queen's, I had sunk into a morass of boredom. Even as early as my second year I was talking about "the year off". But monotony sapped my strength; I was swayed by the profound and repeated observations, "If you take a year off, you'll never go back," and "Why don't you wait until you graduate?" By then my friends were teaching history in Kenya, digging ruins in London, and studying Spanish in Salamanca. I was, in the meantime, wondering if I could survive anywhere else but Kingston. Eventually a decision evolved. I had to go! I had to get away as far as I possibly could and leave everything behind! After graduating I worked for a radiation clean-up program (convinced that cancer could be beaten — even though I was a history major) saving money for my departure that fall.

I chose London because it's pretty safe. I've been there before, they speak a kind of English, and my friends wouldn't let me sleep in Hyde

African Odyssey



By Brad Doney with illustrations by Mark Groshens

Park. The city gave me a taste of independence, of drinking bitter instead of beer, seeing Turners instead of Thompsons, and spending pounds like dollars. After renting a room in Fulham I settled in for about six weeks — the length of time it took me to understand the ladies in the laundromat. Winter began to settle over the city though, and since central heating presumably requires a title, I set my sights on warmer climates.

An ad in the London Magazine, *"Time-Out"* caught my eye — *"London-Nairobi, 12-16 weeks, all inclusive £600."* The advertiser was only a half hour away, in Hammersmith, and in no time I was faced with a burly, overbearing Australian, who began his selling job by proudly showing me his run-down, twenty-year-old Bedford truck. The presentation included the imbibing of several drinks. He showed me photo albums filled with pictures of trucks stuck up to their fenders in mud, carrying half starved, stoned and grinning travellers. With the scheduled departure only days away I decided to go.

The £600 I gave the Australian included transportation, breakfast and dinner, visas, and incidentals, like bribes, fines and repairs. We carried large three-man tents, cooking supplies, dehydrated food, and tons of other supplies for the fifteen thousand kilometres. There were eighteen of us — two Scots, seven Englishmen, three New Zealanders, four Australians, one Malaysian, and me, the token "American". The leader was Mike, an English dentist, addicted to the Rolling Stones and whatever drugs he could find. We had a computer technician, Pete, and an attractive economist, Peng. As well there were two heavy-duty secretaries, Colleen and Rose, a Covent Garden violinist, Tina, and a taxi driver another Pete. Fortunately, there were two mechanics, Jeff and Bruce, but they grew to hate each other. Sue, the psychotic x-ray technician, attracted the greatest ire, and John, the surveyor, who couldn't decide what kind of pyjamas to bring, caused some consternation. Our waitress, Linda, traded away her clothing for souvenirs, but the bookkeeper, Diane, wore all of hers while she slept through the trip. Finally, there were two clerks, Dave and Dave, and a pipefitter, Stuart. Stuart's goal, which shaped up gradually through a series of disasters, was to make it to Nairobi alive.

Their reasons for going to Africa varied. Most were dissatisfied with their lives and were looking for some adventure and excitement. Many gave up good jobs to travel. Peng had been a marketing executive with Sanyo. Stuart apprenticed at sixteen to be a pipefitter, getting his papers four years later. Now at twenty-one he decided he didn't really like it. Pete was an innovative computer programmer, and Rose and Colleen were secretaries, simply bored with their jobs. Many left personal problems behind them. Some were only at peace when they were on the move.

Most were unprepared for the deprivations and hard travelling we were to experience. Jeff, the driver, drove through Africa in a never ending search for "eggs and chips", his idea of real food. Tina struggled to maintain her vegetarianism with a protein deficient diet, and redirected her violinist's dexterity by becoming the company barber. Sue managed to alienate the entire troupe with her irrational verbal assaults and she appeared to experience the least pleasure during the journey.

Among the seven women and eleven men only two romances developed. Tina became enamoured with Pete the taxi-driver, and Colleen fell in love with Jeff. Stuart and Linda both corresponded faithfully to friends at home, and the rest of us complained a lot but generally maintained our chastity. I suspect that none of us were too attractive after a few weeks of dusty travel.

OUR ROUTE to Nairobi seemed fairly straightforward on paper. It was decided beforenand we would travel through Europe to Italy, and then cross to Tunisia via Sicily, because the route through Spain and Morocco had been made difficult by Moroccan authorities. They apparently suspect that a group of men and women, on a truck like ours, are mercenaries. From Tunisia we planned a descent into the desert through Algeria and Niger before arriving in Nigeria. From there we were to veer last to Cameroon before traversing the entire breadth of the Central African Republic. From C.A.R. it was assumed to be simply a matter of crossing southern Sudan before entering Kenya from the north. It all seemed quite elementary on paper.

Mike, the dentist, was nominally in charge, though he commanded little respect, because of his inability to communicate. Fortunately there were few decisions to be made that were not dictated by our circumstances. One can hardly travel when there is no fuel in a country, or remain when visas have expired. Lacking an effective leader was a constant aggravation, however, since even the most minor decisions resulted in exploding tempers and bad feelings. A decision to set up camp or to continue on for another hour could result in an argument lasting all evening.

A week driving through Europe aboard a canvas covered truck in freezing weather familiarized us with the idiosyncrasies of a twenty-year-old diesel engine, which insisted on push starts at the most awkward times, like borders, and the Italian Alps. Because of our rush to conquer Europe we lived on "Mars" bars. Besides, we quickly found that chocolate bars were preferable to the food that was packed aboard. We were all relieved in Sicily when, with only minutes to spare, we caught the weekly ferry to Tunisia. Settling in for the fourteen-hour crossing, each of us nurtured his private visions of the dark continent.

AFTER fourteen sutures, including six to connect the internal flesh, Stuart had some semblance of a knee.

Our preconceptions of the "heart of darkness" were shattered the next morning as we viewed the crane-crowded harbour of Tunis. It looked little different from the Italy we had left. Our enthusiasm was not so quickly dampened though and the differences between Tunisia and the northern side of the Mediterranean quickly came into focus, as we became familiar with the strange mix of French and Arab cultures.

THE FIRST of Stuart's many minor tragedies occurred in Tunis when he stumbled and fell on the beach where we were camping, ripping a tremendous gash in his knee. Our dentist-leader, undaunted, was prepared to stitch it up on the spot. We were able to dissuade him, however, and off we went in search of the local hospital. Following a series of frustrating delays finding the hospital, we managed to get a stretcher out to the truck. While taking the head of the stretcher, I reassured Stuart by pointing out the relative cleanliness of the hospital and the presence of medical staff. At that moment the hospital porter opposite me dropped his end of the stretcher, nearly flinging Stuart out onto the ground. Fortunately, the doctor was more competent and after fourteen sutures, including six to connect the internal flesh, Stuart had some semblance of a knee again. Though he had no anesthetic, except for self-administered brandy, only the last couple of stitches hurt. It was forty-two days before he was able to take the dressing off his leg for the last time.

We spent ten days in Tunis, resting from our hurried travel in Europe, repairing the truck, and letting Stuart recover from the initial infection and fever of his wound. Then we headed for the Sahara. Most of Tunisia is lush and green, the soil red like Prince Edward Island's. The nights were cold and our water bottles were frozen one morning at our campsite near Constantine. This increased our desire to get further south into the hot Sahara.

The farther we travelled, the more curious and strange we appeared to the locals. As we descended into Algeria, people gathered around our truck, sometimes eager to buy American currency, but often just to stare. While adults were often suspicious and wary, the children in the desert villages surrounded us demanding "cadeaux" and "stylo". Many asked for addresses as well. It was assumed without question that since we were white travellers, we were wealthy. This was of course

relatively true, but we were certainly not as rich as they expected. In fact, we were all astounded at African prices and we found that there were few bargains. Any manufactured goods were twice as expensive than in North America, and food, other than native staples, fetched higher than European prices. Because of the difficulties in reaching these areas, most of the locals have had little opportunity to meet middle-class whites, and their preconceptions are of jet-setting white civil servants and wealthy tourists.

Our first days of desert travel were magnificent, miles on end of horizontal lines, broken only by the occasional sand dune. The villages are called Biskra, Touggourt, Quargla, and Ghardaia. My love affair with the desert began and my journal is filled with my inadequate attempts to describe it.

"We saw our first mirages today. At one point I ran ahead of the truck for half an hour finding myself out of sight, completely alone in the middle of the Sahara. The openness and feeling of freedom is exhilarating. The road, a lesson in perspective, stretches for miles before dividing the horizon."

ONE of the troupe awoke in the night with a desert rat perched on his face . . .

One of our major challenges was cooking for eighteen hungry, tired people every night, under primitive conditions. Though we had gas stoves, we used wood as often as possible to save our propane fuel. In the desert, however, this was impossible. Initially three people cooked for a week at a time but because of the strain this was later reduced to three days. Mornings were the worst as it necessitated getting up at 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. In the desert, at least we were able to watch the breathtaking sunrises before downing our lumpy, milkless porridge. God, how I used to curse that stuff. We collected $1-$2 a week from everyone to buy fresh vegetables. Often it took several hours of shopping to persuade the market women that we were not going to pay the exorbitant prices they demanded. Stuart was perhaps the

best shopper and he quickly developed a love-hate relationship with the market ladies. It often took every ounce of his patience to reach an agreeable bargain. It became a challenge to see how full one could fill the basket with the set amount of money we allowed ourselves.

TAMANRASSET MARKS the end of the road to Algeria. We were confronted by an expanse of sand broken by the faint outline of the route to Niger. While camping within walking distance of 'Tam' we got a taste of village life. The two Australian girls were assaulted in a local bread-shop. A local shepherd boy, shivering from the winter temperatures, viewed me and my possessions in awe, as I sat in my Speedo, enjoying the sun. Once our tents all blew down in a minor sand storm, while the thorn-eating camels continued grazing nearby.

Between Tamanrasset and the frontier of Niger, we passed two bicyclists, a Pole and a Japanese, travelling about a day apart. Each carried three litres of water and depended on handouts from travellers, like us, for more. Much of the time they pushed their bikes because of the soft sand. These were the first of many eccentric travellers we encountered. There was the motorcyclist who was in his fifth year of a seven-year journey around the world. But his exploits were surpassed by the two Frenchmen, in loinclothes, who had been wandering the roads of Africa for years, living as primitives.

A couple of times a day we met other travellers proceeding north, sometimes buried to their axles in soft sand. The route is marked with cairns and steel markers, not to mention the sand blown carcasses of abandoned vehicles.

We spent little time in Niger in our eagerness to escape its unvarying flatness. It was just over a month since we left Tunis and the sun and sand was taking its toll. Eighteen people with uncommon backgrounds do not easily settle into camaraderie. Tempers flare and criticism comes more frequently than praise. We travelled hard and the roads were rough and dusty. Though we carried about a hundred gallons of water we were careful because a breakdown could create a potentially dangerous situation. Consequently, there was little wash water. We went to bed encrusted with the day's sweat and dust.

We saw wild camels along the road lying in the shade of thorn trees. One of the troupe awoke in the night with a desert rat perched on his face. A hot spring of sulphurous water provided relief for dusty limbs and dirty clothing. Northbound travellers found an attentive audience for their descriptions of the cold beer, coca cola, and fresh food in Kana, Nigeria, our next major stop.

Our truck had four wheel drive, and although we had sandmats (metal mats which give traction when placed under the tires) we had no occasion to use them. When we arrived in Agadez in Niger we talked to a group of thirteen Englishmen whose truck had broken down in the desert. They added to their complaints with the observation that the truck had been stuck in the sand at least fifty times.

ALONG one of the walls was a bed adorned by a tired prostitute. It was all pretty sordid.

KANO IS the first really large black African city we were in, and it was enlightening if not totally pleasurable. Nigeria has over seventy million people and it seemed like they were all living there. Because it is a commercial city it attracts residents of the hinterland in search of a better life. They end up sleeping on the sidewalks and providing for themselves as best they can. On my second evening there, one of the locals took me on his motorcycle to the largest market in the city. It was just getting dark and we walked for miles through the maze-like alleyways, splashed with the firelight of a hundred lanterns and charcoal fires. Visions of "Mid-Night Express" flashed through my mind, especially since we were looking for my companion's supplier. At last, after a dozen detours and three different guides, we parted the curtain of the local "pot-den". It was a very small room, surrounded by wooden benches. Each seated several men smoking samples of the local product. Along one of the walls was a bed adorned by a tired looking prostitute. It was all pretty sordid. My new acquaintance bought an "arm" of dope for $5; an "arm" is a bundle the size of a man's forearm.

Halfway through March we reached Yankari Game Park in eastern Nigeria. In the centre of the park is 'Wiki Warm Spring' a mineral stream flowing crystal clear over a sandstone cliff. For several days we soaked away the travel stains of the previous weeks. Baboons and wart hogs watched suspiciously as we introduced the local youngsters to air mattresses and beachballs. A great deal of deference is still awarded whites and the kids thought it was great that we played with them. The baboons were aggressive around the campsite, not hesitating to pull garbage out of a fire, or to rip a bag of food out of someone's hand. Their huge white fangs commanded everyone's respect. On a brief foray through the park we saw elephants, hippos, water buffalo, antelope and deer. The hippos attracted the greatest attention. Their ponds would boil and swell and a huge prehistoric head would be thrust out of the water for air, before submerging for another ten or twelve minutes.

We stayed over a week in Kano meeting many of the extremely friendly locals, especially members of a small middle class of young professionals who hang out at the local hotels. They're eager to meet tourists, to learn about their countries and to act as guides to the city and the area.

One of these men is the son of a former Nigerian ambassador to the Soviet Union. During the revolution Frank's father returned to the country in an attempt to get his family out. Captured and imprisoned, he was executed by a firing squad, in front of his son, fourteen year-old Frank. These are the kinds of memories which haunt many of the Africans we spoke to.

Most seemed conscious of the instability of their countries and were quick to express their hopes and fears. Frank had become apolitical, blaming politics for the death of his father. Muslims are proud of the growing power they have become. One man said that by the year 2000 A.D., Muslims will have completed their dominance over the world! As he entered a mosque, another young man astutely observed, "Even Mohammed Ali is a Muslim!" Tribalism remains another major political force, and the question, "What tribe?" follows most introductions. Whites complained that their many servants must be from one tribe in order to preserve a peaceful household.

In Cameroon, Stuart, unlucky as usual, was bitten by a large hunting spider. The excruciating pain that followed left him in agony for much of a day. Commiserating, I captured the spider, slaughtered it, and awarded it to him as a souvenir.

WE WERE in Marua when civil war broke out in N'Dmajena, the capital of Chad just to the east of us, and we witnessed the exodus of whites from N'Djamena to the luxury hotel near our camp. It seemed remarkable that these people could be enjoying good food, wine and the good life of the hotel in Marua, while less than two hundred miles away civil war was raging in the streets of a capital city. I found this air of unreality whenever we encountered political life and bureaucracy on the continent.

It was the beginning of April when we arrived at the frontier of the Central African Republic, the most bizarre and paranoid country we visited. Our short stay, extended by fuel shortages, lasted until the end of May. We camped in Bangui, the capital, just below one of the mansions built by the infamous emperor, Bokassa. I was informed by one knowledgeable little boy that Bokassa ate people. While this remains controversial, it is generally accepted that the self-proclaimed emperor nearly destroyed the country's weak economy, before being toppled by, perhaps, more level-headed leaders. We saw at least a dozen different uniforms in Bangui including strong representation by the French army.

We camped more than three weeks

in Bangui on our site beside the Ubangi River. Though a twenty-four guard was kept, twice we fell victim to the ubiquitous thieves. Their talent is admirable and their exploits legend. A good thief can cut open a tent and remove a wallet from its sleeping inhabitant, who happens to be in a sleeping bag.

About a dozen orphans lived on the site surviving as thieves and scavengers. While they were the most willing and ambitious of workers, they would not hesitate to steal the shirt from your back, if you let down your guard. Campers often paid their leaders protection money in order to escape with their supplies and equipment intact.

The river also posed a threat. During our stay the hippos claimed the life of a local infant and badly injured a German tourist, who had waded into the water one evening. The threat of bilharzia, a water-borne parasitic disease kept me away from the inviting water, though most of the others succumbed to the temptation. The river also breeds the flies which carry disease and cursed our daylight hours.

Usually I awoke about 8:30 as the sun began to turn the tent into an oven. One ill-fated morning as I sat up, I saw a snake slithering on the far side of Stuart's sleeping bag. While yelling at him to get out of the snake's way, I madly tried to undo the tent's zipper. We flew from the tent followed by the equally frightened snake. Literally shaking with fright all I could think of was that it was a deadly mamba, or something dangerous. After a hunting spider and a snake, we were confident that a scorpion was next. We hoped we would survive it as well. Our next encounter with a snake occurred a couple of weeks later at a forest mission station, when an eight-foot cobra invaded the confines of the mission in its hunt for chickens. Some of the staff killed the black serpent, thick as a man's arm, and carried it away for their dinner. Obviously I'm no fan of snakes, though at the same time I have a morbid fascination with them and I never refused an opportunity to see one. Another time, one of the Peter's was bathing himself in a sluggish stream when a large water snake surfaced beside him. Pete claimed that he left the water before it could comprehend he was there. One wise man claimed that if a rope was placed on the ground in front of a tent a snake would refuse to climb over it.

We stayed in Bangui three weeks before we were able to purchase black-market fuel at $5 per gallon. John and Comrade (the nickname we gave a hitchhiker from Upper Volta) suffered bad attacks of malaria, and nearly everyone else experienced diarrhea and skin infections which were difficult to heal. Matthew had his appendix removed in the local hospital and was flown home to recover, and Peng, the Malaysian girl, opted out of our truck journey to raft down the Ubangi to Brazzaville. We completed our group by taking on two men who wanted passage to Nairobi. Only one of them would make it.

WE held contests to see who could let the flies crawl over his face and arms the longest.

TO THE east of Bangui we travelled over the roughest roads of the trip. Often travelling a full day we found that we covered only sixty to seventy kilometres. We filled in potholes three-feet deep, rebuilt bridges and pulled the truck across rivers on manually-operated ferries.

It was here that we broke a front spring for the second time, exhausting our spares. Two men had to carry the broken spring over forty kilometres back to Obo, the nearest mission where fortunately there is a welder. A couple of our men walked ahead a bit, only to return with drawn faces after meeting two lions on the road. That was the first of several such encounters in that area. The lions kept a close eye on us and we slept reluctantly, as their grunts and growls could be heard in the night. During this period I slept in the centre of the tent to avoid paws that might come crashing through the canvas.

The daylight hours were cursed with swarms of black flies that covered anything moist — like sweaty flesh. Consequently, we stayed inside the tents during the day playing cards or reading, waiting for the men to return with the spring. When we ventured out, it was to hold contests to see who could let the flies crawl over his face and arms the longest. The loser was usually the first to have one crawl in his ear.

During the delay, Phil, one of the men who joined us in Bangui, fell ill. A doctor, passing on foot from Juba in the Sudan, heading for Bangui, diagnosed infectious hepatitis. There was no treatment he could give. After three days, working through the night to escape the flies, we got moving again. Phil needed help to move about by this time especially to get on and off the truck. Five days of steady travel brought us to within several hours of Juba, the location of the nearest hospital. Phil was fading quickly, but we had no clue as to what was to follow. On the fifth day we encountered a washout. The normally good gravel road had been swept away from in front of us by flash flooding, and we were forced to wait while the waters receded. After two hours, we plowed the truck through the wheel-deep water, thinking that we would be in Juba before nightfall. Our spirits sank when three miles down the road, we found a bridge completely washed away, necessitating another night by the roadside. Before midnight Phil died. His breathing stopped as he slept, while we helplessly looked on.

A three-day nightmare began. We placed Phil's body, wrapped in a sleeping bag, into the truck, and began the four-hour journey into the city. The police sent us to the hospital

and the hospital sent us back to the police for special papers. After four hours of this nonsense, his body was left at the hospital. It was necessary to get ice from a hotel to pack around his body since the hospital had no morgue. Voluntary Service Overseas workers from Britain took us in hand at this point, and Phil's parents in Birmingham were notified by short-wave radio via Nairobi. A coffin was built, a funeral arranged, and a grave dug. After three days it was over. The rituals of death filled our minds, nearly overwhelming some, especially those who had never seen a dead body before. Our already suffering morale was completely sapped and we wished only to get to Nairobi.

We had two choices. We could go further east and travel into Kenya from Sudan, risking bad roads, further flooding, and the political trouble spreading from Ethiopia and Somalia, or we could travel from Juba through Uganda, the shorter route which offers paved roads, but the dangers of rebel soldiers, and an unstable regime. The government had collapsed days earlier and Obote had returned to seek power. We democratically picked the route through Uganda.

HIS breathing stopped as he slept, while we helplessly looked on.

We spent only two days ripping through the country in our haste to reach Kenya. That brief exposure revealed a strikingly beautiful country with friendly and communicative people. One fellow mentioned that Uganda has an excellent soccer team but that no teams will come into the country to challenge them. Another said simply "Amin ruined it for us".

ON THE 30th of May we reached Kenya. From the mountains to the west we crossed the equator, before travelling through the spectacular Rift Valley, which marks the westward approach to Nairobi. In appearance it could be a North American city: wide streets, manicured parks, skyscrapers, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Minutes from the city a game park sets a variety of beasts against a background of city skyline in one direction and grassy plains in the other.

In Nairobi the group divided. Though we had grown to hate the truck and our bland diet, we all knew that something special had ended. After living on top of one another for nearly five months came the realization that we would never all be together again. It was an aimless sort of dispersal. Most made close friends on the trip and those friends have kept in touch, but on that day most were interested more in a bath and a real bed. Few good-byes were said.

I was a guest at two memorable dinner parties in Nairobi, both at the homes of whites, in each case Kenyan citizens. One of my hosts had been forced to sell his prosperous upland farm so that the land could be redistributed among blacks. He is bitter over the fact that subsequent visits have revealed the farm in a state of disrepair and decay. While we ate, my wallet was stolen from the bedroom where I had changed. Everything pointed to the night watchman, a black servant. My host confessed that though a few years ago he could have beaten the wallet out of the man, now there was little he could do. Besides, aside from the fact that this man stole cash, he was a reliable night watchman.

I spent about a month in Kenya, hitching to Mombasa and Malindi on the coast, and soaking up sun on Lamu, a beautiful island just off the coast north of Malindi. For $5 a day on Lamu I had a roof-top room (shared with a friend) overlooking the ocean, three meals a day, and all the beach one could ever hope to explore. We spent a day skin-diving on a coral reef, visited a snake farm and bought freshly-squeezed coconut oil to use as tanning lotion. Two weeks of this did much to wash away the mental and physical strains of the previous months and to prepare me for the less grueling budget flights home.

THE NEARLY seven months I was away continue to fill my mind and there is not a day that I don't spend a few minutes in Africa. I would have difficulty in advising someone whether or not he should go to Africa. South of the Sahara, on our route, we saw little architecture or art. The various cultures are being crushed by the overwhelming weight of westernization. The natives coming out of the mud huts are wearing Bata shoes and carrying transistor radios. Conrad's Africa has disappeared. There are paved highways halfway across the desert and the rhinos have given their lives to cure impotence in the far east. The dangers now come not from the Tsetse flies and the lions, but from the thirteen-year-olds with submachine guns and power-crazed dictators, with M.B.A.'s from Harvard. I wouldn't travel the same route, the same way again, but I don't regret having done it. Everyone should see the Sahara, walk through a rain forest, hear a wild elephant's trumpet and drink rich Kenyan coffee. Much that is wild and beautiful remains and regardless of how westernized the continent becomes it will never be as tranquil as Kingston. □

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