

## OFTAT - They're Back!

*In our Oct/Nov issue we published an article by Gail Huntingford and Hamish Harvey describing the planning and preparation for their mammoth "Old Folks Trans-Africa Tour. Gail describes their adventures...*

Fifteen countries, five ferries and 10,000 miles in eleven weeks! We set off on 14<sup>th</sup> September and arrived in Nairobi on 29<sup>th</sup> November and had a most



memorable, exciting and fascinating trip. On the whole we all stayed healthy, some of us did have a nasty case of food poisoning after buying some cooked chickens and one had gout (!)

### **Dracula Produces the Goods!**

The weather was very kind apart from a monumental storm while we were camping in Romania. We saw the lightning far, far away; we thought we were safe but it got closer and closer and suddenly down the rain came and it thundered and blew and poured all night. We thought we would get washed away or at least the cars would get bogged down, but all was well in the morning apart from some wet bedding. Our days fell into a routine fairly quickly, up very early, 5.30-6.00 am when it was light. A leisurely breakfast, pack up and on the road by 8-8.30 am. At first, on the excellent roads in Europe and the Middle East, we made good time and were able to cover quite good distances. We would try to stop somewhere for lunch and then would start looking for a campsite or accommodation at 3.30-4.00 pm. The

Harveys were adept at finding lovely places to camp; sheltered, private and often scenically very beautiful. We had some fantastic nights camped in the

desert or on the banks of the Nile and drank our evening sundowners watching the sun go down. We had wonderful starlit nights, how I wished I had learned more about the constellations! We watched shooting stars and the satellites. Accommodation in hotels was more potluck - they ranged from the luxurious in cities such as Istanbul and Addis Ababa to fairly basic.

### **Grasshopper Stew**

The worst was the infamous Nile Hotel in Wadi Haifa, sand floors, hole-in-the-floor loo and a tap over a trough for washing, although the shower wasn't bad! We were woken in the night when a cat being chased by a dog shot in through the window and then straight out again when it encountered a very irate Jeremy! However, we were only bitten by bed bugs once. Wherever we were, bed was fairly early, 8.30-9pm, even if we weren't tired the insects drove us inside our tents. One notorious night I was trying to cook supper and was attacked from all sides by grasshoppers, they kept leaping into the pans no matter how

careful I was. I think I managed to fish most of them out! We didn't see any snakes or scorpions although I always checked my shoes in the morning to make sure nothing had crept in during the night!

Each country has its own special memories; a lovely day touring Budapest; Romania with its pretty villages and churches and a marvellous few hours touring Bucharest with a contact of Jeremy's. We ended the tour driving around Ceausescu's Palace, the second largest building in the world, and for which one sixth of Bucharest was demolished. In Turkey we watched thirty hot air balloons rise above Goreme in Cappadocia and float above and around us; a magical sight. Syria has the most wonderful ancient monuments, Palmyra and the Samaan Citadel where St. Simeon stood on his pillar for 36 years, and the amphitheatre at Bosra. Unfortunately, our abiding memory of Syria is of plastic bags, they were everywhere, covering the fields and roadsides, such a shame.

### **Black and White Deserts**

In Jordan we swam (well, bobbed about!) in the Dead Sea and Hamish and Camilla went to Petra. Egypt, and especially Sinai, was probably my favourite country, wonderful scenery particularly in the Western Desert with the Black and White Deserts, and of course the Pyramids and the Valley of the Kings. Sudan gave us our first experience of terrible roads but again the desert scenery was spectacular. Ethiopia is the most beautiful country. It is amazing to cross the border from Sudan and suddenly, after desert from Syria onwards, the land is green and lush instead of brown and dry. It is very mountainous, on two days

we drove at over 13,500 feet, and around every corner there was a yet more stunning view. In the Simian Mountains we saw the elusive Mountain Ibex; we were standing on a cliff and a small group was about 100 feet directly below us, not the best position for someone with a fear of heights! The churches of Lalibela were the high point of my visit.

### **The Kindness of Strangers**

And then into Kenya and a couple of days at a Safari Camp run by a relation of Hamish's. It was a lovely way to finish our trip, we saw elephant and aardvark. The roads were excellent to Southern Egypt but from Sudan down to about 150 miles north of Nairobi they were horrendous; huge rocks, potholes and corrugations made the going extremely difficult and we were often reduced to driving at 5-10 mph. Despite this, we had very few problems with the cars, three punctures on one vehicle and a failed battery on ours.

One of the memories that will stay with me is how friendly and kind all the people we met were. There was the wonderful Syrian/Armenian who, when we were desperate for diesel (it is so cheap in Syria, 7p per litre, that it is all being smuggled out to neighbouring countries and we couldn't find fuel anywhere) insisted on **giving** us 60 litres each and would not accept any payment. Then the delightful Sudanese farmer who let us camp in his field on the banks of the Nile and sat and had tea and chatted, even though we had no Arabic and he no English!. It made me realize that, despite what we read in the papers and see on the television, the world is really a very nice and safe place.

But it is lovely to be home in Shipton!

**Gail Huntingford**