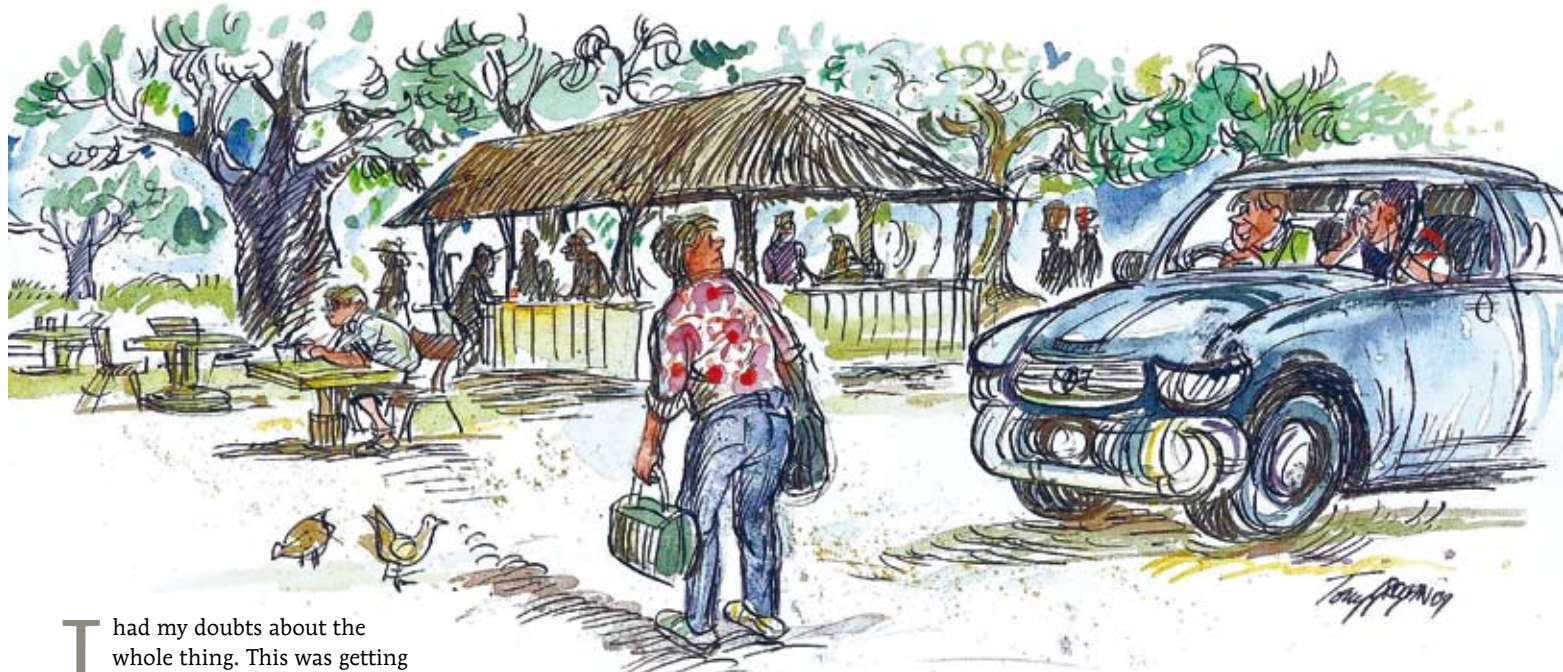


Surprise, surprise!

It's one thing to pay your friends an unexpected visit, but quite another to pull this off when they're travelling overland, writes Richard Asher.



ILLUSTRATIONS TONY GROGAN

I had my doubts about the whole thing. This was getting really costly and I'd had to beg a couple of days off work at short notice. I had a nasty feeling I'd promised someone I'd do something that weekend. And if I went, I would miss the rugby.

But I knew I'd never forgive myself if I backed out now. I'd made way too much effort.

If I was going to go all that way, though, I really had to make it a surprise. When I'd thrown myself before the boss and claimed this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, it wasn't just desperate bleating for leave. This visit had to be as memorable as could be.

My dear friends Scott and Laura were in the middle of a seven-month overland trip around southern Africa. They had set off from Cape Town in their Toyota Hilux five months earlier and motored through Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Now they were home-

ward bound, somewhere in Zambia. I'd been getting SMS updates almost every day, all the more envy-inducing for the fact that I was usually in the confines of the office when these little missives arrived.

Why hadn't I joined them on the trip?

Ah yes, the office had an iron grip on my life.

Why hadn't I at least gone and met up with them for a weekend?

Umm, no imagination? Never thought about it? Too busy living? Idiot!

It wasn't too late! There was still time, but I had better do it now, before they left Africa. Or, if you prefer, before they got to Namibia and South Africa.

It was time to act. They'd be edging into Botswana any day now. I could have made it easy for myself by telling them I was coming and arranging an

airport pick-up, but that would fly in the face of fun. And so I set about organising my long-distance surprise party.

I had to move fast. The weekend I'd earmarked for my drop-in was a mere 10 days away. The first thing was to get Scott's mom on board. At my prompting, she'd surreptitiously found out her son's proposed movements over the next couple of weeks, without giving away who actually wanted the information.

Inevitably the travellers smelt a rat, but it was a very slight whiff. And it certainly didn't smell like me, because I was sending plenty of news about my big plans for the weekend – all of which involved staying in Cape Town.

The cards fell nicely. They'd be in the Okavango on my chosen weekend. That meant they were somewhere near an airport – I knew Maun was the regional tourist centre. But how did one get to Maun?

At considerable expense, it turned out.

Only one airline flew to Maun – Air Botswana – and then only from Johannesburg. I picked up the phone and called them. The process of booking a ticket with Air Botswana was quaint – it involved faxes – but there was a certain old-world excitement to it all.

Then I found a cheap flight to Joburg. It seemed I was sorted. I was really going to do this! Until a drama with my flat's security gate threatened to ruin it all.

Locked out of my apartment with two hours to take-off, passport and baggage still inside, the trip was looking like a pricey and embarrassing non-starter. But at times like this, you quickly learn there's not much an emergency locksmith can't sort out for R450.

A day later I touched down in Maun, praying that my friends hadn't taken it upon themselves

to spontaneously drive to Sudan whilst I'd been stuffing myself with pizza in Rosebank and sucking on complimentary Air Botswana mints.

Now I had to find their campsite – and I didn't have much of a plan.

I had only the vaguest directions to the Old Bridge Camp. All I knew was that it was 10km out of Maun, and I'd be somewhere close when I got to the bridge on the Thamalakane River. That was it. Seemingly there wasn't even a prominent scarecrow to guide me on my way. But I kind of liked it that way. I felt like an explorer.

And so this modern-day Livingstone stepped out of the airport terminal at Maun and into darkest, unknown Bechuanaland... which turned out to be disappointingly tame.

There was a bundle of touristy shops across the road from the quiet little airport. Too easy. It didn't take long to get directions. I'd just need to walk a couple of hundred metres up to the main road, which happened to be the road that would lead to the camp.

I felt out of place in the hot sun with my executive shoulder bag. Even more so when I hailed a minibus taxi, something I'd never done in South Africa. I'd been assured that there was only one road and all the taxis went along it, so I couldn't go wrong. Besides, I was officially in travel mode, which is the time for new experiences. So in I got and settled down for the ride.

I'd heard good things about Botswana, and I began to see why on this taxi journey. People greeted each other on the taxi, and enquired about each other's health. The children on their way home from school seemed quiet and diligent. And nobody gave me funny looks.

Sensing we'd done 10km, I looked out for the bridge. It was an easy spot, so I called a halt and jumped out. I fished around for a few pula and gave it to the "conductor". Do they call

them *guardjies* around here? It's not impossible – they really like speaking Afrikaans in Botswana. Still can't work out why.

I could see a sign to the camp: I was faced with a walk of several hundred metres down a dirt road to get there. I had to be cautious, ready to dive into the bush. Having got this far, I really didn't want to be spotted by my friends as they returned from a shopping trip. I wanted to appear on my own terms.

I carefully entered the camp gates. That's when I realised that I'd never actually seen their Hilux. That made it hard to do the sneaking-up thing.

For a moment I was lost, trying to figure out where everything was. And so it happened that I that got sneaked-up-on.

It had been a while since I'd seen my friends, and I expected changes in appearance after all those months on the road. Long beards, faces coated in dust, panda eyes... that sort of thing. So when I saw a man with the right colour hair sitting at one of the outdoor bar's distant picnic tables, I figured it might be Scott.

But as I stood in the middle of the car park, screwing up my eyes and calculating how I could spring a surprise when he had his back to what I assumed was a croc-infested river, I heard whoops and squeals behind me. I turned to see a Toyota Hilux not 20m away, and my two overlander friends charging towards me...

Thousands of kilometres by car, plane, taxi and on foot to spring a surprise, and I got spotted first.

For pity's sake!

Still, I reckoned I'd scored a moral victory. I may not have managed to leap out from behind an anthill – clearly my ambush

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skills needed work – but my arrival had shock value nonetheless.

I'd been wrong about Scott and Laura having a grimy look, though. They'd obviously nosed out plenty of showers, and it turned out the Hilux even had a mobile washing machine of sorts. I was grimmer than they were.

The camp was an interesting place. Along with the usual quota of European backpackers, the bar area had a small crowd of local regulars – a curious collection of men with ponytails, cowboy hats and polka-dot scarves. They regularly screeched up the drive with music blaring from their bakkies, but rapidly took on a mournful air once they had their first beer in hand.

"Space cadets," Scott said, rolling his eyes.

But we didn't want to hang around the bar. Of more interest was being able to pick our way past the sleeping kitchen dogs and wander along the banks of the river.

The vast swarms of birds rollicking in the cool air at sunset provided ample entertainment. It was magical to walk along the quiet tracks around the camp, stopping for the odd impromptu game of bush cricket.

Having come all this way, I also had to see the Okavango itself.

This we did by dugout, gliding among the lilies on a perfect blue-sky African day. We beached the dugout on an island and then hiked among elephants and zebras. Unforgettable!

Before I knew it, it was time to catch my flight home. I had only been there for two full days. But with the loud thud of a Botswana exit stamp hitting my passport still ringing in my ears, I knew I'd been right: I'd had to come.

And I'd learnt something: When in doubt, just go! ■

