

The Trans-African Highway

By Constance Scrafield

It was no more than a track, certainly not as wide as your average dirt road in the countryside hereabouts. The jungle rose all about us and in the night, as we sat in a space, a pocket of the jungle, the music of the many insects in the foliage on every side left no doubt that this is the birth place of jazz.

Zaire. The country was called Zaire, although its masters have reverted the name back to the Congo ? the Democratic Republic of Congo ? since then. The river in the north was the Zaire River; the money was Zaire, I think, and for sure, the people were the Zairean.

We were strongly advised to travel through the jungle road to Burundi in convoy. With this in mind, my then husband, Ernest, and I had teamed up with a pair of Brits, Fred and Bob, as travelling companions. They drove in a Jeep of some description: it was rough; one of them was rough ? perfect company for the journey south.

As for us, we were travelling in a Volkswagen Kombi, an air-cooled engine, perfect for driving in arid and hot conditions such as the Sahara Desert had presented: our jerry cans of water needed only for drinking and very minimal washing.

Christmas in the Cameroons, well, three months in the Cameroons but this is about the Trans African Highway and the revelation I experienced on a day driving south on it.

The drive took us through thatch-roofed villages. Chickens dashed across the roads like wildlife and, occasionally, one would run too late for us to miss it, in spite our careful pace.

Narrow as it was, we were not inclined to speed; indeed, the track would not have permitted it. On the side of the road, there were surprises like a small tank with its barrel pointing aimlessly, the shadow of a threat, from the days of colonial invasion. Stuck there and abandoned like any old tank ? it made us wonder what the story was: if the invaded people had somehow won advantage over terrible odds and had routed their suppressors in that one unrecorded corner of history.

While working our way through one of these villages, a small boy with a large papaya on his head dashed to the side of the way, waving and smiling at us. We stopped. Used to bartering, I went back in the van to find a souvenir that might be considered a fair swoop for the fruit by the boy's grandfather who followed him.

There was a small, now empty and washed, honey pot, plastic with a snap on lid. I offered it to the grandfather, who tested the lid with pleasure and agreed most affably to the bargain. We continued on, well pleased, too, with the exchange.

Along the way, not long before we wanted to stop for the night, there were three tiny people walking on the track ahead of us. They were wearing odd caps made, we thought, from palm leaves; they were carrying blow pipes with them and we realized that they were pygmies and that they were going hunting; that they would use those pipes to shoot darts to kill their prey.

Suddenly, I had a vision of my own father back in Canada, in his blue suit, with his station wagon parked outside his office, talking on the telephone, doing business ? negotiating, buying, selling, making a deal ? getting a contract ? organizing the financing of whatever it was, and I realized that there was, basically, no difference between that Canadian business man father of mine and these three tiny men in loin clothes and pointy leaf caps, going hunting...

It was a real shock. The brunt of it was the depth of the truth of it. They were, equally, just trying to make a living, just bringing food to the family. The pygmies were and may still be treated as slaves by larger-stature tribes to hunt and so forth but that made no difference to the thrust of the revelation.

In an interview on CBC Radio 1 the other day, a man who recently escaped to Canada, told of having endured, with his wife and two small children, a horrifying journey across the seas from the Middle East to Europe. They are here and safe now. He does all he can to help other newcomers settle in.

Asked about his feelings toward those who made his journey so hard, he said: ?I teach my son there is only one nationality: that is the nation of humanity. We are the same. Just one nation.?

Our differences are not in our skin colour or our so-called cultures. Our differences are in what our parents tell us to believe, as influenced by their parents back all the generations, until people begin to realize the truth.

Then, teach that to their children.