The lion’s copper mane glowed like a thick halo in the soft yellow of dawn. He was spraying his mark on low bushes as we rumbled closely behind. His brother, whom he was searching for, was “with a girl who liked both brothers,” as our guide, Jonny, delicately put it. When the brothers got within sight of each other, Jonny looked at me, eyebrows raised. My fists were clenched, waiting for a dramatic conflict. But the first brother laid down in the road, as if to say, “I’m not jealous, I’ll wait over here.”

We had parked the bikes for three days of game drives in Madikwe Game Reserve, on the northern border of South Africa. Staying at a rustic-yet-luxurious bush camp within the reserve stretched our budget, but we decided to splurge now and eat ramen later. After four months of cycling in Africa, we know when to seize opportunities.

The animals in Madikwe are accustomed to vehicles, making it possible to get close without disturbing them; we counted the whiskers on a lounging pair of cheetahs, followed a second pair of lions, and saw the original lion love triangle twice more. We watched animals come for their daily drink at a large watering hole: white rhinoceros, zebras, cape buffalo, hyenas with their hunched shoulders, wildebeests with their long, grumpy faces. Giraffes splayed their legs in order to reach the water, and a lilac-breasted roller fluttered its rainbow of feathers. While older elephants bossed other animals around, the baby elephants swung their trunks in circles, attempting to figure out how to use them.

Before we reached Madikwe, we cycled through northern South Africa and Southern Hemisphere winter, against headwinds, up and over folded mountains and river valleys, shivering through sub-freezing nights. Incredible warmshowers hosts in Rustenburg made me look forward to the day we can host again. After our foray at Madikwe Reserve, dusty roads took us to the Botswana border.

As we handed our passports over, the border guards told us, “You will have no problems. Botswana is a peaceful nation.” We sighed with relief, comparing these statements to the constant warnings of crime we received in South Africa. Blissfully coasting downhill, the sun greeted us warmly, as did the 15th country of this trip. Botswana’s 2.3 million residents are spread out over its 224,607 square miles, sometimes in modern buildings and often in thatch roof huts. It is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, and that meant we could wild camp again! Wealth here can still be measured in head of cattle, goats and thorns are omnipresent, and sometimes you need a village chief’s permission before setting up a tent.

We headed into the bush for three nights of dry camping in fine, red soil amid scraggly bushes, doing a thorough sweep each night for prickly things that might deflate our sleeping pads. Headwinds slowed us down while corrugated, sandy roads demoralized us, but Tom looked at me and said, “This is the adventure I was looking for.” We could only cover about 50 to 60 kilometers (30 to 35 miles) each day, and each night we took sponge baths using the least amount of water possible. While watching the rose glow of sunset fade to the west, the slenderest wisp of moon emerged.

For the three weeks we were in Botswana, the Batswana1 that we met buoyed us. Everyone was so welcoming, always waving, smiling, and engaging us in conversation. They emphatically insisted that we would have “no problems,” and the words “peaceful nation” were repeated countless times. Of course, no nation is perfect, but we got the same reception from farmers, merchants, prison guards, drivers of fancy cars, children, and women selling food on the side of the road. Most of the time it was accompanied by big, white smiles and a subtle sense of pride. The pride is understandable: with nearly 60 years of successful and peaceful democratic elections, stability, and economic progress, there is a sense of unity and harmony.

Over the weeks we pedaled northeast, past the Tropic of Capricorn, then to Mahalapye, where we found much-needed showers, and onward to Palapye, a university town. We cut northwest to Letlhakane, a diamond mining town where income inequality reared its ugly head. From the diamond mines, our route took us north to the Makgadikgadi salt pans, where distant white horizons bent our perspectives, leaving us guessing.

1. In Tswana, the language and tribe of 73 percent of the people, the prefix “ba”, means “the people of.” All citizens of Botswana are known as Batswana (plural) or Motswana (singular), regardless of ancestry or tribal affiliation.
As we handed our passports over, the border guards told us, “You will have no problems. Botswana is a peaceful nation.”

what we were actually seeing across the massive, ancient dried lake beds.

The salt pans support plants that have adapted to live on the edges; some have shallow roots to take advantage of rare surface water, while others like the Baobab tree² have deep roots reaching for groundwater. Baobab are the largest succulents in the world, and I knew that the gray, bloated trunk in front of me could hold thousands of liters of moisture. Others plants, like prickly saltgrass,³ are the O.G distillers and survive by extracting salt from the water and depositing salt crystals on their leaf surfaces, through their stomata (tiny openings on the leaves).

The Kalahari Basin is the largest expanse of sand in the world, a fact reinforced by pockets that forced us to push our bikes on the edge of the pans. It was worth the struggle because the sunrises over the semi-arid savannah are like no other. It starts as a slow violet and shifts to soft orange creamsicle before settling into a deep red through the bushes. Then a fiery orange ball pops over the flat horizon. After three nights and 100 miles in the pans, I put a victorious fist in the air when we reached the pavement near Nata.

From Nata we rode straight north on the highway to Kazungula, then crossed into Zimbabwe, dodging elephants for six days. As I write this from a tiny, white-washed room in Victoria Falls, inside my mosquito net, I think of all the folks we have met from around the world traveling via overland rigs, motorcycles, and even a few cyclists. They are sharing the gift of adventure and wonderment with their kids, partners, and friends, and I am reminded that it doesn’t have to be a long trip, or even a cycling trip, to share these things.

The invitation for Tom to join me on this epic quest wasn’t tidily wrapped in a box with a bow. It was more like an ace of spades that I put down face up; he slowly slid it across the table and fit it into his hand of cards. Now that we’ve found a groove of traveling together, the gift of adventure is like something we give back and forth — planning the next continent, the next country, the next meal. We’ve watched the new moon wax to full across the savannah and whittle back to nothing. Yesterday we stood staring at Victoria Falls as dawn broke. The Zambezi River poured over basalt cliffs in a wide flank, and the mist made a vertical rainbow. After approximately 2,500 miles on the African continent, I can’t wait to see what the next miles and moon cycle bring. As we continue through northern Zimbabwe, then Zambia, Malawi, and Tanzania, I know adventure is on the horizon. But that’s true no matter where you go.

Hollie Ernest is a botanist, forester, cyclist, and swimmer, currently traveling around the world by bicycle. To get in touch about anything at all, you can find her on Instagram @hollie_holly.

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