

The Journal



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Chapter 5: Nigeria, Cameroon & Chad

Day 40: Birnin Konni to Kano, Nigeria

Because of the mechanical problems, we had decided against the Lake Chad (off road) route and opted instead to chance our arm in Nigeria (according to some a nightmare due to constant police stops, where they demand money). Partly because we were keen not to draw attention to ourselves, and partly because we wanted to reach Kano that day and were unsure how long it might take, we got up at dawn and were 'on the road again' by seven.

Just before the border we filled both vehicles and all our Jerry cans as Nigeria is supposed to have frequent fuel shortages. With some trepidation headed for the border post. The Niger side was fine and the initial Nigeria police check no problem. At the customs check however we started to see what people had been talking about. On the wall was a list of all the items you're not allowed to import: medications, air compressors, bottled water etc. Basically a license to print money if you're so inclined. Fortunately for us, only one custom official caused us any real difficulty, insisting for a gift to avoid him searching Bert and Ernie. Given that if all of the 'contraband' had been found we were sure the fines would be equally ridiculous we reached an amicable solution.

Next hurdle were the police checks which are at regular (often every 20km) intervals and where we had heard they often ask for money. We decided that only slowing slightly (NOT stopping), smiling, waving and a loud 'hello' would be our approach and it worked remarkable well, only actually having to stop twice. Even when we stopped and they inevitably asked for a gift, a polite 'no' always meant they waved us on our way. They even occasionally asked if we were there to observe the election.



Elections Nigerian Style

Kano is a city of about 3 million people and attempting to navigate around it to the State Campsite with nothing but the Lonely Planet at dusk on a Friday proved fun. Miraculously it only took about an hour and a half. At the campsite we were told due to the local elections throughout the country the next day, the Government had banned all non-essential road travel and that it was possible/likely we wouldn't get through the police checks between eight and three.

Over dinner that night we decided to press on regardless, figuring that we had our green crosses on the vehicles and as white people might be mistaken for election observers or health workers. If we stuck to our police stop method we might get lucky. We decided to leave extra-early so that even if we were stopped at eight we would have at least made a start.

Day 41: Kano to Dakwa

We actually made it up before the call to prayer (five o'clock!) and were on the move by quarter to six. Not surprisingly there wasn't much on the road and to begin with no one at the police check points. As it got to about eight, we started to see more people driving around (not obviously on essential business) and more police. The 'slow slightly, smile and wave' routine again worked very well and when we were stopped (people, usually customs, standing in the middle of the road or waving guns) either the polite 'no', or Giles' technique of asking more than one question at once and taking any 'yes' answer to mean we could drive on, and we again made good progress.

The good road runs out about 80km from the border and turns into a mixture of awful pot-holed tarred road and dirt tracks. Despite promising ourselves an early stop to camp because of our early start, we drove until half past five and camped 10km away from the Nigeria-Chad border. There was very little bush to camp in so we were pretty conspicuous but by that time we were beyond worrying too much. Giles again excelled himself by producing hot dogs for all and along with a sleepy bunch of locusts that roosted in a tree next to us we hit the sack.



Day 42: Dakwa to N'Djamena, Chad

Given it was less than 200km to the border and even though that involved 2 border crossings, we allowed ourselves a late start and a bit of a lie in. It almost felt like how it had sounded in the brochure.

Continuing along the awful road to the Nigeria-Cameroon border we set off at half nine. We didn't have a Cameroon visa but hoped that as the route was only 100km or so through Cameroon we'd be able to arrange a transit visa on the border. This border crossing was easy enough and we weren't even asked for a fee for the visa. The pot-holed road continued for another 80km (we mostly drove on the dirt next to the road); hard work but an opportunity for some good photos and videos. The last few

kilometres to the Chad border is on good road and we were hopeful of making N'Djamena by early afternoon.

Sadly the border officials at the Chad border post had other ideas. Firstly the chief customs officer was away in town and we had to wait for a junior officer to go find him before getting the carnet stamped. Once this had been done, a police officer who we'd had a nice chat with but had refused to give him a gift, spotted Austin put a foot on the concrete flag pole base. According to him, this was a massive faux pas, showing extreme disrespect for his country and meant Austin would have to go to jail. Naturally we all felt that this was a load of rubbish but thought the best approach was profuse apologising and suggesting we might be able to pay a fine instead. Eventually this was agreed (no receipt of course) and saddened we headed the last few kilometres into town.

Because we would be in N'Djamena for a week or more and needed somewhere where Bert and Ernie would be safe we had a trawl around town to find something suitable and decided due to cost and availability to stay at the Sahara Hotel - Air Con at night and a guard who would watch the cars.

Day 43 to 45: N'Djamena

Andy had a wedding to go to and so booked flights back home to leave on the Wednesday. We took Bert to almost every garage in N'Djamena (no Land Rover specialist) and found that everything was normal (turbo function, compression testing, timing belt etc) - still no cause. At the last garage (the Toyota specialist) they said they would check the intercooler and clean the injectors for us as a last resort. On the positive side, Andy had been to the Central African Republic Ambassador's house and arranged visas for us all.

The temperature was now reaching over 45⁰C during the day and not falling below 35⁰C at night so much of the middle of the day was spent either by the Novotel pool (in the shade) or in Austin and Giles' Novotel room (they moved after a couple of days at the Sahara). In the evening we spent most of our time discovering N'Djamena's quite staggeringly good array of restaurants.



On the Wednesday evening we took Andy down to the Airport and said goodbye for the next week.

Day 46 to 48: N'Djamena

On going back to the garage we were told they hadn't found anything wrong but perhaps by taking it all apart and putting it back again, maybe we would see an improvement. Only we didn't. Instead, Bert had started knocking and producing lots of black smoke, and worryingly difficult to start. In fact impossible, stranding us outside our intended lunch spot. Jumping in Ernie and racing back to the ,now closed garage, we managed to get hold of the mechanic who came back to Bert. Rather interestingly he immediately took off all the injectors and raced off to have them

cleaned. A service we had already paid for...hmmm. Approximately 3 hours later he returned with another mechanic and replaced the parts, to no avail. Much head scratching they eventually removed the fuel stop solenoid and Bert roared into life now smoking in his "usual" fashion and the knocking had subsided, but stopping him involved stalling! During this time we met two Americans whose journeys had taken them through southern Sudan building schools, and they were planning to return in 3 weeks, but might possibly link up with us and leave early, more the merrier! "Stalling" Bert back at the hotel feeling somewhat disheartened we collapsed into a welcome cold beer and planned our strategy to get Bert back to health. Low and behold the aforementioned "comedy" mechanic turned up with a replacement solenoid, sourced at 7 o'clock, something smelled wrong. Adamant that we should not go back to the garage the following day, he duly replaced it, but the problem remained. Food, beer and sleep seemed the best approach.

Following day we reasoned an electrical problem, and returned to the garage. Once there we found all smiles and our comedy mechanic nowhere. Twenty minutes of Giles' rapidly improving mechanical French and the mechanic got to work. Incredibly it was discovered that the ignition connection had worked loose, an entirely separate problem, solved in a fabulous African way. Sourcing a Series three ignition barrel they rewired and cut a new hole in the steering column to accept it. Much like the Millennium Falcon we now have a two key start up system! Bert was back! Evidently the original comedy mechanic had been trusted to get the injectors cleaned, an operation that required him going into town, which he clearly had not done. Fortunately Bert seemed to know this and threw off his ignition connection in disgust, catching comedy mechanic out and getting his injectors cleaned as a result. We await to see if the power returns....

Day 49: N'Djamena



Palm Sunday and therefore we reasoned a day of rest. Giles and Austin spent the middle of the day by the pool and Duncan the day in bed after a nasty bout of Chadian D&V. Austin, the man who never burns or peels, promptly burned and began to peel – that'll be sitting out in 45⁰C sun at midday for you. A quiet evening and we hoped that with our leader due to return shortly we would be back on our way within no time.

Day 50: N'Djamena

We'd decided to check into a different hotel in order to ensure that we could all be in the same place when Andy got back that night so most of the day was taken up in moving around (we've started moving almost as slowly as the locals). Austin had noticed a thorn had wedged into the rubber of one of Ernie's tyres so we planned to change it and see if there was a leak once the thorn was removed. Given our previous attempt at jacking the car (see Nouakchott) we decided this would be best done on the flat tarmac of the hotel car park in the cooler evening.

We're now no longer surprised by the mechanical peculiarities of Bert and Ernie, so it was just about par for the course when, on moving Ernie to the tarmac about half of his coolant emptied onto the floor. Opening the bonnet we saw that the fan had come clean off, because of the bearing fusing at a jaunty angle, and that water was leaking from, we thought, one of the coolant hoses. After changing the hose however, Ernie was still leaking and we thought perhaps it was coming from one of the aluminium connecting tubes. Thoroughly disheartened we realised that we needed another trip to the garage in the morning.

Day 51: N'Djamena

Andy's plane landed at four a.m. and we hoped that his return might herald an upturn in our fortunes. Certainly we felt reasonably pleased that given the sight of Duncan's illness ravaged features and the news of Bert & Ernie falling apart by the minute he didn't just get straight back on the plane home.

The garage had good news, however. The leak was due to a fault in the water pump, not the aluminium hose, which would have been almost impossible to weld. The water pump needed renewing but they were confident they could source and fit one by the next day and would be able to find an 'African' solution to our bent fan bearing. Just as it was all looking up however, on the way into town in Bert, his engine starting cutting in and out. Not another problem. Back to the garage to be told that fuel was leaking from the injectors that had been cleaned last week - evidently on replacing the injectors the old washers had been used instead of replacing them with new ones as necessary. Again the fault of what we hoped was one rouge mechanic at the garage (the other mechanics have been thoroughly confidence inspiring). The garage promised that this could also be rectified the next day. We would see.

It was good to have the four boys back together again, and armed with the Sudan permits and assistance Andy's Dad had managed to source we all started to feel a little more confident about the route.

Day 52: N'Djamena

The morning saw us once again making the familiar journey back to the garage hoping to find good news waiting for us.

We found Ernie looking much healthier than before with a brand new (if slightly different, series III) fan fitted. We asked the mechanics to tighten up the still leaking injection points on Bert in the vain hope that this may reduce the clouds of smoke that he had been producing. In the meantime we refitted the mudguard onto Bert's front wing, hoping this drastic change in the aerodynamics might make the all important difference in power. With both vehicles now driving in a similar fashion to our arrival in N'Djamena we decided to call it a day with the modifications. They now seem to have absorbed enough series III parts to qualify as having changed their identity irreversibly.

Having now worked out the Millennium Falcon style multiple key ignition system on Bert we scuttled back to the hotel to unpack, clean and repack the vehicles. After what felt like a long day of jobs we collapsed in a pensive mood awaiting the scheduled departure the following day.

Day 53: N'Djamena to Moundou

Wanting to get a good distance covered we left fairly early in the morning, leaving the heady delights of N'Djamena behind us we were on the road again. With the strains of Hillbilly Symmes' rendition of 'On the Road Again' (somewhat of an anthem) in our ears we found ourselves slipping back into the routine of the road, we crossed the river and were pleasantly surprised to be waved through the first of the police checkpoints.



Traffic leaving N'Djamena

The tarmac road remained in good condition for the day and we made our way past trucks loaded in a fashion that contravened several laws of physics. Having taken advice on the route we took the road via Kelo and were somewhat disturbed to see vast, heavy rain clouds building on the horizon.

Shortly after Kelo the road turned into a dirt track of reasonable condition and much to our concern the clouds started to deliver their load as we saw the first rain since northern Morocco. Given we were not expecting the rains to start in that area until May this was not encouraging.

As the light began to fade at around 5 we started looking for possible camping sites. Outside of a town we saw an open area that we pulled off into and headed a little way away from the road to avoid being seen. We camped for the evening in an area that we weren't entirely convinced wasn't a tribal meeting ground, still it seemed to serve us well and we attempted to get back into the routine.



Stopping for diesel in Moundou

We were entertained that evening by a colossal electrical storm in the south that dramatically lit up the night sky.