

JOURNEY TO CAPE TOWN

IN THE SECOND PART OF THEIR JOURNEY THROUGH AFRICA, **LENNART ANDREAS** AND HIS WIFE **MAIA** FACE DOWN RAMPAGING WILDLIFE AND CORRUPT OFFICIALS IN A BID TO COMPLETE THEIR DREAM OF RIDING TO CAPE TOWN



◀ Elephants may look peaceful but they can trample a biker



O

ur troubles begin sooner than we'd hoped. Leaving Tanzania was a walk in the park, but entering Malawi, well that's a whole different story. It doesn't take long before we're told to follow an official into a small back office where negotiations commence. Although Mala-

wi's official website explains that visitors can get a visa on arrival, the customs officers refuse to issue us with them.

"Not possible anymore", we're told firmly, before being asked: "How much are you willing to pay?"

We politely decline his offer of a visa at double the official price, at which point we're told to turn around and go back to Tanzania where we need to apply for an e-visa. This usually takes up to three days to process. But we are willing to play the long game and refuse to give up. We approach everyone in a uniform, and even follow them into their offices, only to see our requests being turned down one after another.

After being asked why we can't just pay and save the hassle, we decide it's time to write to the national public relations officer by email. And sure enough, once the local officers find out about that, it's a case of 'welcome to Malawi and enjoy your stay!' Persistence goes a long way in Africa but it also takes time. These shenanigans at the border cost us almost 10 hours in total and we find ourselves riding deep into the night. But at least we made it into our third African country.

THE MUSHROOM FARM

Ask any group of travellers about their experiences in Malawi and I guaranteed someone will mention the Mushroom Farm near Livingstonia. It is an eco-friendly campsite located on a cliffside with spectacular views. It is a wonderful place



to stay and the food is delicious, but the real attraction for adventure bikers like us is the road that leads to us to it. We find ourselves on a steep, rocky trail that winds up the mountain for about six miles.

Legend has it that lots of motorcyclists and their bikes have fallen victim to the road, and with fully loaded bikes, it's not an easy task for novice off-road riders like us, especially in the humid climate. About halfway I stop for a break as my T-shirt is completely drenched in sweat. While our Triumph Tiger 900 Rally Pros easily make it up the mountain, it is we who are the weak link here, and we really have to work for it.

There's lots of loose rock and steep hairpin turns that test our skill and nerve, but with every minute that passes, we get a better feeling for how our bikes react to the terrain and our confidence grows. Once we finally reach the top, thankfully without crashing, we feel like Rocky Balboa celebrating on top of those famous steps in Philadelphia. It's time for a well-deserved two-day rest at the Mushroom Farm which is totally worth the challenging climb.

NKHOTAKOTA WILDLIFE RESERVE

Pouring over our maps, we spot the Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve a little bit further south. It seems like a nice place to pass through on our way to Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. Most of the time however, wildlife reserves and national parks are off limits for motorcyclist due to the unpredictable



▲ The snaking Swartberg Pass in South Africa

► Lennart gets to grips with a sandy trail in Botswana

WANT TO RIDE IN AFRICA?

If you'd like to ride your own bike in Africa, Moto Freight (www.motofreight.com) can arrange seafreight of a Triumph Tiger-sized motorcycle between London and Cape Town from £1,595 (current rate) each way, including arrival, clearance, and handling charges.



behaviour of the animals that live there, some of which could eat you if they so choose.

This time, however, we are granted permission to enter. Almost immediately we're struck by the large number of warning signs about elephants, and the non-stop presence of droppings is a sign they are never far away. They are amazing and very intelligent creatures and, while we'd love to see one, their sheer size means being trampled is a very real danger.

Riding through the park on a beautiful wide, sweeping gravel road, our hearts are pounding as we look for any signs of these impressive animals. However, 45 minutes later, we exit the park again having not laid an eye on one single elephant, but who knows what had been looking at us.

Sadly, our time in Malawi is over far too quickly. We would have liked to have stayed longer but we need to push on to our final destination, Cape Town. Unlike the previous border crossing, our entry into Zambia is quick and easy and we're excited to explore another beautiful African country.

What we were not ready for is the temperature. At 43C, the wind flowing through our helmets and riding suits feels like being under a warm shower. We'd planned a route that included quite a bit of off-road riding and gravel trails, but the extreme temperatures force us to stay on the tarmac for fear of exhausting ourselves in the rough stuff.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

We reach South Luangwa National Park by the end of the day where we follow a small dirt track that will eventually lead up to our camp overlooking the Luangwa River, one of the major tributaries of the famous Zambezi. As we ride, we are suddenly cut off by a lone but massive bull elephant. All our inner alarm bells go off at once. This is a big animal, there's nowhere to hide, and we are stuck. There's no turning back as the elephant could easily charge while we turn around. There's no going forward either as that would put us within direct striking distance. We can only wait and hope.

In this moment we realise how powerful nature can be as we have very little influence on what happens next. After a short standoff, the elephant decides to move out of sight. We take our chances and continue our way. What we don't realise is it is simply hiding in the bushes observing us.

The next thing we know, there's a highly agitated elephant careering towards us flapping its ears. Seeing such a huge animal coming at us at close range is terrifying and our only option is to open the throttle. Thankfully, our Triumph Tigers have the power to outrun it. As we make our escape, we're acutely aware this encounter could have ended very differently. Ironically, we have been eagerly looking for elephants throughout our journey, and now here we are running away from one!

We make camp for the night and relax to the sound of hippos going about their business in the nearby river which helps us forget about our frightening encounter. However, the fresh

▶ South Africa provided some of the best riding of the entire journey



THE NEXT THING WE KNOW THERE IS A HIGHLY AGITATED ELEPHANT CAREERING TOWARDS US FLAPPING ITS EARS



elephant footprints we find just a few meters away from our camp the next morning, reminds us that we need to be on high alert at all times in Africa.

THIS IS AFRICA

The border crossing into Botswana is an adventure in itself. At the small town of Kazungula, in the southwest of Zambia, a massive bridge is being built to replace the ferries that take you across the Zambezi River into Botswana. Unfortunately, political disagreements have delayed the opening, meaning we still need to take the river crossing to get to the border town of Kasane.

In reality, the 'ferries' are simply pontoons made from piles of wood that are strapped together with metal sides and an engine attached. Water gushes through the floor as we slowly make our way across the Zambezi, and I can't help but feel we'd be safer riding over a bridge instead (this thought was later reinforced when an internet search revealed 18 people drowned in 2003 when one of the pontoons capsized). But as they say, 'this is Africa', and new experiences are all part of the adventure. All-in or go home, I say.

Thankfully we survive the crossing and head directly to our campsite. The staff ask if we'd just come over from Zambia. After replying yes, they start spontaneously singing and dancing in front of us. It turns out the border only reopened a few hours ago after being closed due to COVID restrictions, and we're the first international visitors to have made it across. Maia and I look at each other in astonishment. Sometimes we just cannot believe the luck we have.

THE ELEPHANT HIGHWAY

As we ride south towards the village of Nata on a perfectly tarred road, we think we are up for a relatively boring ride, as much as that is possible in Africa, but then we realise we are riding on the so-called Elephant Highway. Although it is a main road in the area, the huge animals roam left, right and well, everywhere along it. In fact, we see so many of them on the road that, after a while we don't even stop for them anymore.

We also notice that most road signs are bent at different angles or snapped completely. We ride on puzzled until it dawns on me that the metal road signs are used by the elephants as their personal scratching poles. Since these animals can weigh up to 6,000kg, they snap like toothpicks.

We push on towards the town of Maun, known as the gateway to the Okavango Delta, a vast inland river delta rich in grassy plains and wildlife. Along the way, we spontaneously decide to hop into a Jeep to visit the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park with one particular goal in mind, seeing one of our favourite animals, meerkats.

Once again on our trip, we're the only tourists around and after a very bumpy ride, we reach the open plains. Disappointed, we can't see a single animal until our guide suddenly points in a particular direction, and out of the blue, almost 20



meerkats show up. They are fast, they are small, they are cute, and most of all, they are curious.

The zoom on my camera is useless as they literally crawl against the lens as I lay on the ground taking photos. It gets even better when Maia films one particular meerkat that digs a hole for almost 10 minutes before disappearing inside. Suddenly, the little animal jumps out holding something in its mouth. It's a scorpion and, if that wasn't enough, a second meerkat pulls out a spider that would have an arachnophobe running in terror. Bon appétit.

THE BIG FOUR

We were enchanted by Botswana but we soon find ourselves at the border crossing with Namibia. All seems to be going well until the credit card machine we need to use to pay the road taxes decides to have a day off. Paying cash is not a possibility as the US dollars we are carrying are not accepted.

So, we now have two options. We can either we go back into Botswana to find a cash machine which would result in a lot of formalities and paperwork, or one of us can stay behind while the other crosses into Namibia to find a cash point.

The second option sounds like a decent plan until we discover that between the nearest town and us lies a national park with four out of the big five game animals: lions, leopards, elephants, and water buffalo. Not in a million years would one of us drive through there alone. Anything could happen, a crash, a mechanical brake down, a flat tyre, or a lion attack. So, we politely decline that plan too.

As we learned before, persistence, patience, and being kind is the key to success, and we finally manage to persuade an official to let us pay at a different border post in Namibia. With a solution reached, we're on our way again and head into Bwabwata National Park. Knowing that lions and leopards are around is not the nicest feeling and we feel very exposed on our motorcycles. So, it's with relief that we exit the park on the other side and are ready to explore yet another African country on our journey.

ENDLESS HORIZONS

Namibia is endless. Endless amounts of sand, endless blue skies, and endless roads that test man and machine. One of these roads leads to Spitzkoppe, a massive barren landscape where huge granite boulders and rocks suddenly jut out into the sky. It truly is a magical place for camping and, as we pitch our tent, we enjoy a beautiful sunset that bathes the landscape in golden colours, highlighting the various shades of red rock surrounding us.

Being sat between these massive boulders while gazing up at a million stars in the sky makes us realise how small we are in this planet. In the middle of nowhere, huddled together in our tent with our motorcycles patiently waiting for another day to come, we feel content.

We are less happy as we reach Deadvlei, a stunning dried white clay pan that is famous for its towering red sand dunes and dead trees that look like skeletons dotting the stark landscape.

After riding off-road for hours to get there, we're relieved to discover the last 40 miles to the

▲ The heavens put on a show in the Spitzkoppe, Namibia



WHO'S WRITING

Lennart Andreas and his wife Maia recently completed a six-month journey through Europe and Africa. Having started at home in Switzerland, they travelled as far north as Nordkapp in Norway, before finishing in Cape Town at the end of 2020.

Freelance photographer Lennart has also ridden from LA to New York, and over the highest passes in India. He feels lucky to be able to share his passion for motorcycling with his wife Maia, and together they have ridden tens of thousands of miles on two wheels around the world.

Discover more about Lennart and Maia's travels on Instagram @lennart.andreas and @maias_travels, and at www.finding-neverland.com



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famous clay valley is paved, only to be denied access. Apparently, it is too dangerous for motorcycles. We find it ironic that we spent the entire day on much tougher trails and crappy gravel roads, and now this is too dangerous? Anyhow, the next day we catch a local taxi early in the morning to experience the sunrise. We're totally alone in this mesmerizing valley where dead trees never looked so good.

FINAL DESTINATION

Our goal at the start of this journey was to reach Cape Town, and another COVID test later, our dream comes a step closer as we enter South Africa. It feels strange crossing the final border of our trip. We can't quite believe we've ridden all the way here. We are healthy and in one piece, the motorcycles are holding up great, and we have had no life-threatening situations besides an elephant or two. Despite our fears at the start of this journey, we have had no bad experiences whatsoever.

After five months and more than 18,000 miles, we are within touching distance of Cape Town. As we ride into the iconic city, tears roll down our faces as we realise our dream has become a reality. And the best part is we still have a month left to explore and enjoy South Africa before returning home to Switzerland.

And enjoy it we do. South Africa is motorcycling heaven. From sweeping paved roads along the ocean (make sure you ride Chapman's Peak Drive if you visit), to easy, fun dirt trails like the Swartberg Pass, there is so much riding to be done. If you want a tougher challenge, there are areas such as the Baviaanskloof with its seemingly endless rugged mountainous terrain where we push our riding skills to their limits. We soon realise South Africa is the jewel at the end of our journey and we could write a book about our experiences here alone.

THE END OF THE ROAD

Actually being in South Africa and waving goodbye to our bikes as they are shipped back to Europe feels surreal, but it is incredible to have fulfilled a dream. The hardest part of the trip? Making the decision to go. We had no off-road experience, close to zero mechanical knowledge, and we could think of a million reasons why it would have made a lot more sense to just stay at home.

Despite this, we jumped head first into our adventure. We have giving it everything we've got and accomplished something we'll remember for the rest of our lives. If we can do a trip like this, anyone can. The biggest hurdle to overcome is always in your head, the rest of the puzzle will fall into place, I assure you. We arrive back home changed people with a lot more appreciation for the world and life in general. Following our dreams was the best thing we have ever done. There are no excuses. Get out there and chase your own sunset! **ABR**

THE BIKES

Our trip formed part of a six-month motorcycle journey, so we needed bikes that were both capable and comfortable. The Triumph Tiger 900 Rally Pro offers both. In fact, they performed far above our expectations. We travelled through weather conditions ranging from below zero with snowstorms, to 43C and sandstorms, but nothing could stop these machines.

Two flat tyres were the worst that happened. Besides a few accessories, the Tigers were not modified and dealt with road surfaces ranging from good to very bad, and even non-existent.



▲ Despite having no off-road experience and zero mechanical knowledge, Lennart and Maia had the adventure of a lifetime