

SOUTH AFRICA

March 2014

I was supposed to be riding 8,000 kilometres but these tyres wouldn't get me to the corner shop.

My first motorcycle excursion to Africa took me as far as the Congo and the border with Angola, so I returned for a tour of South Africa. My chosen rental bike was a 2011 BMW; all good, except for the tyres, no tread and not even a matching pair. After heading off to a Sunday opening Motorcycle Superstore and fitting two new tyres I headed south from Johannesburg across the High Veldt farm land. It was quite warm before the heavy rains came but dry for the ride through the Golden Gate National Park of sand stone escarpments and mountains, littered with wildebeest and buck.

Day two involved a ride into Lesotho and then out again. Lesotho is land locked and surrounded by South Africa, quite a poor country but the landscape is stunning with grassy green mountains and winding roads. After leaving Lesotho I rode south west, heading eventually for Cape Town in four days' time. The afternoon ride took me to an overnight stop in an old Colonial guest house.

Leaving the High Veldt behind me I dropped down to the hotter Low Veldt onto long straight roads that stretched out 100's of kilometres and beyond. I was now crossing the Great Karoo, a dry arid desert, stretching into the distance as far as the eye could see. A ridge of mountains creates the divide that separates The Great Karoo from the Little Karoo. 600 kilometres (350 miles) of riding, including a stunning Gorge and mountain passes. In the evening I watched the Barrydale school Rock Band perform in the bar, before I was given the job of DJ. BB King blared out into the night.

Departing Barrydale my route crossed the famous wine fields and mountains of the Cape. I'd passed ostriches running wild and today I saw grinning baboons perched on top of telegraph poles. Blue skies all the way, good roads and mountains down to the cooler coast. I spent the night south of Cape Town before riding down the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope and up the Atlantic coast, before checking in to my Cape Town hotel. To my surprise and great pleasure, I discovered that the hotel had an award winning Indian restaurant. What more could I ask for?

I rode east out of Cape Town the next morning, with wonderful views of Table Top Mountain, before rounding the craggy whale coast. Unfortunately it was not whale watching season but apparently it's spectacular when they do appear. The last 40 kilometres crossed the exposed and windy Cape Agulhas, down to the most southerly point of the African continent. I was soon sat on the veranda of my small hotel, next to the lighthouse, overlooking the white sandy beach, as the waves rolled in. The wind was in my hair and not a cloud in the sky.



Toward the Great Karoo

Read more overleaf...

SOUTH AFRICA (cont.)

After leaving Cape Agulhas I joined the coast road east, across arable farm land and fields of cows and strange looking sheep. A mountain chain accompanied me inland, almost all of the way, as the farm land gave way to heath and then to forestation. Apparently this was the famous Garden Route but in the words of the song "it don't impress me much". My destination was Storms River, just short of Port Elizabeth and a non-riding day. The weather lived up to its name that night. I caught up on a bit of work the following day and started reading Don Whillans' biography "The Villain" whilst the lodge did my laundry.

I left Storms River under grey skies and headed off into light rain, down the old road to avoid the monotony of the new highway, through Tsitsikamma National Park, bye-passing Port Elizabeth, before heading into the scrub covered highlands of Frontier Country. The British fought the local Xtosa tribe here, when they came to South Africa in the early 19th century, similar to the later wars with the Zulu. Nelson Mandela was from the Xtosa tribe and I passed the University in Fort Hare where he studied law, before quickly riding straight through Fort Beaufort, a menacing sort of town where the locals looked pretty intimidating.

I overnighted high up in the hills of Hogsback. I don't think the place was named after the pigs that run around troubling motorcyclists, more likely after the mountains. Not a particularly spectacular day, more one of travelling from A to B.

After Hogsback I headed for the Trans Krei and soon passed the grave of Steve Biko the Anti-Apartheid martyr. The Krei is a high land of huge hills and deep valleys over which the road sweeps down and up. I made good progress. Various coloured houses lay sprinkled over the hilltops, as the villages made way for bustling towns. Riding through the cloud I passed the birth place of Nelson Mandela before dropping down to the Wild Coast and Port St Johns. 40 kilometres of the route on a dirt construction road, with plenty of holes and lots of mud, what fun. I heard that the Kruger Park was underwater but hopefully it would be OK in a few days' time when I got there.

Riding up through lush thick forest in the rain, leaving Port St Johns behind me I emerged out onto high open ground. It soon brightened up and I got a real feel for just how vast this country was, with rolling green hills stretching as far as the eye could see. After riding inland I dropped back down to the coast and sunshine before an overnight stop in the Oribi Gorge National Park of KwaZulu Natal, south west of Durban.

Yesterday was pension day for the OAP women and the ladies walked in file along the roadside, carrying shopping on their heads. Today there were hawkers on the freeway peddling pineapples and mangos. It was a hot and humid ride up the coast, through fields of sugar cane, past Durban and into the wetlands of St Lucia. I was told that the hippo's walk down the streets here at night.

At first I was doubtful about the merits of today's excursion as the Australian nurses and I set off for the iSimangaliso Park in an open sided, long wheel base Land Rover. It wasn't long though before I saw Hippo and Warthog from a distance and then got up close and personal with Rhino, Water Buffalo and Kudu. I was even lucky enough to watch a magnificent pair of Fish Eagles over the lake before a BBQ lunch. In the end not a bad day's excursion but I didn't get my camera out once. That night I was treated to a spectacular sound and light show of thunder and lightning with plenty of rain. I was off to Swaziland in the morning.

Read more overleaf...

SOUTH AFRICA (cont.)

The forecast was for heavy rain and as I was ready to leave early I set off intent on gaining an extra hour in the dry. Dodging cows and chicaning around goats I headed north for the border with Swaziland. Mozambique was further away to the North East and off to my left Rourke's Drift, a place well known to 1964 cinema goers and viewers of the Christmas TV repeats of Zulu. After dealing with the bureaucracy at the border crossing I headed over the mountains in glorious sunshine and almost reached my destination in the dry.

Just 30 minutes short of my accommodation a tremendous tropical storm erupted. I never removed a single item of wet gear as I collected the key from reception before riding up my chalet and grabbing the bags from my pannier boxes. The tiled floor was a blessing as I dripped my way to the bathroom and removed all of my outer gear and dropped it in the huge corner bath. I was soon dry and cosy while the rain continued to beat down on the roof outside.

Yesterday evening I'd ridden along a muddy red river torrent to reach my destination but when I departed this morning the river had reverted back to a black tarmac road. A dreary start to the day in cloud and drizzle, very reminiscent of northern Scotland. It soon brightened up though as I crossed the border back into South Africa. Swaziland seemed a well organised place and even looked more affluent than its South African rural neighbours. I was soon on the edge of the Kruger Park with the option of another game drive that evening, an option that I passed on as the weather was grey and unappealing. Seems I made the right choice, by all accounts.

A great ride today, high among the mountains and gorges of the North East under blue skies and fluffy white clouds. I was enjoying the peace and tranquillity of Blyde Canyon, reputed to be the third largest in the world, before I was joined by several coach loads of Germans. All that's left now is the ride back to Jo'burg in the morning.

I woke up and savoured the last view of the mountains from my window. I thought that I'd heard a knock on the door and went to answer it before I realised that it was nuts falling off the tree and bouncing down the roof. The mountains were soon left behind and I entered the High Veldt farmland again and sped along, heading for Jo'burg. The rural highway turned into freeway and the idyll was over. I just had to unpack the bike and head for the airport.



Contact Gordon

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