

Tanzania Day 1: how was your day at the office?

Day 1 - not going well. 5am start in Nairobi - check. Flight over Kilimanjaro - check. Car waiting at airport - check. Takes credit card as promised - nope. Hack Tanzanian cashpoint to get enough cash to pay. Buy sim card: simple, but not instant (forms!). And off.. to mall to get cheap camera and supplies. Cheapest camera = 220000 ksh (\$130). Asked \$80000ksh for bugspray and sunblock. Decide to buy supplies in tourist area upcountry. But first, driver1 has forgotten the car's id docs - an issue on a road with policement every mile or two.

And so we get into the first traffic jam (10 mins): the president's mother lives nearby, and visits his mother every weekend (even presidents aren't immune to this). Everything stops as his cavalcade drives past – except today it's the vice-president visiting. Second traffic jam: 10 minutes for a busy traffic junction in Dar – the traffic policeman routes us onto a lane full of motorbikes coming towards us, and we test the 4x4 going offroad to get round a car stuck in front of us. And onto the main road out of Dar, and from Tanzania to Zambia, Malawi and Congo. Third traffic jam: 10 minutes as everything stops, and the president's cavalcade dashes past. The rainy season has started, and we hear that the road is damaged ahead. Fourth traffic jam: we drive past a long line of stopped trucks, to where the president is inspecting a subsidence (kind of a deep wrinkle across the road) – everyone is walking forward out of their cars to see and hear him.

And then the fifth traffic jam. Everything stops. For miles. We drive past lines of trucks, then cars, then buses (there are people everywhere now) then cars. We stop on a bridge – below us, a group of Masai are stood on the riverbank, watching the trafficjam like tourists. We're told that the road ahead is flooded, and a channel's being cut to divert the floodwater: perhaps a 1-2 hour wait for this to be done. Motorbikes and big 4x4s with snorkels swarm past us: I make a mental note to hire something with a snorkel next time. As we drive forward past the stopped cars, a passerby shouts that the problem is "too much crocodiles". Everyone laughs; we're all stuck, and this is rapidly becoming a social occasion. A vanload of traffic police drive past in the opposite direction – perhaps they've given up? It rains again, and we sit and wait for news. And the president returns – slowly this time because there's no room left on the road to go fast. Merchants appear, selling fresh-roasted cashewnuts, which I eat looking at the trees they came from (and smelling the next batch roasting). I read the boring textbook about javascript that I've been avoiding, chat with Nicky (the driver that Esther insisted I had for Tanzania) and people-watch. I learn that Masai carry a stick and an umbrella (and a gust of wind reveals a silky pair of pale-blue boxershorts. I learn how useful traditional dress is when a girl has to go off into the bush. I learn Kiswahili for "white" and "cashew" and "bugger off, we're not paying that".

It's now 4 hours since we parked on the bridge (we're now at two lanes of parked traffic, with the 4x4s and motorbikes still swarming past), and we start to move., hopeful. People drive past the jam, taking video of it on their mobile phones. My own phone dies (add to shopping list: car charger for phone).

We hear that the bridge is clear now, but a line of cars has overtaken the waiting buses, and another line of cars has overtaken that one, on both sides of the bridge. The main route from Tanzania to Kenya now has 3 lanes of static traffic (4 or 5 if you count the bikes; 5 if you count the 4x4s creating a new cross-country trail) with nowhere to go, and no traffic police in sight. It's going to be a long time getting over this bridge.

7.5 hours after entering the trafficjam, we see what it's all about. First, we drive down onto the river's floodplain: it's dark now, and there's water either side, with crocodile eyes reflecting in knobbly heads just enough distance away to be menacing but hard to see. The the water – first a static flood across half the road; not moving, nothing to worry about. Then it's moving, and quickly becomes a torrent, sideways across the road, getting deeper and deeper as we cross until we reach two trucks stranded on their sides, motorbikes piled across their chassis. This isn't a good sign; I start regretting my earlier "just line up the crocs" jokes, and wonder who the god of angry rivers is hereabouts.

Then we're through, breathless, stunned that we just tried that (but after 7 hours' wait, what the heck) – and stop again. We're stalled on the other side of the river by a mirror of the lines of cars that we just left. We're hungry and thirsty – and by luck, stranded in the middle of the night market that many people had come to in the morning before the river broke over the road. I learn how to jostle for drinks with Masai tribesmen (British hard stare doesn't work, waving money at barkeep does), and Nicky and I settle into trafficjam number 6 (a van has broken down on the road ahead of us). We move at last, and drive past the jam on the other side of the bridge. This goes on for miles. People are sleeping in front of their trucks, and in the roadside near buses. And I'm quietly struck by the thought that this is what a crisis evacuation looks like- the jams, the queues, the rumours, the hope, the decisions: do I stay here with the bus or walk forward in the jams? What do I eat? What should I save just in case? And how can I help other people? The answer to the last one is "with information" – as we drive, Nicky shouts to stranded drivers about the situation, the bridge, and the length of the queue ahead of them.