

... chit chat ...



On route to Bahir Dar in the west, towards Sudan.



10. SUDAN

(14 to 28 April 2011)

10.1. The Sudanese Men we meet ... (Linda, Sudan; April 2011)

In the Sudan we meet men, men and more men! And each one is eager to please and eager to chat. It is not that we don't see women. We see women, but a disproportionate few. And these few seem removed and a little guarded. And for whatever crazy, muddled-up reason we do not get to meet the women, we cannot help but love the men! Our 11 words of Arabic DO NOT contain the expansive conversations we have with these dear Sudanese men.

They radiate delight at the sight of us in their country. They grin with disbelief when we launch into conversation. They sit us down, with chai, to chat and exhaust our 11 Arabic words and 111 hand gestures! It's the trend throughout the Sudan! And I'm not sure why it is like this? Could it have something to do with being squarely caught in a situation not of their doing and out of their hands? Caught between two crazy presidents; namely, their own al Bashir, wanted in The Hague for 'crimes against humanity' and another, ex-president Bush who declared them part of the axis of evil? Maybe, but I'm getting ahead of myself!

There really is a gentle urgency in every meeting. An unsaid 'thank you' and a said 'please'; 'thank you for seeing we are alright', 'please take a photo to show back home'. We mingle at truck stops, at midday rest shelters, at markets, at work, in canteens and at food stands. They spoil us with a handful of dates, a bag of peanuts, a heaped plate of grilled goat meat, the bottomless cup of chai and a song and a dance. Our purchases always burst with the extra tomato, onion, lime and bread-roll.

At a restaurant a truck driver rushes back in to give Angela a little bottle of eucalyptus oil. Along the road, a choir of work-men, raise their arms and voices in unison as we slip by. From the back of a bus we stopped for water, we receive more than we need.

Uhm, Axis of Evil, my arse!

And then a little later at night, a 'sweet surprise' comes over the scene. Some of these men line up at bakeries, shops and stalls and leave for home with trays of syrupy baklava, nutty-date delights, oat biscuits and icing-sugar coated balls. Other men softly follow their wives into bright gold jewelry stores. Alley-ways shine bright with big and small shops bearing gold from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Russia. And wives flanked by mothers, sisters and friends, 'oh' and 'ah' at chunky and fine jewelry pieces. We are told they are measuring the weight and worth of a nuptial agreement, an insurance policy or an old age pension. The men do not seem to be part of this business. They wait aside, for the women and salesmen to conclude the negotiation, and then pay wordlessly.

Uhm, makes you wonder who rules the roost?

Some photos follow of our interactions with the men. It is not really allowed to take photos of women, so the ones at the end are a bit messy.



A lunch stop on route to Bahir Dar.



Bahir Dar - The warden of one of the many Lake Tana Monasteries.



A bird on the shores of Lake Tana.



A typical Lake Tana boat made from reed.



A cormorant catches a Nile perch in Lake Tana.



We manage to buy a little 'black market' fuel in Bahir Dar to get to this last pump with fuel. The usual Libyan supply is erratic.



A last beer before we enter Sudan on a rooftop bar in Gonder - look at the Gonder Castle in the background.



Me with Tew, a young deaf guy we befriend in Gonder. He teaches me Bamwo (played throughout Africa) and I teach him Backgammon.





Really expensive jewelry!



Peep through the window to see the women 'shopping' for jewelry.



The men wait to one side ...

... and then pay wordlessly.



10.2. Crazy Days and Crazy Nights (Linda; Sudan; April 2011)

The part of the Sudan, we travel, is desert (the Nubian Desert in the north-east). Apart from three tiny little slithers, a river (the Nile), a road (trucks) and a pipeline (oil) that run to and from its capital, Khartoum.

So, it is desert that fills our days and nights. In the morning and late afternoon we ride in a trance. At midday, we rest in the shade. At night, we frolic and flourish in the dark.

In the day, the desert we see has whites, blacks, reds, oranges and yellows. It has dry pans, stark shrubs and teasing mirages. But the desert we feel leaves us crazy. Empty and full, weak and strong. Its stark beauty spins past us, as we ride. The horizon ahead, a moving arc, reveals layer after layer of desert magic. It has me agreeing emphatically with Galileo, that the world is round. At the same time, I resist the urge to slip off its flat edge. I swear I spin faster when we ride from east to west! I weigh nothing. My fingers feel fat. I wonder when I will pee again. I drink water through my pores in a swimming pool back home. I bow deeply to the donkey and the camel for their forbearance. I look forward to sipping chai, smoking a water-pipe and lying down with strangers in the shade. And, sure enough, it gets just that crazy...

Around midday a shady shelter always appears. From it, the heads of Sudanese, wrapped in white turbans, rise from row after row of string-strung beds. It is a place for the mandatory

'group' midday rest! We find these shelters, just in time, throughout. We receive beds after a bit of a reshuffle. We pay for a plate of whatever is on offer. Sometimes it is a feast of meat, sometimes it is 'fuul' (stewed brown beans) and sometimes it is just a poor chai. Sleep comes easy. We wake to quiet Arabic chatter and it is time to ride again.

When the sun starts to drop, we slip off the road. We find a slight sandy rise to keep us out of sight and out of the hot wind. We stop, sit and wait in the square meter of shade, thrown by our bikes, until the sun goes down. And, just-just then, it gets really crazy ...

We spring to life! Roll out ground-sheets. Pump up mattresses. Nibble on peanuts and dates. Pry open tins of tuna. Chop tomatoes, onions, peppers. Cram pita breads. Gobble them down. Boil water for hibiscus tea. Fall flat on our backs to frolic ... with the crazy night.

Utter bliss. It's never-never land! It's first star on the right and straight on till morn. It's the northern sky with strange new constellations. It is satellites and shooting stars. It's a tranquil whisper and a gasp of delight. That breathless hot wind of the day is a soothing cool for a whole night long. It's an ultimate joy. It's a drug.

We wake, brand-new, for always another crazy day. And soon I see another donkey and another camel and I smile because I now know the secret of always another crazy night.



During the day, we see ...



The sand claiming back the road.



... and here a mirage has gobbled up the corner of the distant mountain!



The heat creates the illusion (a mirage) of a lake in the distance.



And sometimes it is not an illusion, it's the NILE!



And the Nile is most of the time no more than a slither - just enough for drinking!



And some less grand ...



Here and there somebody else ...



... a donkey and a bike ...



... but mostly it is just you ...



At midday we stop at a shady shelter ...



We are always welcome.



Harry was really far away there!



In the late afternoon, we slip off the road to find a spot for the night.



We rest in the shade of our bikes and wait for the sun to drop.



... quick look, at the guys on the beds!



We quickly fall into the local routine and stop for the mandatory midday rest everyday.



Some grand ...

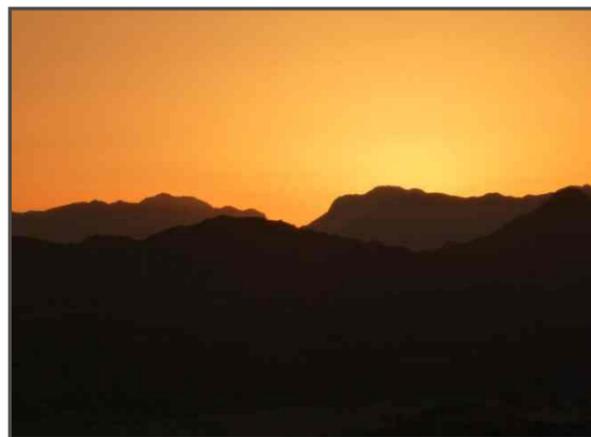




And in the early morning ...



The sun slowly rises ...



Breakfast - Bread, cheese, fig jam, dates and fruit never disappoint!

SUDAN

10.3. Shooting Stars and Purring Trucks (Linda; Sudan; April 2011)

Power has, is and always will shuttle back and forth over time. And so it expresses itself in different places at different times.

Along the road from Khartoum to Port Sudan we find an expression at Meroe, the ancient remains of the royal cemetery. This is an indigenous African civilization of Nubian origin that thrived from 600 BC to 350 AD.

Nubians fascinate me. They are the most northern of indigenous African people (i.e. further north the influence is more Arabic). They are responsible for the great ancient civilizations of the Land of Punt (from 2450 BC) and here at Meroe (from 600 BC to 350 AD). They have always been in the desert, kind-of straddling the confluences of the Blue and White Niles. Today, we still find them between Khartoum (north Sudan) and Aswan (south Egypt).

The ancient civilization of Meroe makes so much sense. It's just off the Niles, dead center between central Africa (with all its produce, ivory, slaves), Egypt and the rest of the world via the Red Sea. And so, the Nubians of the desert, with nothing, become powerful handling resources for others! The Meroe royal cemetery is what is left of this powerful 'one' period in Nubian history. The civilization at Meroe declines as a result of changing trade patterns in and around the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and environmental degradation. Hang on ... did we read of something similar happening elsewhere, in the Time Magazine, recently?

We visit the desolate site with its proud pyramids above ground, and its sacred tombs below ground. We overnight, just beyond these royal bones, out in the open.

It's a night of purring trucks and shooting stars!

A rumble rises from the quiet desert, as the night settles. It's the throaty grumble of trucks on the road between Khartoum and Port Sudan. The brand new tar road we came on in the afternoon. Except it's not new! It's ancient! A dying star falls and streaks down from the dark sky. I count five, six, seven shooting stars that night! Punt, Memphis, Meroe, Aksum, Thebes, Lalibela, Gonder I salute the rise and fall of each of these civilisations along the same old trade route.

There's no point in making wishes, all my wishes have become true.

And all the while, I hear the comforting, healthy sound of truck after truck, pumping blood down the same old arterial to its newest heart, Khartoum? I love it! Khartoum is NOT some backwater / basket-case of a country! There is oil running through a pipeline all along this road. There are cattle stacked, horns to hooves, in trucks on route to Malaysia. There are farmers in bakkies hurtling to southern Sudan to inspect its agricultural potential. There are businessmen in air-conditioned cars wheeling agricultural contracts for the Saudi Arabian government. There are small business owners dropping off supplies at stops all along this road to feed this trading activity.

And Khartoum, sounds with a healthy heartbeat, and looks a little like the cousin, twice-removed, of Dubai. Good! I hope Sudan is going places again!

This night, I wake at about 11 o'clock to see that the moon has just decided to join us. There is beautiful!



We head for the ancient royal cemetery of a great Nubian civilisation at Meroe, Sudan.



Deep below these pyramids are the chambers and tombs of Nubian Royalty.



The next day, we see the trucks 'in a different light'.



Perhaps not as well preserved as Egyptian pyramids but certainly a lot more desolate.



We camp just beyond the Meroe Site out in the desert.



And at last the sun is down ...



... and we spend a night with grumbling trucks and shooting stars and even a 'late moon rising' ...



Khartoum, the 'pumping' capital of Sudan.



Khartoum at the confluence of the Blue & White Niles.

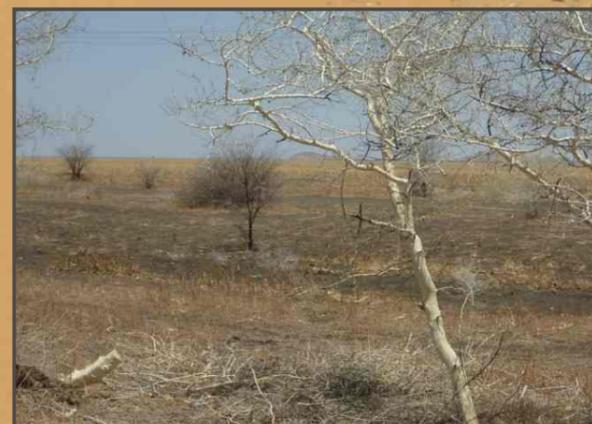
10.4. Some More Photos from the Sudan



Sudan has so much desert ...



... and dryness ...



... and yet here and there you see wheat peeping out from behind all the dryness!



Sudan is a daily toil for water ...



... donkey water carts like these carry water throughout Sudan ...



... to fill earthen jars like these ... all over the place with surprisingly cool water for 'free'.



And now and then we have a sighting of the Nile River, which makes 'life' possible.



Most of the settlements we see have electricity.



And, of course, in Sudan we are 'totally illiterate'.



It is really difficult shopping here.



In Khartoum, we camp at the 'Blue Nile Sailing Club'.



... and look we have annexed the only shade!!!



The Sailing Club is also home to the Kitchener's old gunboat, the Melik.



Here are a few shots of the market in Ondurman, the old part of Khartoum.



Nubian homes have very decorative gates.

Loads of loving attention is spent 'pimping my bike.'



... 'pimping my truck' ...



... 'pimping my tuk-tuk' ...



In northern Sudan we come across this scene - the illegal digging for gold.



Feels like a 'Mad Max' scene.



... on the inside and the outside ...



This is our accommodation in the town Dongola.

This is typical accommodation in Sudan, called a 'lokanda'. The guidebook says the biggest difference between them is their names. True!



Angela prefers her make-shift bed outside as it is cooler. She is right!



... and Harry stops for a quick chat ...



This 'chai lady' (tea lady) is Nubian.



Boys playing video games.

Often the only water available at 'lokandas' is that little tap next to the 'hole'



... and sometimes we eat well ...

... and sometimes we don't ...



10.5. Some More Photos from the Sudan The Ferry Trip



The desert town of Wadi Halfa. Here we take the ferry along the Nile to Aswan in Egypt.



The Nile and ferry terminal are in the distance.



These trucks brought 2000 head of cattle to be transported up the Nile. Luckily not on our ferry.



The best fish ever - heaps of whole fried fish - for 2 meals in a row.



... with their possessions.



We and our bikes have to get on last and it is getting dark.



From high on a hill on the morning of our departure, we can't help but spot a lot of early morning bowel movements.



This is the foyer of our hotel at Wadi Halfa.



... with our bikes parked outside.



Banners with El Bashir are all over. He is wanted in The Hague for war crimes against humanity.



Here (if you can see) we build a ramp ourselves to get the bikes up.



Our bikes are on! Nestled in the passageway with all the other passengers.



We spot the cattle from under a truck where we rest in its shade.



The terminal is busy only one way (from Egypt to Sudan) with refugees returning from Libya.



Harry is almost as worried as the 3-strip ferry captain on the steps next to him.



And we are on. In a first class cabin. Here Dominic & Colin join us.



The ferry is very empty because of the revolution in Egypt. On a normally 'packed' ferry we have been told this is the top spot i.e just under the shade of the lifeboat.



And yes, here is Angela and her bike! Landed on the other side in Egypt!