



The *JUST NOW News* - A now-and-then Newsletter for alumni and friends of COWABUNGA SAFARIS published whenever we have enough news and time to put it together.



Six Days in The SUDAN

Gary K. Clarke

The Sudan had long intrigued me. The largest nation on the African continent (nearly one million square miles), it features two notable dimensions of the Nile: the confluence of the Blue and White Nile at Khartoum; and the Sudd (or barrier), an enormous swamp that spreads 250 miles, clogged with huge masses of floating vegetation. It also has more pyramids than Egypt. Its fabled capital city, Khartoum, is steeped in history and has diverse ethnic and cultural groups from throughout the country.

It was September 21, 2001 when I made my first visit to the Sudan, just 10 days after the September 11 terrorist attacks on America. My journey had begun weeks earlier at the Royal Geographical Society in London and from there to Zanzibar, then Bagamoyo on Africa's East Coast, and on to the interior lakes of Tanganyika and Victoria. With other members of the Explorers Club, I was retracing the footsteps of early explorers in their searches for the source of the Nile.

Prior to our departure, the U.S. Department of State had issued warnings on travel to the Sudan, but our group of 17 had secured special permission. Now, however, in light of the 9/11 events in New York City and Washington, DC, the State Department advised all U.S. citizens abroad to exercise extreme caution and to avoid travel to areas that might be hostile to America.

Upon arrival in Uganda, we learned that the Sudan portion of our expedition was officially cancelled. But I wanted to go to the Sudan — to meet the people, experience the culture, feel the country, see the Nile. So I did — alone, and the only one of the original 17...

Tall and imposing, with a barrel chest and regal composure, Ali Mohamed epitomized the Sudan and its people. Standing in the desert heat in his traditional Muslim robe, he was a striking figure with rich chocolate colored skin, close cropped grey hair and distinguished mustache, piercing eyes but a gentle smile.

We had never met but he welcomed me in the desert with the traditional greeting: first his strong right hand on my left shoulder, then a firm pumping handshake, followed by a powerful bear hug, and concluding with a symbolic kiss on each side of my neck just below the ear. All of this was emblematic of one of the most unique adventures I've ever had in Africa.

Ali had a demeanor about him that reflected his military background. A retired Army Captain, he had been the personal driver of the President of the Sudan. Now he was on a staff of four that had set up a private desert camp for me in the shadow of the majestic Meroe pyramids. I was accompanied by a terrific trio of local hosts: an interpreter (who also served as my guide); the Chairman of the Department of Archeology at the University of Khartoum (affectionately known as "the Professor"); and a skilled

driver (nicknamed "the Desert Fox") of our 4WD vehicle. And what a driver! He unexpectedly and often darted off the road across endless sands faster and easier than a dorcas gazelle.

There was an instant rapport between Ali and me. Though he spoke no English and my Arabic was limited to "Hababkom Ashra!" (a friendly greeting), we shared many subjects through our interpreter: family, children (and grandchildren), religion, the desert, the Sudan, the U.S.A., the state of the world... and life. At times, there was no need for words; we just seemed to know and understand one another's thoughts.

My host trio ensured that my jaunts in the desert were serendipitous... and exhausting. The Professor brought history alive as he personally escorted me around the numerous pyramids, a hand dug well dating back 2000 years and still in use, and the ancient ruins of the Royal City. My guide led me up a rugged, crumbling shale mountain, blistering in the sun, to see the Sixth Cataract of the Nile. The footing was so treacherous I would have faltered had it not been for two desert nomads — perfect strangers — who literally carried me to the top. And the "Desert Fox" (bless him) rescued the three of us when we were unexpectedly stranded on foot in a fierce rain, wind and sand storm while exploring a stone quarry.

Oh, it was HOT. Up to 117 degrees F. Whenever I returned to camp, bathed in sweat and gagging with thirst, Ali offered me a glass pitcher of red Karkadai, the sweet national drink made from the hibiscus plant. It was soooo refreshing, and he even served ice!

My immediate hosts called me "Ja' Ali", meaning 'The Brave One'. But to everyone else I was simply known as "The American" (not "an" American, but "The" American). Wherever I traveled in the Sudan I was received with warmth and sincerity, as expressed by the merchants in the bustling market of Omdurman; boat builders on the Nile; celebrants at a festive, crowded wedding reception; officials at the Wildlife Conservation and Environmental Protection Administration; directors and staffs of the Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of Sudan; faculty members of the Ahfad University for Women; traditional weavers in Shinde; uniformed guards in a salute to me at the Presidential Palace; and veiled ladies ceremoniously brewing coffee and tea on the dirt streets of Khartoum.

(continued on third page)

"To dare is to do... to fear is to fail."
— John Goddard

The Plant and Animal Kingdoms of South Africa

Nancy Cherry

Many folks have asked us when we're going to do a Safari to South Africa, and it has been in the back of our minds for a long time. We wanted to be selective and special as South Africa is a very diverse country, offering many different experiences and habitats. It took a bit of research, but we finally pulled it all together — **The Plant and Animal Kingdoms of South Africa**, from 5-21 June 2002.

An added bonus to this Safari is that Gary is a member of PAAZAB (Pan African Association of Zoological Gardens, Aquaria and Botanical Gardens). At their annual meetings he has met most of the directors of institutions we will visit, and they have told him if he ever brings a group to their facility they want to provide a personalized tour.

Our Safari starts in Cape Town, one of the three most beautiful port cities in the world, and our hotel is on a working harbor with oceangoing ships from all over the world. We'll take a revolving cable car to the top of Table Mountain, Cape Town's famous landmark, and tour the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. A highlight of our stay in Cape Town will be our visit to the famous Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens with their striking display of outdoor sculptures, and many footpaths.

Our modes of transportation will include modern coaches with large viewing windows, Safari combis (vans), open sided 4WD game-viewing vehicles, boats, and on foot. Accommodations include chalets, luxurious lodges, a converted homestead and the unique tree suites in the Phantom Forest.

Along the famous Garden Route we'll stop at significant spots where our Guides will explain why South Africa has such a wide and unusual variety of botanical specimens — some found nowhere else in the world. In all, South Africa has 22,000 flowering species, which is 10% of the total count found in the world. We learn about fynbos and the infinite variety of proteas — the national flower of South Africa. Because of perennial moisture, our drive through the Tsitsikamma Mountains (derived from a Hottenthot word) passes by creepers, ferns, moss, lichen, brilliantly colored fungi and wild orchids. In this moist maze are forests of yellowwood, candlewood, Cape chestnut burgeon, and evergreen.

The Garden Route ends at Port Elizabeth — and from there we fly to Durban, a beautiful resort town on the white beaches of the Indian Ocean. After an overnight in Durban we travel to Shakaland for lunch (your chance to try traditional foods, if you so desire). In the afternoon we motor to Zulu Nyala Lodge, built on a mountaintop in the heart of Maputoland, with a fabulous view. In addition to our game drives in the private Zulu Nyala Reserve, we will spend the entire day in the Hluhluwe Umfolozi Game Reserve, a wilderness set aside to save the black and white rhinos from extinction. Most of the big game species are found here as well, including lion and leopard. Our game drives will not be disappointing. During our stay at Zulu Nyala Lodge we take a boat to visit the St. Lucia estuary, an area that has been declared a World Heritage Site and offers wonderful birdwatching.

Once again we board an aircraft to fly to the northern section of South Africa where Kruger National Park is located. So far during this Safari we will have traveled nearly the whole of the southern South Africa coastline and now we'll see another totally different habitat in northern South Africa.

We'll be staying in the private MalaMala Game Reserve just outside the border of Kruger, which enables us to do game drives in open safari vehicles. For three nights we luxuriate at Kirkman's Kamp. In 2000 it was closed for three months for substantial refurbishment, yet the early 19th Century charm of the camp was preserved. With no fence between Kruger and our camp, wildlife come and go at will.

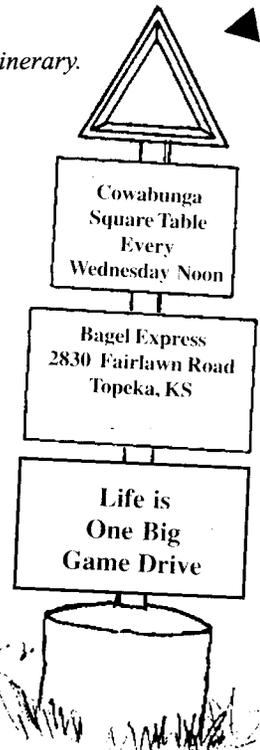
This area is famous for exotic game. Our sightings could include nyala antelope, white rhino and even some seldom seen species such as the pangolin, serval, African wild cat, side-striped jackal, honey badger and wild dog. Black rhino are rare — but Cowabunga often has good luck! In addition there are the larger animals such as buffalo, lion, leopard, kudu, hippo, hyena and elephant.

Gary is extremely excited about this Safari as all the places we're going, except Cape Town, are new for us — they'll be a first for a Cowabunga group. It's a different kind of Safari because of the emphasis on both the plant life and the wildlife — something for everyone!

Please contact us for a full color detailed itinerary.



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Safari Gifts

Brian Hesse

Holidays, birthdays and anniversaries — all occasions typically associated with giving and receiving. I'd like to add one more: Safari. While on Safari, the old saying "It is better to give than to receive" takes on new meaning.

For example, I'll never forget how red in the face "Jambo, Jambo Bwana" James Schmidt was in Kenya when I had every person in our lodge sing to him. Or how "Touchdown" and Theda Herz had a hard time cutting their 60th anniversary cake in Tanzania — because it was a huge, icing-covered piece of elephant dung. Or how surprised Mel and Donna Storm were to find their airline-lost baggage — on a game drive (our driver-guide and I had hidden their bags in the bush earlier that day). Or how hilarious the camp staff in Zambia's Luangwa Valley found the "Cowabunga Quiz," "Cowabunga Chorus," and "Cowabunga Salute."

Then, of course, there are the Swahili names reflecting individual personalities and inside jokes: Bwana Ng'ombe, Bibi Twiga, Bwana Nyumbu, Mama Askari, Mama Kupiga Picha Moja Zaidi, Babu, Bwana Upesi-Upesi, Bibi Cheka, Mama Pombe, Bibi Maneno, Mama Mfupi, Bibi Moto Chini, Daktari ya Usiku... You know who you are — and why!

Some might call the above "pranks" or "jokes." I prefer to think of them as gifts. Because good natured laughter is one of the greatest gifts, either to give or receive.

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Plus a wonderful man, blind and 104 years old, living remotely in a mud brick house. As I sat beside him in the heat, he clutched my hand to his breast and kept repeating in Arabic, "Welcome, The American, in peace; Welcome, The American, in peace". Here was an individual whose life had touched three centuries, who had actually lived through much of the significant history of the Sudan, yet was cognizant of today's world. And he received me with such serenity, such graciousness. It was extremely moving, almost spiritual.

My last night in the desert was one of my more memorable experiences in Africa. Dusk fell just after 6:30 pm, but it was still over 100 degrees F. The "samoun" wind flowed off the sun baked shale mountains, bringing a current of blast furnace air through our camp. Since it was much too hot for a campfire, light was provided from the eerie glow of a small paraffin lamp. The Meroe pyramids stood as silent silhouettes on the horizon.

Despite the heat, we drank hot hibiscus tea as we sat at the little table and discussed the day's events. I was tired, but it was a good tired, as this entire Sudan adventure had been so fulfilling.

Suddenly, a man appeared from the darkness and stood by the table. He startled me, but the Professor and my guide knew him. He was a traveling minstrel who had heard that the Ja'Ali was here, and had walked to our camp to entertain me! Such hospitality.

He played his aoud, a stringed instrument like a mandolin, and sang folk songs. The camp staff gathered around and joined in the singing which led to dancing. It was a surrealistic scene. Here I was in the Sahara Desert at night, under the shadow of ancient pyramids, sitting in a dilapidated little chair slowly sinking in the sand, surrounded by eight Muslims I'd met just a few days ago, sipping a special "brew", feeling so accepted and secure. As I looked up at my Sudanese friends, towering over me in their long white jallabiyahs, a half moon floating in and out of quilted clouds above them, it occurred to me that my family and friends in the USA were probably concerned about my welfare.

The singing, dancing and laughing accelerated at a feverish pace. What energy! How did they do it, especially in the heat?

Never have I had such instant camaraderie, such laughter, such celebration, such a sharing of spirit with near strangers of a different culture. It was difficult to identify my feelings. Yes, I was overwhelmed; and certainly I felt honored. But there was something else, something intangible that flowed between us all, and I sensed their awareness of it as well.

As a late dinner was being prepared, I suggested that instead of me being served at the table like a visiting dignitary (considered necessary protocol for visitors, but it made me feel uncomfortable), why didn't we all eat together in traditional Sudanese style? The staff was thrilled and we all sat in a circle around a single food bowl, reaching in with our fingers. It was a typical repast of ful, consisting of rice, broad beans and goat meat. We shared much more than a meal; we shared a special dimension of humanity.

The next morning my departure from camp was difficult. In such a brief time I had grown so fond of the staff, and they had received me with openness and affection. To my surprise they presented me with gifts — local Sudanese handicrafts. I was touched.

It was with heartfelt emotion that I bade farewell to Ali. His eyes glistened, then filled with tears. I lost it, and we both cried unashamedly. Fortunately I had the long return drive to Khartoum to regain my composure.

There I was immersed in a flurry of last minute activities, official thank-yous, and hasty good-byes.

As I rode through the vibrant streets of Khartoum at dusk en route to the airport, I noted in my Journal: "My heart is sad because I am leaving. I love this city, this country, and its people. I came initially to see the River Nile, but my life has been greatly enriched by the spirit of the Sudanese".

Six days in the Sudan forever changed my view of the world.



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“I’d rather be on Safari”

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