

# ***Border Crossings***

## **TRAVELLER'S CODE:**

1. Travel in a spirit of humility and with a genuine desire to meet and talk with the local people.
2. Be sensitive to the feelings of other people. Acquaint yourself with and respect the local customs.
3. Realise that people in the country you visit often have time concepts and thought patterns different to your own. Not inferior, just different.
4. Cultivate the habit of asking questions instead of knowing all the answers.
5. Remember that you are one of thousands of visiting tourists. Do not expect special privileges from the local people.
6. Make no promises to local people unless you are certain you can fulfil them.
7. Reflect daily on your experiences; seek to deepen your understanding.
8. Choose to be surprised, not disappointed, when places and people do not match your expectations.
9. Take only photo's; leave only footprints

## ***The etiquette of travelling in the rest of Africa*** by Tony Weaver and Liz Fish (Out There, Dec. 1996)

In the bad old days crossing the borders of Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique or Zambia inevitably meant an armed incursion. Unfortunately, for some overlanders, nothing has changed.

We have all heard apocryphal horror stories about African bureaucracy. Border posts induce panic attacks, road blocks are a source of terror, visa offices a paper jungle. More often than not, bureaucracy problems are caused by travellers with an attitude problem. With some spectacular exceptions, bureaucrats and law and order officials in most African countries are polite, friendly people. In many cases where travellers fall foul of the law, it is their own fault.

### **Border**

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A typical incident at a Botswana border post: we had just finished completing all the formalities and were having an amiable chat with the helpful customs officials. A South African 4x4 pulled up in a cloud of dust and two men in grubby bush shorts and T-shirts and two women in shorts and bikini tops, all wearing hats and sun glasses, walked in.

They slapped down their passports. The immigration official politely asked them to remove their sunglasses and hats as they were standing beneath a photograph of the president of Botswana. The travellers burst out laughing and one muttered "banana republic". As we drove off, the customs officials were doing a very, very leisurely strip search of the 4x4, huge piles of luggage lying in the dirt. The travellers were in for a long, hot wait.

In two years of African travel, we were never searched, nor did we have a moment's trouble at a border post. Only once was a bribe solicited, by a Kenyan official who asked "have you brought me a present from Uganda?" We fobbed him off. Maybe we were lucky, but we prefer to believe it was because we followed a few basic rules:

- To the average traveller, border post officials are lowly civil servants, but in their communities they are very important government officials and must be treated with respect.
- Without going over the top, always keep a set of neat clean clothes for border crossings. The more respectable you look, the less hassles you will encounter. Men should shave before crossing a border.
- Walk into a border post wearing hat and sunglasses, and remove them as you make eye contact with the officials, indicating respect for the ubiquitous portrait of the president – and for the officials.

- “ Have all you documents ready for inspection, and never get impatient if you are kept waiting. You are at the mercy of the border officials, who have the power to stamp ‘prohibited immigrant’ in your passport: bye bye overland trip.
- “ Even though most border posts only require one member of a large party to enter the post, everyone should get out and offer themselves for inspection.
- “ When customs officials approach your vehicle, immediately open the back – don’t wait to be asked. Tidy the back as much as possible before getting to the border post. Make sure one of you stands by during the search to avoid pilfering.
- “ Learn the greetings of the next country before getting to the border post: a great icebreaker is to get involved in an impromptu language lesson. Remember that, especially at isolated border posts, officials are bored and love practising English, and enjoy news from other parts of the world.
- “ Keep your cool, no matter how tedious and obstructionist the officials are being. We have heard of travellers forced to camp for three days at a border post because of them lost their temper and insulted a customs official.
- “ Unless there is a compelling reason for being there, like if your visitor’s permit is about to expire, never cross borders on weekends, public holidays or near closing time. You are liable to be hit with an overtime fee, or the customs officials will keep you hanging about until the overtime rates come into effect. Most borders are incredibly hectic at weekends and on holidays, and you will have a long wait. The Beit Bridge crossing between South Africa and Zimbabwe is a nightmare on long weekends.

## **Bribery** **and** **Corruption**

If a bribe is solicited, pretend you don’t understand: ask the person requesting the bribe to accompany you to another office to clarify the request. This should be enough to scare off the supplicant, unless the whole office is in on the game.

Walk into an office with a few cheap pens in an outside pocket. If an officer asks to borrow a pen and then admires it, offer it as a token of friendship. Postcards of your home town also make good gifts and help to break the ice. Chutzpah is often the name of the game.

The rule of thumb is to play it by ear without putting your foot in your mouth. If there is a payment which seems outrageous, ask for a receipt – if no receipt is offered, then assume you are being asked for a bribe. If a receipt is forthcoming, the item will usually be legitimate.

There are travellers who routinely bribe their way around Africa. This is an outdated view of Africa which is no longer valid in most parts of the continent. In the majority of countries, the authorities are committed to cracking down on bribery and corruption, yet many travellers don’t realise this. By offering bribes, you are supporting a system which is rapidly fading.

Two countries which previously had nasty reputations but have cracked down heavily on corruption are Uganda and Tanzania. The Ugandans have had more success than the Tanzanians, and the threat of reporting a corrupt Ugandan official to central government will make him turn tail.

## **The Bribery Hit List**

**Kenya:** Corruption stretches from the pettiest of officials into the highest echelons of government. Here there is a fine line in knowing how long to hold out before offering a bribe. The point at which to offer a bribe is when you are about to be arrested, and no sooner.

Officials on the Kenyan side of the intermittently operating Sand River border post near Keekorok, linking the Serengeti in Tanzania and the Masai Mara in Kenya, have a nasty reputation for extracting bribes. In East Africa, a bribe is known as *chai*, the Swahili word for tea. So ‘taking tea’ is taking a

bribe.

**Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo):** Expect to pay bribes for almost every single official service. Bribery is a way of life: the central government seldom gets it together to pay civil servants outside of the capital, Kinshasa, so border guards, policemen, soldiers, even bank clerks and nurses, demand a *cadeau* (gift) before doing what they are supposed to do. That is simply how they get paid.

**Nigeria:** Exceptionally corrupt. Expect to pay bribes. Don't fall foul of the military or police – it could be fatal.

**Mozambique:** Some border posts have a nasty reputation for corruption. If you are travelling through the Tete Corridor, expect to be stopped on the bridge across the Zambezi at Tete and asked for "one hundred dollars". The rule in Mozambique seems to be that if the person stopping you does not have a gun, drive off.

## **Police and Military Roadblocks**

A feature of life. In Kenya, expect to be stopped as many as 10 times a day. Always slow down when you see a roadblock and meticulously obey any signals. Remove your sunglasses when an officer approaches and greet them in the local language. Be as polite as possible. You will occasionally be asked for a bribe at a road block. Play it by ear.

In East Africa, roadblocks are often badly marked, and the barriers consist of two rows of fearsome, tyre-shedding metal spikes. All the more reason to slow down well in advance of a block, and to *never* drive at night – sometimes the police forget to move the spikes, or don't pull them fully off the road.

Always keep vehicle papers, passports, carnet and insurance documents in a secure place which is easily accessible, so you don't subject yourself to unnecessary scrutiny at roadblocks. If you are issued with a vehicle disc at customs, display it on the windshield.

In most cases, you will be waved through as soon as the officer sees a foreign-registered vehicle – except on Kenya's Mombassa to Malindi road, where foreign vehicles are a target for bribe extraction.

If there is something wrong with your vehicle, work out a convincing story in advance. Say something like "but we have just had that fixed" and pull out a tool kit and start repairing the fault. This usually gets you off the hook.

In Mombassa, we were stopped while on our way to fit four new tyres to our vehicle because the old set were bald and treadless. The officer politely pointed this out and said he would have to fine us. In a moment of divine inspiration, we told him the tyres were a new design from the United States, especially made for mud driving.

"You see, officer", we explained, "there are no holes for the mud to get stuck in, so you drive right over the tope. They are called Super Slicks". He grinned and said "that is a very good story, you may go".

## **Wars and Coup D'etat**

Coup d'etats are unpredictable things. All the more reason to tune into the BBC's African Service every evening and listen to regional developments. When the Rwandan civil war erupted, several groups of overlanders were trapped inside the country.

If trapped, head for your consulate, or a friendly consulate if you are not represented (the Brits are pretty good) and hole up there. If you cannot get there because of fighting, get to the nearest solid hotel with all your available food, money and backpacking gear (including stoves); book a room, close the curtains and prop blankets mattresses and tables against the window to slow down bullets, flying glass and shrapnel; fill the bath and every available container with water in case supplies are cut off – and prepare to be very bored, because chances are nothing will happen.

If you are trapped in the countryside, head for the nearest friendly border. You will probably come

across a road block where the soldiers are drunk. Nasty, and you will have to keep very calm. Don't get out, keep the engine running, the vehicle in gear and a foot on the clutch.

Single out one soldier with more authority than the others, or who is least drunk. Make sure you know the president's name and invoke his authority – this may be enough to bring the drunkest of soldiers to his wits, if they are loyalists and not rebels. Play it by ear: invoke the names of President Mandela and the Bafana Bafana – they carry a lot of power.

If things get out of hand, crash the roadblock if it is crashable, and hope like hell the guns don't work. Drunk soldiers are notoriously bad shots. If you are hauled out of the vehicle, don't resist, however tempting it may be.

## **Last**

## **Word**

We had been gone from South Africa for two years when we returned through the Beit Bridge border post. On the Zimbabwean side, the immigration official paged back through our passports and said "you have been gone two years, you must be very glad to be going home, viva Mandela, congratulations," and shook our hands.

On the South African side, the grim faced woman demanded to know "Why have you been gone for two years/ Where have you been? How much money are you carrying? Does your vehicle have a licence? Are you carrying firearms?"

There are some border posts where the tricks just don't work!