

Lodgings

People have weird ideas about Africa.

Before I left I was asked, more than once, by serious and well-meaning people, if I was going to have to ride an elephant around. Or if I was in danger of being attacked by lions. I always told them, very politely, that no, I was going to live in a proper city, not out in the wilds.

Nowadays, I purposely avoid telling those people about the lion that almost bit my hand off. Can't go letting their preconceptions be validated, now can I?

I did live in a city with the rest of my team, but our mentors wanted to make sure that Port Elizabeth wasn't our only experience of South Africa. They decided we needed a road trip.

Ten people, two cars, twenty-one days. In February, the hottest month of the year.

Yeah.

Great plan.

Don't get me wrong, on this side of the experience, it was worth it. Right there in the middle though, when entertainment options in the cars began drying up and the view out the windows turned into a homogenous yellow blur? Things got tense.

It didn't help the situation at all that at every single overnight stop where we stayed with locals, the girls were put up in what may as well have been mansions. As for us guys? We got to stay in places considerably less grand.

First world problems aside, it was always an experience.

About halfway through the trip we were heading into the capital of Botswana. We had been on the road all day, and at that point, I would have settled for anything flat and immobile.

Be careful what you wish for, I guess.

When we arrived, it had been dark for hours, though you wouldn't have known it from the heat.

We met up with some friends, and they led us through the darkened city to a massive house. It was beautiful, columns accenting the brick work and perfectly selected wood details to provide just the right note of contrast. It looked like heaven. The interior was even better. Richly detailed furnishing that all quietly proclaimed their proficiencies at soothing and relaxing weary travelers.

And then all three of us guys were given the boot to go meet our host.

He was waiting outside; his beat-up pickup truck was idling at heaven's curb.

He didn't speak much. Through a combination of gestures and grunts, we pieced together that he wanted our bags in the bed of the truck, and for all of us to pile into the cab. Ryan, who is skinny as a rail despite the massive quantities of food he routinely put away, volunteered to take the virtually non-existent back seat. Mike and I squeezed into the front seat with our host, and off we drove.

We hit a highway and soon, the lights of the city dwindled away behind us. The headlights were the sole points of light on the empty stretches of asphalt.

Mike, ever the friend-maker and conversation starter, had run out of steam in the face of our functionally mute host.

We drove along, and something penetrated the fog that surrounded our weary brains: did anyone know where we were going? Our South African phones wouldn't work in Botswana, and in the dark, there was no hope of spotting landmarks.

Dread interacts with weariness in strange ways. Adrenalin tries to surge, but when you're that far down, you can only spike up so much. Not nearly enough for any sort of reactions.

We rode on into the darkness.

And then he turned off the highway.

Not onto another road, mind you, just off onto a dirt track. The weariness and dread twisted further together, and in a moment of semi-lucid silliness I said: "And the three Americans were never heard from again."

Silence built in the cab until our host began laughing. And then all four of us were laughing.

It turns out that our host was just as exhausted as we were, and hadn't been in the best mood to take in three strangers that his wife had volunteered for them to host. Conversation grew from that point.

The cab bounced along until we pulled up in front of a dark house. Our host looked a bit embarrassed as we tumbled out of the truck. He explained that he was building this house himself for his wife and baby, and that it wasn't completely done yet. "No electricity." He said

with an apologetic shrug. We pulled our bags out of the bed of the truck, and as we walked towards the house, our eyes adjusted to the darkness.

The sky was brilliant.

There were no lights for miles in any direction. No light pollution at all. Just the velvet expanse of the night sky.

Uncountable stars pierced the darkness, their light twinkling above us. The familiar constellations were lost in the sheer volume of stars overhead. The band of the Milky Way stood out thick and heavy from the rest. Space was directly overhead. Just barely out of reach of our hands.

All three of us had stopped in our tracks, mouths hanging open at the scope of the universe.

Our host patted me on the shoulder and gently pushed us towards the house.

“Come on, dinner is getting cold.” He started walking towards the house, calling over his shoulder. “Plus, there are hyenas and puff adders about.”

We raced after him, leaving the universe behind.