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FREE SPIRIT

Seldom has there been such an appetite to get away, to shake off pandemic fatigue and recharge the batteries.

Africa offers this opportunity in spades, however you do it. But for many, the freedom and independence of a self-drive trip offers the ideal solitary escape, allowing experiences that can't be appreciated any other way

BY **CHARLES NORWOOD**

is it safe?" It's the same question every time. Having just climbed into a stranger's car whilst getting a lift (back in the days before we all wore face masks), I was explaining why driving yourself in Africa was, for me, the best way of going on safari.

"Yes, yes, yes, it's as safe as you make it", I glibly said.

"But what about the wild animals, or being held up by bandits, or getting lost or breaking down... and how are you going to find the wildlife?" His deep-seated fears and prejudices had surfaced. "Anyway, I don't like camping and I want a guide to show me the way. And it's supposed to be my holiday, so I don't want to be bothered with thinking about all that."

Finally, I didn't have an answer. Driving through Africa

does take energy and effort. Not everyone gets it. The problem is that self-drive safaris offer experiences that are hard to adequately convey. How do you explain the feelings and emotions that you get from such a journey?

"But when was the last time you cooked bacon and eggs for breakfast over an open fire with the curl of woodsmoke in the slanting early morning sun and the sound of guinea fowl peeping in the distance?" I gushed enthusiastically. "You like a road trip, don't you?"

The essence of a great self-drive safari in Africa is to embrace the serendipity, to go with the flow and enjoy chance encounters with people and animals, often away from the crowds - and to not be too fazed by the occasional setback or border-crossing delay.

The first time we drove across Chobe National Park and camped deep in the bush, we were woken in the night by the throaty rumble of elephants passing at eye level to our rooftop tent. In my fearful state I mistook the noise for a lion's guttural growl and thought that the Land Rover's bonnet was going to be a springboard for it to join us in bed. We held our breaths and kept still until they silently padded into the darkness.

Ever since those early journeys I have loved every minute of driving in Africa, whether it be across the Serengeti plains or heading through Damaraland to the Kaokoveld. Yes, there is a lot of work involved, both before and during the trip, and having a vehicle for your sole use isn't cheap. But the highs and lows, the dust, →

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Light my fire: Settling in at a Kalovia community campsite for self-drivers, outside the South Luangwa National Park

TRAILS of the unexpected

Mike Breslin explains why he believes opting to self-drive through Uganda and Rwanda offers that little bit extra when it comes to adventure

We took a wrong turn as we approached Rubona. Tired after a long day negotiating the glorious mountain roads of Rwanda, we simply forgot our own rule of always using both app and map, and so we followed the former's suggested shortcut down a ridiculously rocky, steep and slightly perilous track to Lake Kivu, without checking the roadmap first.

Yet that evening, sitting on the terrace at El Classico 1, a cold bottle of Mützig to hand, we were glad of the detour, remembering the excited band of kids who guided us down, inch by inch, us and them laughing all the way. Right then a swanky new Land Cruiser passed by, taking its guided tour occupants – partially obscured by smoked glass – to who knows where, but almost certainly not up the road we had come down. It reminded us that we were free. Free to drink beer in local bars, to take a wrong turn, and to get stuck in the mud.

This was about half way through our most recent African road trip, a two-week 1800km self-drive loop through Uganda and Rwanda, visiting Entebbe, Lake Mburo, Kigali, Lake Kivu, Lake Mutanda, Queen Elizabeth National Park and Fort Portal, before heading back to Entebbe.

We had missed the rainy season, but only by a few weeks, so many unmade roads were still quite muddy. But there was plenty of tarmac, with most of the rough stuff in the parks, and our old Land Cruiser (hired from the excellent Road Trip Uganda)

only got stuck once. We were soon rescued. In fact, everybody stopped to help us out, and I would suggest that getting bogged down might be the very best way to meet people in Africa. Incidentally, we also towed a tourist-laden minibus from the mire later that same day, which was satisfying.

Satisfying also sums up the trip itself, because we packed in plenty: mountain gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park; tree lions in Ishasha; buzzing Kigali; lovely Lake Kivu and jaw-dropping Lake Mutanda; the vibrant market in Fort Portal; two chaotic but fun border crossings (where patience and a sense of humour is the key), and so much more.

Of course, it could be argued that we didn't see everything, as we had no local knowledge (though in the parks we hired rangers as guides, cheap and very worthwhile) and perhaps that's true. Then again, on this trip and other self-drives in Africa, through taking the odd wrong turn and simply wandering when and where the mood took us, we've seen things and met people we never would have otherwise. And isn't that the very essence of adventure?



MIKE BRESLIN

the discomfort, the getting lost and the dehydration all evoke strong emotions.

You have to work for the pleasures, which makes it more rewarding: stopping to spend half an hour watching a dung beetle rolling its ball in the wheel tracks; the unexpected ostrich that bounds across the road in front of you; the meerkat or the pack of wild dogs that always seem to appear when you least expected it; those quiet moments after lunch, having a siesta in the shade of an acacia tree, when you notice the ground squirrels getting more adventurous.

Driving yourself in Africa is tiring, and many try to cover too many miles in a day. My wife loves escaping the dust of the road and swapping a campsite for the comfort and pampering that lodges provide. She likes to get to know the teams running them and pick the knowledge of the guides, discussing their views and perspectives of the world, their family lives and the even the football teams they support.

Perhaps it's not surprising that putting more effort into an experience gives more back, but I find that being shown something is somehow less satisfying than discovering it for myself. Supper may have burnt

on the campfire and the mosquitoes may be biting, but the sense of achievement from doing it yourself is the reward. Travelling through Africa the way you want to is incomparable, and leads to so many encounters that wouldn't happen on a traditional guided tour.

It is down to you to join the dots that make up the complete journey. No one else can do this for you. Lodges and camps, national parks, tour operators, car hire companies and airlines are all parts of the jigsaw, but the outcome is in your hands – and often the best bits are when it goes wrong!

On a driving safari you are more involved in the rhythm of life: the fire needs making, the days and meals need planning, routes need plotting and essential supplies of food, fuel and water need to be maintained.

At its simplest, driving between lodges or camps – especially in countries like Namibia – is an ideal introduction to this type of trip, offering the best of both worlds. Adding camping to the itinerary introduces a whole new dimension. More ambitious destinations like Botswana, Zambia and even East Africa can be explored this way.

So, if you feel the need to get away from the claustrophobia of lockdown and breathe in the peppery

air of Africa and hear the booming silence of the plains and pans, talk to your tour operator about self-driving options. Many offer pre-set itineraries as a starting point that are good value. Discuss your ideas and ask if they have driven the route that you are considering. The more adventurous among you will want to make all the arrangements yourselves, but don't underestimate the amount of work involved.

The calm of an African morning is the perfect antidote to the pressures of the past year. Sure, it can be hot, tiring and stressful on a self-drive trip, but that feeling of contentment when everything comes together, when you have challenged yourself and survived with a few scars and bruises, is wonderful. Africa offers the ultimate road trip: perception-changing and so rewarding.

Remember, it will go wrong – every part of it – but as long as you understand this, you will have a great and memorable adventure. But just don't ask if it's safe. 🐾

CHARLES AND MEREGAN NORWOOD have spent their professional lives organising self-drive safaris. They run www.selfdrivesafari.co.uk, a free resource for people interested in learning more about exploring Africa from behind the wheel.