



Plants and Healers

African Journey

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Journey through Southern Africa

Winter 2006

I had traveled through Southern Africa three years earlier for five months and was excited to return and grow forth the seeds that had been planted before. On this month-long journey I was accompanied by six other intrepid travelers.

Near the turn of the year I arrived in London hoping to visit Kew and Chelsea Botanical Gardens. I had the honor of visiting Kew Botanical Gardens twice and was blown out by its huge conservatories of plants from all over the world, including a big collection from Africa. I had been to Kew a number of times but each visit takes my breath away. Finally I was able to spend a day at the Chelsea Physic Gardens (est. 1671).

I was overcome by emotion when I sat in these gardens dedicated to the medicine plants of Europe and the world. A must visit for plant people. Both these places humbled me and blew my mind on so many levels. I look forward to my next chance to visit them.

Early in the New Year I flew through the night to Cape Town and met up with two of my travel companions, Julie and Morgaine. We had a few days before the next of our crew arrived and planned to use that time well. The next day we walked for seven hours over Table Mountain with a view of the Cape of Good Hope. We walked along the (table)top of the mountain, which is all fynbos ecosystem, then down into Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens—one of the finest plant collections in the world.

That walk really grounded me. I had done the walk a couple of times before and it brought me a lot of joy to relive the experience. I was excited to find again two insectivorous plant species along the top.

My brother Ken arrived the next day and we four had some quality time with my American/South African family, the Volkwijns. In addition to Kay-Robert and Desire, we were blessed to be joined by their daughter, Lynne-Corinne, an old friend of mine. We shared teas, meals, stories, and ideas on several occasions that will be remembered fondly.

Kay-Robert guided us through a couple of the townships, a somber look at life in the slums. In our white, rented KAI van named Moby, the four of us visited Cape Point and on the way back we communed with the jackass penguins, mischievous baboons, and those strange flightless birds, ostriches. Cape Point fills me with energy coming from being that base of the continent with two huge bodies of water coming together.



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We ate a sandy lunch on a windy beach near by. The ocean revealed some of the most intense shades of blue I have ever seen. We harvested a trip's worth of nori seaweed from the seaside.

We also had a couple of hours interviewing a white sangoma named Naill whom I had first met in Botswana three years before. It was good to hear his views on the sangoma practices, as well as watch how each in the group asked questions. I was glad to hear that his school is doing well and that he had traveled to Colombia since our last meeting.

On the eleventh we picked up Chris from the airport and swooped him off to visit the oldest vineyard in the Cape, Groot Constantia—for tastings, then an evening picnic on the beautiful grounds. Later that night we picked up Mycol at the airport and headed off to Namibia.

We drove through the night and arrived late the next morning at the Ai-Ais hot springs on the southern end of the Fish River Canyon. We were blessed with a big hot-spring fed pool, date-laden palms, and a comfortable campsite for our first circle as a group. We went for an early evening walk along the Fish River, taking in a nice variety of plants at its heavily silted edges.

The next day we drove a hundred km to the north end of the canyon and were treated to the African equivalent of the Grand Canyon—one of the biggest canyons in the world. Then on we drove to the famous kokerboom (quivertree) forest—tree-size aloes with a golden shimmering bark. These trees live to be several hundred years old and we played a couple of hours in the largest known grove of them. We were even treated to a long-lasting rainbow!

Our group was quickly learning how to be a tribe together. Music was a big part of most people's realities. Fortunately both Chris and Julie brought music devices we could play through the stereo. Morgaine brought a guitar, and we all had voices. Music expressed itself in many ways along the journey.

We hoped to catch Namibia's #1 attraction, the Sossusvlei Sand Dunes, at sunrise. This required us driving off into the middle of nowhere through the night. On the drive we had all sorts of encounters with animals and humans. None-the-less we appeared at the gates before two am and managed a few hours of sleep before they opened at sunrise. Once day began we got ourselves unstuck from the sand and drove an hour into the park to reach the dunes.

The early morning light casts amazing shadows and a wide range of pink to orange colors. We quickly dispersed into the dunes for several hours of other worldliness. Everyone returned slowly for a tasty lunch and then a day drive to Swakopmund. On the way we stopped for a bit for petrol in the town of Solitaire with some amazing succulents planted



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and a nice bookshop. We arrived at Swakopmund not long before sunset after a day of traveling through otherworldly landscapes.

Fortunately we found some camping spots at the Desert Sky Lodge and also ran into a friend of a friend named Mike. He joined us the next day on our excursion to see the Welwitschia. I felt blessed to once again meet with the Welwitschia, amazing elders of the plant kingdom. I got as much joy watching the others in my company get acquainted with them as with my own delight.

We eventually came to the end of a road in the middle of nowhere and before us was one of the elders in a big fenced-in area (for his protection or ours?). We all had some intimate time with a cluster of them off a ways in the desert. Then our group dispersed for personal experiences with the beings.

I climbed a hill finding beautiful offerings every few feet. I was delighted to see some bushman's candle (a plant that burns like wax) still standing. The gravel floodplains provided home to many plants and other creatures. I was tricked seeing the remains of old Welwitschias resembling crusty polypores. These beings are with me wherever I go.

On the way to the Welwitschia we had some good moments with lichens, of which there are many here, and with all the rock formations. There was a nice collection of plants in the Swakop arroyo (where you can camp). But of course the wondrous Welwitschia stole the show.

As a group we had gotten to a good place in communication and making decisions. One important group decision was hearing from Mike that he wanted to join on to the trip for a while. We all discussed it and decided it was a good idea. Our meals became rich and nutritious as we got into a groove. Meals were made on a two-burner stove. Everyone contributed to the meals along the way. We shared at least one communal meal a day with very good use of leftovers. We had fruit each morning and someone often made a porridge. For most of the trip we had kimchi or sauerkraut going. We harvested acorns in Cape Town and processed them along the way. (The San loved them.) Sprouts happened several times.

Tea happened more often when our RSA, Mike, showed up. I believe afternoon tea is a wonderful ritual. After a while we even made the dates we picked into a nice wine.

We took off for Etosha Game Reserve, driving all day through a cloudy northern Namibia, our circle having grown to seven. We arrived at the main gate half an hour before closing. We raced on to the camp (which they close at sunset), stopping a moment to take up the splendor of a few giraffes. That night we received a huge rainstorm but the earth absorbed it quickly.



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Early the next morning we headed out to a day filled with exciting moments spotting many animals (and some plants too!) doing their thing. We saw countless springbok bouncing about. There were herds of zebra, and by the end we had had our fill of giraffes. One big moment was having some time to really watch three hyenas circling our van looking for prey. I will not soon forget their white-less black eyes.

I am so awe-struck when I see the forward look of the oryx, of which we saw many. We drove out into the seemingly endless salt zone of the Etosha Pan in the middle of a storm. The weather added to the sense of isolation I felt out there in a world of white (in our white van!). We soon headed back to the lush savanna.

Once the sun came out, so did a pride of lions, who checked us out as much as we did them. These mammals stand out to me amongst the diverse array of fauna (including reptiles and birds) that presented themselves to us that day.

We drove from the park in the late afternoon for supplies in Tsumeb, then on toward the San (bushmen). Providence took us to Roy's Rest Camp, conveniently located near the turn to the San. This lush oasis greeted us with kindness through the hands of the caretakers there. They set us up well with all of our needs being met and topped it off with a nature trail tree map around their place. One of our crew was down sick and he along with everyone seemed to benefit with slowing down a bit here.

The next afternoon we visited the San village of Grasshoek. These people were out six miles from the main road on 4wd sand. Our van seemed up for it and generally we did well, only getting stuck twice. This village of about 200 greeted us warmly and after some negotiations agreed to spend time with us over the next day. We set up camp with rain all around. Once the storms passed somewhat, a number of the villagers appeared in traditional dress with their crafts and voices. I enjoyed their singing around the fire. The medicine men, and hunters and gatherers gathered about, dancing and sharing. We shared foods with them and absorbed what we could of their culture. That night the rains really came down. About half of us slept in the van. I was taken back to my youth building trenches in the sand to keep us from getting flooded out.

The next day was clear and bright. We were in a savanna with African teak (*Pterocarpus*) and *manketti* (*Schinziophyton*) all about. Manketti is certainly one of my botanical wows for this trip. You can eat the seed of this euphorb as well as extract cooking oil from it. Its wood is prized and its bark is used to make soap, only a few of its benefits to us. The San appeared early the next morning and we gathered with them to share some of their skills and crafts including fire making, ostrich shell bead making, fiber processing, and tool making. We shared smokes and soon headed off to explore the bush.

Four guides accompanied us -- two sister with their babies and three brothers. They showed us a couple of dozen plants in a real "dig them up and taste them" way. The sisters also shared their knowledge of plants. This was refreshing to see, as the San



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women are often more aloof. At one point an elder woman was called in for clarity on the name of a plant. Our guide, Mathew, explained that the adults had to be re-taught the plants and were still learning.

After a couple of hours we made our way back to the traditional camp. We shared more of our food. They offered to give us a tour of their current village. We accepted and spent a couple of hours meeting their elders and fellow villagers. We listened to two kinds of instruments made by local craftsmen and we illustrated for them some yoga asanas. Several from our group were ready to move in. We were blessed to meet a healthy village of modern San. I look forward to returning sometime.

We drove back that night for another round of Roy's Camp before heading out the next morning for Zambia. We traveled the Caprivi Strip seeing elephants in the latter part of the day. During that drive we held two of our eight affinity circles. It was suggested that we try to have affinity circles while driving and that ended up working out well. In addition to daily check in circles, every few days someone from our circle would facilitate a topic. The topics were of all sorts, from suggestions of the group. I would say the most impacting circle was each of us sharing two significant experiences from our lives. The most energized circle was around intimate relationships. There were circles on plant knowledge, and world history and personality tests, etc. There were a lot more ideas than time for circles. But it seemed everyone got a lot out of those eight we were able to have.

We ended up camping that night at the border where I had camped three years earlier. It felt wonderful to be in the tropical zone. Up with the sun, we crossed first into Botswana seeing baobabs and more elephants. Then traveling over to the ferry to cross the Zambezi River into Zambia. We were fortunate to find a place to park our van near the ferry. (We could not bring the van into Zambia due to rental car policies.) We hitched a ride in the back of a big truck into Livingstone. It was great for our group to leave the security of the van for a few days.

We checked in at the Jollyboy Backpackers and got straightened away for a pick up out to Bovu Island the next afternoon. We checked out the market scene around town, finding wild mushrooms (termite mushrooms, chanterelles and waxy caps –Yum) for sale and ate them that night for dinner. We also shopped for a couple of day's worth of food for the island. That night we finally got around to sharing what medicines each of us had brought to stay healthy. We were quite the mobile apothecary.

I will be forever grateful for any opportunity to visit Victoria Falls. Truly these falls must have inspired baptisms. Each visitor is drenched in spray leaving with smiles covering their faces. On sunny days there are rainbows everywhere! Imagine that....

On this visit I was amazed by the diversity of life out on the rims of the canyon. I especially noted a lot of vines and other green lush beings clinging to the rim. I recorded



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as many as I could on wet paper and camera. Some of us walked the back of the rim for different vantage points. I was delighted to watch two from our group prance about taking pictures of so many butterflies. We also encountered troops of baboons. One mother made a grab for my bag but did not get it. Unfortunately we lost one from our crew for a couple of hours. It took some time and energy to reconnect but thankfully they were fine.

That afternoon we headed out to Bovu Island. This small island -- only a couple of kms long and less wide -- is in the middle of the Zambezi River 30 km east of Livingstone and then south on 4wd roads for 11 km. We arrived via canoe to the island, landing at the (sand)bar for our free beer. Night was soon coming so we received a quick introduction then were whooshed off to find a camp spot and have dinner.

I had a chance to catch up with the local plant expert, Evelyn. We had met on my last visit and I had looked forward to some additional time together with the plants. The next morning we went with Evelyn for a walk on the mainland with the local healer, Dr. John. Our interpreter was one of Bovu Is's right-hand men, Godfrey. We saw many important medicine trees and gathered enough greens for a tasty dish for lunch. I was glad people got a look at the marula, mopane, and African mangosteen trees among others. Some of the key plants from that region let us see them that day.

Dr. John is truly a treasure to his community. He said he had learned from his elders. I was glad to see Godfrey learning from his elder as we all were. Afterwards we traveled back to the island for lunch, a short break and an affinity circle on the 10 most common tree families in S. Africa. Evelyn attended and added a lot through familiarity with the trees around. She promised to show us many of the trees the next day. That afternoon the island was treated to an African drum workshop and then most went off for a sunset canoe trip while dinner was being prepared.

The next morning we met early to avoid being out in the heat of the day—Jan 20th is high summer here. Evelyn led us to the bottom of the island, showing us a diverse forest over less than a kilometer of land, including an old baobab. Many small mushrooms were popping up all over, catching our interests. We saw many of the tree families we had talked about the day before. Before lunch we sat at Evelyn's and held a plant research circle going through her references. We ate up most of our stores at our noonday meal and headed back to Botswana across the ferry and reuniting with Moby.

The sick one in our crew showed a good recovery in tropical Zambia. We drove south that evening stopping soon after dark at a rest camp. We had been advised not to drive at night in Botswana, due to the presence of many elephants and mules and other beings wandering about. The next day we headed out early for our long journey to Gaborone. After many whimsical twists of fate we made it to my friend Charles's house, a fabulous prankster. He looked after us while we were in the area and showed us a fabulous time with his friend Phillip.



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We had formed a loving family circle by two weeks into our trip and it was hard to already say aloha to our RSA friend, Mike. But he needed to catch up with his duty on one of the Greenpeace ships. (At the end of the trip we got to reunite with Mike in Cape Town and receive a wonderful tour of his ship the Esperanza. I felt I was with the kind rebel forces in Star Wars!) So off he flew.

In Gaborone we spent the day with a couple of sangomas (native healers)—Seipone and Ismael. Several in our circle had bones thrown for them. They gave us a nice overview of what it is like to be a sangoma in the modern world.

The next day we zoomed into RSA visiting another capitol, Pretoria, to check out their botanical gardens. Here we hooked up with our host, Paul. We did a nice tour of the gardens, enjoyed a picnic and took shelter in the medicine huts during the afternoon downpour. We then headed to Johannesburg for a night landing at a young permaculture outpost. We spent the next day helping to host a permaculture circle, with 22 of us attending. We toured the gardens, opening up to the weeds and medicine beings. Then we sat and shared knowledge on wild foods, fermentation, tincture making, and mushroom identification, et cetera. Everyone seemed to get what they came for. I enjoyed feeling the experience as a reminder that revolutions are happening all over Gaia and that the time is now.

That evening we drove about four hours out from the big city into the province called The Free State with lots of open land and big sky. Our destination was Rustlers Valley. A friend from my first trip, Eidin and her son Juno, accompanied us, sharing stories and memories. My previous trips to this valley had left a memorable impact on my life walk. I was excited to share this vortex with the circle. For us everything flowed smoothly.

We were lucky to have Dale Millard as our host. He shared ongoing lessons on ethnobotany, entheogens, insects, snakes, phytochemistry, and a whole lot more. I asked him lots of plant questions. We ate fresh fruit, wild plants, and mushrooms galore from the abundant gardens. Though we only had a couple of days, they were rich with a day of hikes and time in the garden.

On the walk to the sangoma's eye I was amazed by the flora of disputably the birthplace of Homo sapiens. The land felt old and scoured over. We found a memorable Clematis whose crushed inhalation radically opens the upper sinuses. Most of the circle tried it. We also came across some Withania. I love this plant, who is also known as ashwaganda of Ayurvedic fame. I know I still have so much to learn about this being. &nb sp. We came back along the ridge after sitting a while in the eye-shaped outcropping. There were wonderful views each way. From the ridge we could see far and wide. Then we came down again near the encampment and went on to make dinner.

The next day we traveled to Sangoma Mountain to learn through Dale's eyes the wonder and the plight if this holy mountain of the sangoma. This place is not a relic but a living



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community of sangomas from all over RSA teaching and healing together. I enjoyed returning to this sacred place where people are living fully into one of the oldest healing systems on the planet. Everyone seemed greatly moved by our time there.

It was hard to leave Rustlers Valley. On top of that we were also saying namaste to Chris. He wanted more of that scene before heading north to a permaculture internship in Zimbabwe. We traveled into town for supplies, then on the way to the third capitol of RSA, Bloomfontein, we began to have overheating problems. We fortunately found an angel mechanic who knew these vans. There was a cloud with that lining in that there was a hot steam accident that burned him and Michael. He recovered and cleaned all the mud that had accumulated up in the radiator. This helped things immensely and soon we were back on the road heading south through the Karoo Desert at night. By mid-morning we were back in Cape Town. The van left us quickly and easily.

We had some time on Table Mt as a group and a memorable dinner at Mama Africa restaurant. Over the next week everyone flew off. Michael flew on toward Ghana. The rest back to NC and MD.

P.S.- I am now hard at work revising my first draft of the Africa book with the addition of this recent experience. I hope to have some copies available this summer. Please reply to this write up with your thoughts of what areas from this narrative that you would like to know more about. This will influence my revisions. Thanks. FC