

Safe Driving

Beware of the Chickens

Most African overland travel does not take place on bush tracks, but on major highways which were once tarred. Tony Weaver and Liz Fish bounced their way through Africa for two years. (Out There, Feb. 1997)

We had just spent two months in Ethiopia where the drivers are extraordinarily courteous and well-behaved. They have to be. Anybody who kills somebody else in a road accident there is automatically charged with murder.

It was shocking to return to Kenya, where the drivers are only marginally less suicidal than lemmings. As we came over a blind rise at the foot of Mount Kenya, a heavily loaded *matatu* (taxi) came straight for us on the wrong side of the road, for the simple reason that his side of the road was potholed. Being bigger and tougher, he forced us onto the verge, where we nearly rolled as our wheels hooked a vicious ledge.

Ten minutes later, the same thing happened again, but this time we were prepared. As the taxi drew level with us, we hurled rotten tomatoes at the driver. This is not recommended standard operating procedure, but is useful as a stress relief measure for Third World driving.

Here are some slightly more conventional ways of dealing with that stress:

Accidents

The last thing you want on an overland trip is to be involved in an accident. At the least it will involve you in weeks of bureaucracy, and the probability of having to fork out money for a bribe or fine. At worst, it could wreck your vehicle and severely injure or kill you. In extreme instances, you run the risk of being beaten to death by a mob if somebody has been killed in an accident in which you are involved.

A friend was driving through a remote part of western Zambia when a drunk ran into the road in front of him. The man was killed, and our friend, newly arrived from Wales, stopped. Within moments, a mob had gathered and began beating him, intent on a lynching. Luckily, a bus arrived with two Zambian soldiers on board. They fired into the air, loaded the dead body into the back of our friend's Land Rover, and escorted him to the nearest town. He was thrown into jail overnight. Fortunately for him, a doctor in town took blood samples from the corpse and established that he had been well and truly plastered.

As callous as it may seem, if you are involved in an accident in a rural area involving the death of a pedestrian, or of livestock, get to the nearest police or military post and report the incident. Don't stick around - your life may be in danger.

We heard another tale of an overlander who flipped his vehicle in the capital of the Central African Republic, Bangui. As he hung upside down, dazed, bruised and bewildered, a crowd gathered around and, after checked that he was still alive, proceeded to strip the vehicle.

Night Driving

Don't. African roads are always hazardous, and the dangers are multiplied exponentially at night. Many vehicles drive without headlights; livestock wander onto the roads; there is a greater chance of pedestrians being drunk; and this is the time when carjackers and bandits are most active.

If you are forced to drive at night, keep your speed down, and if you have a co-driver, get them to act as a second set of eyes. On the main Thika highway heading north out of Nairobi, we twice came across vehicles driving down the wrong side of the dual carriageway with their headlights off. Evidently they were sneaking through a short cut, and left their lights off to avoid detection by the police.

Road Surfaces

Although most major routes are constantly being upgraded and repaired as part of aid programmes, many roads in Africa are appallingly potholed. There is no safe way to drive through potholes at speed. The only solution is to drive slowly, however maddening this may be. If a stretch of road seems to be clear of potholes, stay in sight of another vehicle so that you can see when they take evasive action, and slow down accordingly.

Be very careful of inadvertently driving off the shoulder of some roads: many roads have dangerously sharp edges, and a wheel off the tarmac can flip your vehicle in seconds. If your wheels do slip off the edge – you may be forced to do this to avoid an oncoming vehicle – then do not try to jerk the vehicle back onto the road. Slack off your speed, keep the wheel steady, and gradually edge back onto the road.

There is an inverse law of danger on African roads – the better the road, the more dangerous it is, because good road surfaces encourage terrifying speeds. This is particularly true on the newly resurfaced north-south Tanzam highway. Here buses, called 'video coaches' because they boast TV sets showing non-stop kung fu movies, tear along at speeds in excess of 140km/h, swaying from side to side and cornering on the wrong side of the road.

The drivers also watch the movies.

Taxis and *Matatus*

One of the biggest hazards in most countries, and especially in Kenya, are the minibus taxis, and the larger taxi buses called *matatus*. *Tatu* is the Swahili word for three, and they derive their names from the days when the standard fare in Nairobi was three shillings.

Matatus are notoriously dangerous beasts, and hardly a day goes by in Kenya without a newspaper report of terrifying accidents, often with as many as 70 killed in vehicles with a load rating of 40. *Matatus* drivers are a law unto themselves.

Most of the accidents involve drivers who are drunk, stoned, or have been chewing the narcotic weed, miraa, or all three. They drive at fearsome speeds, overtake in the face of oncoming traffic, bully their way through urban roads, and are always heavily overloaded. We lost track of the number of times we were forced to pull right off the road to avoid a head-on-collision with a *matatu*.

Never drive close behind a *matatu* or bus: there are very few formal bus or taxi stops, and drivers normally stop dead in traffic to load passengers. If you are approaching a *matatu* pulled off the road loading passengers, be aware that the drivers take it as their right to pull out into the traffic without checking for oncoming vehicles.

City Driving

If you are unused to driving a 4x4 in heavy traffic, practise before leaving, in the safety of a city you know well, where drivers are reasonably polite and traffic lights work. Once you hit a city like Dar es Salaam, Lagos or Nairobi, it's a jungle.

Never trust traffic lights: in some cities they only get switched on when visiting heads of state are in town. When they do work, most motorists are so surprised they ignore them. Treat green lights as a yield sign. Don't be surprised if you stop at a red light and the traffic behind you starts hooting and cursing you. Ignore them, unless ten minutes pass and the light still hasn't changed.

Roundabouts are also to be treated with caution. Although the general rule of the road is that traffic from the right (in countries which drive on the left) has the right of way, this is mere theory in most cities.

If you are used to driving on the left, as is the case in all former British colonies, consider using taxis when you get to cities in countries which drive on the right, like Francophone Africa and Ethiopia and Eritrea. It will save you considerable stress.

Be very cautious when driving anywhere near the official residence of a state president or prime minister. Guards have very itchy fingers. Also be on the lookout for a phalanx of vehicles or motorcycles bearing down on you with flashing lights. It may be a visiting head of state or the president being escorted around town. Get as far off the road as possible, and never ever try to take a photograph. People have been shot for less.

Overtaking

In most Central and East African countries, trucks and vehicles will indicate with their left indicator when it is safe for you to overtake, and with their right indicator when it is not safe. Don't take their word for it. The chances are there is a 10 ton truck approaching which the driver ahead failed to see. Always check first.

When overtaking, always check in your rear view mirror to make sure a *matatu* or other vehicle isn't, in turn, overtaking you, despite the fact that your indicator is on. Also make sure that no vehicles are lined up in side streets or roads ready to pull out in the path of the vehicle you are about to overtake.

Always drive very carefully into blind rises: there is a good chance you will meet a vehicle on the wrong side of the road overtaking in the face of death.

Sleeping Policemen

Not, as the name suggest, lazy law enforcement officers, but vicious speed bumps found in most small East African towns. They are almost never signposted, are not painted, and are a particular feature of Kenyan towns. They usually have rocks piled up on either side of them to stop the *matatus* driving off the road and around them at 120km/h.

They are sharp and high, and do terrible things to your suspension if you hit them at anything faster than a crawling speed. Be on the lookout for them when entering any town. They are often found on main highways passing through villages.

Livestock and Wild Animals

A feature of all African roads, even in the cities. Road sides are almost never fenced, and domestic animals often graze on the verges because the grass is greener there as a result of runoff from the tarmac.

Cattle are particularly dangerous because they are totally unpredictable. They might walk away from you, and then suddenly swing and jump straight at your vehicle. Goats are miraculous survivors, always getting out of the way, while donkeys, mules and horses will sometimes trot along in front of you ignoring all hooting and shouting. The only thing to do is stop and let them wander off the road. Chickens are also miraculous survivors, but are often followed by small children. Be very careful if a chicken runs in front of you – rural people love their chickens and their children.

In northern South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe, kudu pose a special hazard. Night driving in these countries is generally safer than it is further north, but this is when kudu are out and about.

In Namibia, where four percent of all road accidents are caused by kudu, there are several fatalities every year caused by kudu leaping into windshields and impaling the drivers on their spiral horns. The most terrifying case we have heard of was of a man who was impaled by a kudu, with this accelerator

foot pressed flat on the pedal by the weight of the animal. He finally rolled the car at nearly 200km/h (it was a Mercedes) and miraculously survived.

The best solution to this is to angle your spotlights slightly outwards, so that they pick up the yes of the kudu well in advance. According to research conducted in Namibia, 54 percent of kudu-related accidents happen at night, 13 percent in the twilight hours and 33 percent during the day. Kudu are twice as active on moonlit nights, and are particularly active and jumpy on full moon nights.

It is not true that kudu try to jump over headlights – they are most likely dashing across the road to join their friends and family, and passing cars are incidental. It is also a fallacy that keeping the internal cab light on will stop kudu from jumping through your windshield. – all this does is reduce your night vision, adding to the chances of an accident.

Be very careful of warthogs – they can cause a fearsome amount of damage to a vehicle when hit at speed.

Remember that, despite all these grim warnings, South Africa has probably the worst road safety record in Africa. It ranks third in the world for the number of deaths per vehicle kilometres travelled. Kenya is not far behind.