

Travel@RPCVSF.org Goes to Central Africa

By Greg Zell (Nigeria 62-64)

Travel is always looking for bargains; found them in Overseas Adventure Travel Last Minute Travel Deals (no longer offered to solo travelers); convinced two friends who had never been to Africa to join me; father/daughter: both retired federal employees. Lots of fun to show them Africa.

We arrived in Johannesburg a day before the tour began to recover from jet lag and to see some of the city including Soweto and Mandela's house. (Under apartheid, blacks were not allowed to live in the "city". Instead, they were housed in "townships" some distance away. The SouthWestern Township was the largest group of townships.)

Our first night is at The Emperor's Palace, a huge casino/hotel complex next to the airport protected by guards with AK-47s because there is lots of money here. OAT put us up here on my first safari with them. The first gin and tonic of the day at Tribes bar and restaurant is divine (quinine to kill the malaria; gin to kill it deader. The Peace Corps doctor warned us not to believe that advice.) Then we do dinner. The farm raised ostrich steak in berry sauce is superb. My friends, Art and Annette, take the pledge to become Africa hands on this trip. Never again will they say "Johannesburg". From now on it will be "Jo'burg".

Next day we transfer to the Tombo Protea hotel yards away. The hotel (and adjacent airport) is named for O.R. Tombo, a hero of the struggle against apartheid, and for the national flower of South Africa. The room was ok but the rest of the hotel public areas were poorly renovated El Dumpo and not up to OAT standards. Not to worry. The following day we leave what the British call southern Africa and fly to Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, in what the British call Central Africa.

We are fortunate. The rainy season seems to have come to an end a few days early. More animals will be showing themselves; the Zambezi river is in full flood which means the falls are in full spritz. We travel into Zambia to view that part of the falls in complete rain gear over a metal bridge and well-laid out cobblestone path, both made treacherous by green algae for walking impeded people like me. Thanks to the guide and my fellow travelers there were shoulders to lean on and arms to grab hold of. In Zambia, we stay at the lovely David Livingstone hotel and celebrate the 205th birthday of this remarkable man there.

A couple of our lodges are not available because of flooding. We are sent to upgraded lodges. So sorry for us. Our lodges and internal airline are operated by Wilderness Safaris, a very high end safari company out of South Africa. They have a monopoly on lodges in the Okavango concession. They seem to have a symbiotic relationship with OAT. My first safari to Namibia was subcontracted by OAT to Wilderness. The trip leader and guides wore Wilderness uniforms with an OAT patch and were outstanding.

We do national parks in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Botswana. Our first game drive gives us a few impala (small antelope), kudu (large antelope), baboons, Guinea fowl, warthogs, birds, and a lion with 2 cubs in the open bush by the side of the road. We would go on to see zebra (rhymes with Debra), giraffes, and elephants. The birders in the group saw a lot of specimens but were not helpful with cooking instructions or side dish suggestions.

OAT specializes in small group travel. In our group of 11 there was a couple from Ft. Lauderdale and Californian RPCV Jim (Botswana) whose service was cut short by the draft. Jim's site was in the capital Gaborone (hah bor oh nee) in the east; we will spend most of our tour in western Botswana where we see many elephants. Botswana has a surplus of elephants. And you think you have problems!

We fly to a gorgeous lodge in the Okavango Delta, a unique geological formation. Since this is a conservancy concession and not a national park, our game drives take us off road. The concessionaire, Wilderness, is responsible for all roads, old or new. We see another lion and 3 good sized cubs strolling down the lane. We also meet a guest, RPCV Ken Longley (South Korea), from Seattle who got tired of practicing law and decided to be a free lance photographer. He has spent the last several days tracking a leopard. He tells me he is very grateful to Tim O'Brien, one of our more active members. After completing service, Tim joined Peace Corps Korea staff. Ken says he had a behavior problem regarding authority figures. Tim was sent to Ken's site to chat him up. Ken says Tim was very soft-spoken and not pushy; he told Ken to be himself; cool it a little; and smooth some rough edges. Ken said it was the best advice he ever got and allowed him to complete his service in a country he loved.

On a game drive, we caught up with Ken who was ending his leopard observation. We moved right in and watched the leopard noshing on an impala carcass. We were parked inches away from a tree when the leopard decided to put the carcass in it for future dining. The leap of the cat almost brushed our speechless

passengers on that side of the vehicle. The carcass fell to earth which brought a leap down by the leopard. Our agape passengers exhaled.

Our final stop was Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, and a view of the falls from that side, not quite so wet on the path; spritzzy on the overlooks. I took Art and Annette to lunch at the Victoria Falls Hotel. This is a beautifully restored hotel from the colonial era and so veddy British. Its centerpiece in the lobby is larger than life portraits of George V and Queen Mary. Victoria Falls is also the home of our fantastic trip leader, Thembie. OAT brags about its trip leaders and the bragging is very justified. Thembie's attention to detail was only exceeded by her knowledge, a wonderful person in an emergency in the bush.

This trip was similar to a smaller one I took about 6 years ago; however, there was nothing déjà vu this time. I could not help noticing the energy and hope of the Zimbabwe people since the army removed their founding president and the US dollar became their national currency. On my last trip, the people were definitely downtrodden.

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