between the sunlight and the thunder

Like all my safari diaries, this one appeared originally in the Hugo-winning fanzine Lan's Lantern.

by Mike Resnick

August 28, 1990: Between the bright sunlight of East Africa's safari countries, and the ominous thunder coming out of the Republic of South Africa, there exist four nations: Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and Botswana. We had originally hoped to visit all four on this extended safari, but Mozambique is in the throes of a brutal civil war, so we confined ourselves to the other three countries, where I would be researching Purgatory and Ophir, a pair of novels I'll be writing in the next couple of years, and hopefully coming up with some more ideas. This was a unique safari for us, in that we did not arrange to go with a single guide, as we always do in Kenya, nor did we care to join a package tour. Instead, we made a list of all the locations we wanted to see in all three countries, then hunted up a travel agency (we found it, finally, in York, England) that was able to arrange our itinerary. The first step, as always, was the 8-hour flight to London, during which time I did my best not to feel bitter over losing the Hugo after leading for the first five ballots. I didn't quite pull it off.

August 29, 1990: We landed at Gatwick at seven in the morning, took a bus to Heathrow after clearing customs, and waited around the airport for almost 12 hours for our 10-hour flight to Zimbabwe to take off. I love Africa; it's the process of getting there that I hate.

August 30, 1990: We landed in Harare (formerly Salisbury), the capital of Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), and dragged our exhausted (formerly energetic) bodies to Meikles Hotel, a large, luxury hotel in the city center right across from Cecil Square. While Carol took a nap, I went out walking, and found that there is an enormous difference between Harare and its Kenyan counterpart, Nairobi. One gets the feeling that if the tourist industry vanished, 98% of the people you see in Nairobi would find themselves out of work; whereas if it vanished from Harare, no one would know the difference. Which is a roundabout way of saying that Harare is a working city, with very little to interest the casual tourist. In fact, we soon came to realize that Zimbabwe is a working country. President Robert Mugabe continually gives lip service to communism, but it's a capitalist country from top to bottom...and unlike most African countries, it works. The roads are all paved, the electricity works around the clock, the water is safe to drink, there are schools every couple of miles throughout the countryside, poachers have made almost no inroads in most of the game parks, and unemployment doesn't seem to be much of a problem. In fact, I would say that Zimbabwe is as well-developed, and runs as smoothly, as most Eastern European nations. I realize that doesn't sound like much, but when you compare it to Kenya or Tanzania or Zambia, it's a quantum leap forward. I signed copies of Ivory and Paradise in a local bookstore, then returned to Meikles and changed for dinner. We ate at the Bagatelle, a 5-star dining room in the hotel, where, in a delightful twist, the proprietors were black

and the piano player was white.

August 31: When I checked out in the morning, I presented Meikles with a paid voucher -- which they refused to accept. Evidently they had been paid in Zimbabwean dollars, and because the country is so starved for hard currency, they have a law stating that all foreign travelers must pay in their own currency. So I very begrudgingly paid for my room for a second time, and made a mental note to bill the travel agency. We had decided to begin our safari in Botswana (formerly Bechuanaland)...but, because we would be flying around the country in 5-seaters with severe weight limitations, we first flew to the Victoria Falls Hotel, where we left some of our luggage. The hotel itself is an old colonial structure that reminded me of some of the better British hotels in the Brighton area. We had seen a sign in the Victoria Falls airport telling us that we must report at least an hour early for international flights or run the risk of having our seats sold. Our flight to Botswana was due to leave at 2:30 in the afternoon, and the bus from the hotel didn't leave until 1:30. A number of people who were taking the flight panicked, and began offering up to $100 to anyone who would drive them to the airport and get them there by 1:30. Since the flight is scheduled three times a week, we figured that the hotel hadn't received any complaints about it, and waited for the bus. It got us there at about 2:00, and the Botswana plane didn't show up for another two hours (par for the course, the flight attendant later admitted.) The flight to Maun, Botswana took perhaps an hour, and shortly thereafter we were ensconced in Riley's Hotel, which has a long and colorful history from colonial times, but has become a rather dull hostelry in the middle of a rather dull town.

September 1: When I stopped by the desk to hand in my voucher, they announced that they had no record of a previous payment, and I would have to pay for the room. At this point I hit the roof, FAXed the travel agency in York, and raised bloody hell. They assured me that we would have no further problems with our vouchers, and they were right (which is not to say that we had no further problems in other areas.) We went to the airport -- Maun consists of nothing but the airport, three gift shops, a few houses, a few huts, and Riley's -- and took our chartered 5-seater to Jedibe Island Camp, in the heart of the Okavango Delta, where, after more than 4 days, we finally stopped traveling and started vacationing. Jedibe is a small island, with ten tents, two ablution blocks (a euphemism for bathrooms, which consist of a toilet and a shower, surrounded by a rather shakey reed fence and no roof), a bar, and a dining tent. It's run by Tony and Pam, a second- generation Kenyan and Zambian, respectively, who migrated down to Okavango when their own countries got too civilized, and there was only one other guest there when we arrived. If there is a better way to decompress after a long trip than riding in a mokoro, I don't know what it is. The mokoro is a dugout canoe, and while you sit up front and watch the Okavango go by, a strong young man stands at the back and poles you along. We went out in mokoros in mid-morning, and stayed out until dinnertime. Carol, the bird expert in the family, tells me it was the best single day of bird-watching she's ever experienced. The Okavango Delta is some 1,600 square miles of swamp, with about 200,000 miles of very narrow, winding channels. By the time we were twenty minutes out from camp, I figured that, left to my own devices, I might, with luck, be able to find my way back in something less than eight months...yet our polers always seemed to know exactly where they were, and you got the feeling you could set them down anywhere in the Okavango and they'd be able to find their way home with no problem. I remarked about that to Pam, who agreed that they were death and taxes in the Okavango, but added that three of them went to Johannesburg for Christmas and got hopelessly lost

in half an hour.

September 2: We went out on a powerboat in order to see more of the swamp (mokoros are many things, but fast isn't one of them), packed a box lunch which we ate on a totally uninhabited island, and returned to camp in time to meet Franco and Masimo, a pair of Italians who work for Mondedori, my Italian publisher, and were making a documentary film about the Okavango. Masimo, a perfectionist, had wanted an overhead shot of the Delta, and refused to photograph it through the window of the plane...so they opened the door and he and his camera hung out, upside down, while Franco held onto his feet. The result: exceptional footage and an exceptional inner-ear infection. They also wanted footage of a fish eagle swooping down and snaring a fish out of the water. Tony had trained a local fish eagle to do just that when baited, and we went along while the fish eagle went through his paces about a dozen times and we all got some fabulous footage. That night I went to the ablution block at about midnight. While I was there, a hippo came out of the swamp and began rubbing his sides against the reed wall. Hippos have killed more tourists in Africa during the past quarter century than any other animal, and the reason is simple: they panic when they are cut off from water...and the very best time to photograph a hippo is when he goes inland to eat, as otherwise all you're likely to see are his eyes, ears, and nostrils. (They stay in the water to protect their sensitive skins from the sun all day, but at night they leave the water and consume up to 300 pounds of vegetation.) Stand between a hippo and water and his first inclination is to run through -- not around -- you to get back to the safety of his pond or river. Now, Jedibe is a very small island, perhaps 300 yards in diameter. So I reasoned it out and concluded that if I left the ablution block, all the hippo had to do was turn around and he could make a beeline to the water. Then I got to thinking, and decided that if he was an exceptionally stupid hippo, then no matter where I stood, he would conclude that I was between him and the water (and in a way, he'd be right). So I stayed another half hour until he want away, and promptly bumped into a bushbuck on the way back to the tent. Bushbucks are much more intelligent than hippos; he took one look and me and ran like hell.

September 3: Our bush pilot, Lee, picked us up in mid-morning and flew us to Tsaro Lodge in the Moremi Reserve. (Pam remarked that Lee had stuck it out much longer than most bush pilots -- something like seven years now -- because he liked the social life in Maun. I am still mulling over this remark, because to my way of thinking, Maun is the kind of place you leave in order to have a social life. Oh, well...) Tsaro is a luxurious camp nestled on the Khwai River, composed of eight large, spotlessly-clean chalets, each equipped with beds, chairs, couches, fireplaces, tiled bathrooms, and electricity -- all rarities in the bush. The current manager, Jack, used to be a game warden in Zimbabwe, and I gather the place has undergone massive renovations since he arrived. There were three couples from Cape Town there when we arrived, and they turned out to be the friendliest and most interesting people we met on the entire safari; in fact, when we go to South Africa, which we plan to do in a couple of years, each of them has insisted that we stay with them and let them show us around. We took a game run (a three-hour drive through the reserve in a 4-wheel-drive vehicle) in the afternoon, and were actually charged by an irate cow elephant, a hell of an exciting ten seconds that I managed to capture on videotape.

September 4: After a morning game run, Carol and I and two of our Cape Town friends decided to take a walk through the hunting concession that borders the reserve. We saw some birds, and a herd

of red lewche, and some bushbuck -- and then we walked around a heavy stand of trees and damned near bumped into a lone elephant. It's difficult to say who was more surprised; it is not difficult to say who retreated more rapidly. A German couple showed up in late afternoon. It turns out that this was their 25th wedding anniversary, and they had brought along champagne for the whole camp. It's amazing what you can have in the bush if your timing is right.

September 5: We took a morning game run, then got picked up by our social lion pilot and flown to the Linyanti Channel, where we were met and driven to Linyanti Camp, another primitive bush camp with tents and outdoor bathrooms. This one was run by Ron, a devoted birder, and his wife, Hillary.
They had a 6-month-old baby who was so quiet we didn't know he was there until bedtime, when Ron picked up his rifle and led the way to his rather distant cabin, while Hillary followed him, pushing
a baby carriage. Not quite your everyday African sight. We arrived just as a large party (well, as large a party as a seven-tent camp can handle, anyway) was leaving, and had the camp all to ourselves for a day. In the afternoon we went out on the channel in a double-decker pontoon, drifted
into Namibia for an hour, and saw a bunch of birds and a handful of elephants. Still, the Linyanti area
was a disappointment: the camp backs up to the river, and is surrounded on three sides by a hunting
concession, and the place is pretty much shot out. The top of the food chain, both in mammals and birds, was gone; there was just nothing left for them to eat. At dinnertime we were joined by Derek
Joubert, a National Geographic filmmaker who had a permanent camp a few miles away. I have a couple of his documentaries on videotape, which pleased him no end, and I remarked on the similarity of his name to that of Keith Joubert, a renowned wildlife artist whose prints of the "Big
Five" Carol had bought me for my birthday last March. It turned out that they were brothers, and that
Keith, the only man ever to paint a portrait of the Kilimanjaro Elephant (which he did from the figures
in Rowland Ward's record book, the elephant itself having died almost a century ago) had read and enjoyed Ivory, which is based on the elephant.

September 6: We had a very disappointing game run in the morning -- not much is still alive and moving in Linyanti -- but I made up for it by coming up with a couple of short story ideas that I'll be
writing in the next few months. In the afternoon some more guests showed up, including a rather adventuresome American girl who works for a bank with international connections, and has spent time representing them in Peru, Chile, Poland, and Hong Kong. (How adventuresome? Well, this spring she flew to Antarctica for a week as a guest of the Chilean Air Force.) We also met the ultimate Ugly American, a New York lady who didn't stop talking for the next six hours, had nothing
good to say about anyone or anything, and made us realize why so many people intensely dislike Americans. Fortunately, she came down with a sore throat at dinnertime, and we didn't have to listen
to her the rest of the night.

September 7: After a 3-hour walk in search of game that simply didn't exist, we happily took our leave of Linyanti, and went next to the most luxurious hostelry in Africa. (Yeah, I know I've said in
print that that honor belongs to the Mount Kenya Safari Club. So sue me: I was wrong. The Chobe Game Lodge has it beat all hollow.) Chobe National Park is the crown jewel of Botswana's parks. It possesses 30,000 elephants, almost three times the total that remain in all of Kenya. It has 150,000
buffalo, in herds of up to 5,000. It has hundreds of lions. It also has the Chobe Game Lodge. We had arranged to stay in the same suite where Richard Burton and Liz Taylor honeymooned after their second marriage (Suite 210, for anyone who wishes to experience it themselves.) It was immense, elegant, air-conditioned...and it had a 75-foot terrace and its own private swimming pool -- so private, in fact, that we never bothered with our swimsuits. After all those days of tents and

outdoor
bathrooms, it was so luxurious that it took a real effort of will power to leave long enough to look at
animals. The food was on a par with the accomodations. Our first night there, dinner consisted of Eggs Florentine as an appetizer, ragout of impala (the best game meal we've ever had) as a main course, and trifle with custard sauce for dessert. Lunch was a buffet that covered five tables, with so
many delicacies that you could go on tilt trying to pick and choose from among them. There were numerous lounges and bars, a fabulous outdoor dining terrace, the best gift shop we'd seen in the country, and there was even a room with a large-screen TV and a selection of videotapes, each a documentary on some aspect of Botswana and its wildlife. The Chobe Lodge is much the largest lodge in Botswana, though it holds less than 100 people and is at best medium-sized by East African
standards. The reason for this is that Botswana, which is 87% Kalahari Desert and which nobody seemed to want -- not Britain, not South Africa, not anybody -- suddenly discovered the world's two
largest diamond mines in the early 1980s. As a result, they have more money than they need, and have decided to keep their tourist industry small rather than ecologically degrade their parks by running too many cars and tourists through them. We took a boat out on the Chobe River in the afternoon and watched as hundreds of elephants and thousands of buffalo came down to drink, then picked our way among the hippos and crocs and returned to our suite, wondering why we had bothered with all those other locations when we could have spent the entire Botswana section of our
safari right here.

September 8: Another day of luxury, punctuated with a pair of game runs. In the morning, we managed to find a pride of lions on a kill, and to see some cheetahs, which are quite rare in these
parts. In the afternoon, we saw literally thousands of elephants, as well as 30 or 40 other species of
mammals (as well as one of the lions from the morning, carrying a buffalo leg in her mouth as proudly
as a puppy carries a toy). It's a damned good thing we did, too, as I deeply resented any time spent
away from that suite. Dinner was freshly-caught bream, kudu in cream sauce, and good old hot fudge sundaes. I'm a teetotaler, but Carol tells me the wine was superb.

September 9: Another morning game run, and the elephant and buffalo were so numerous than I was beginning to feel jaded. Then we got into a van and were driven some 50 miles to the Victoria Falls
Hotel in Zimbabwe, where we picked up the luggage we had stored there, checked into a room, and promptly slept the afternoon away. (All that luxury exhausted our systems, I guess.) We woke up just
in time for their nightly spectacular, a lavish pageant of native dances, which turned out to be more
authentic and less tourist-oriented that we had feared.

September 10: We stopped by a native crafts village, not knowing quite what to expect, and were pleasantly surprised to find that it, too, was more educational than tourist-oriented. >From there we
went to the Falls, truly one of the wonders of the world. The Zambezi River was the lowest it's been
in 40 years, which actually was to our benefit, as when the river is high the Falls create such a spray
that you can't make out the features, let alone photograph them. We took the much-hyped Sundowner Cruise in the afternoon. Very disappointing, if you're not heavily into booze. The boat never got near the Falls (or anything else worth seeing), and most of the passengers were three sheets
to the wind before the cruise even started.

September 11: We took a noontime flight to Hwange National Park, where we were escorted to the

Hwange Game Lodge, perhaps half a star down in luxury from the Chobe Game Lodge. Though we had requested a room, we were given an enormous suite at no extra cost. (Upon leaving I asked the manager why; he replied that it was sitting empty, he had recognized my name on the guest list, he had read Ivory and Paradise and Adventures, and since I was obviously on a research trip, he hoped that I would remember him kindly when I got around to writing a novel about Zimbabwe.) Our guide was a young man named Mark, who asked what we would like to see that afternoon. Well, I said, giving him what I thought would be a totally impossible task, we haven't yet seen sable, roan, kudu, or rhino. Within 45 minutes we had seen them all, plus a couple of hundred elephants and some exceptionally rare eagles. This is some park, this Hwange. It's the largest in Zimbabwe, and has just about every species of mammal you could wish for. It's also paved -- something that I thought existed nowhere outside of South Africa's Krueger National Park -- and the rangers have created a number of huge, artificial water holes, so that the game doesn't migrate. The park is immaculate -- you would swear they mow and rake it every day -- and except for Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater, we have never seen such a large number and variety of animals in one place. Dinner (eland and impala in exquisite sauces) was superb, as were all the various services provided by the lodge, and it is our conclusion that as luxurious as the Block lodges in Kenya are, the Sun chain in Zimbabwe -- consisting of Hwange, the Victoria Falls Hotel, the Monomatapa, the Montclair, the Troutbeck Inn, and half a dozen others -- is even moreso. The staffs are courteous and expertly-trained, the food is world-class, and the accomodations are usually equal to anything you can find in New York or London. For those of you who want to see Africa in absolute luxury, where the words "rough it" do not exist, just mosey down to Zimbabwe and make the circuit of Sun hotels.

September 12: Two more fabulous game runs, three more fabulous meals, and a lot of loafing in our suite. After dinner we walked out to a spotlighted waterhole about a quarter-mile away, climbed up to a bar that was perched on stilts overlooking it, and spent the next couple of hours watching and photographing an endless procession of animals as they came down to drink.

September 13: We took a morning game run, then stayed around the lodge until our midafternoon flight to Lake Kariba. Kariba is a man-made lake, more than 100 miles long, 30 miles wide, and (in places) 1500 feet deep. When it was created some 30 years ago, it literally put a dent in the earth...but unlike most projects of this type, it didn't foul up the ecosystem. It not only provides power for most of Zimbabwe and Zambia, it is also the biggest damned reservoir you ever saw, as well as a huge vacation area bringing in all kinds of hard currency. They also stocked the lake with fish, left them alone for a few years while they grew fruitful and multiplied, and now pull some eight tons of fish per day out of it. We knew all this before we got there -- but until you fly over the lake, until you look out both windows of your plane and see that water extending almost to infinity, you can't begin to appreciate the magnitude of the project. If the Victoria Falls are an awe-inspiring work of God (or Whoever), Lake Kariba is an equally awe-inpiring work of Man. We arrived at the Caribbea Bay Hotel, probably the least impressive member of the Sun chain, in late afternoon, and while Carol was unpacking, I scouted around to find us a restaurant -- and came up with Pedro's in the basement of the hotel, an authentic Mexican restaurant in the heart of Africa.

September 14: In the morning we took a ferry to the Sanyati Lodge, on the far side of the lake. The landscape, far from being the flat land that usually leads up to a lakeshore, was formerly the tops of some mountains (remember: this is a man-made lake), and we climbed about 150 steps up to our cabin, which had a gorgeous view of the Sanyati Gorge, a channel between two mountain tops that rose up out of the water. Our hosts were Hans, a former farmer who Carol declares is the best birder she's even met, and his new bride, Diana. We asked Diana to radio ahead and find out what time we had to catch a charter plane to our next destination, Chikwenya Camp in the Mana Pools

Reserve; she did so, and reported that because of some foul- up we had been scheduled to arrive at Mana Pools on August 16, not September 16, and that Chikwenya was sold out. We told her to tell them we had paid vouchers and planned to show up anyway, and it was their job to find someplace to put us. They reluctantly agreed, and Diana mentioned in passing that Sanyati had been unable to reconfirm our arrival but since they had been paid in advance had simply set aside our cabin and assumed we were coming. (I just love making travel arrangements in the Third World.) Since Sanyati is a mountaintop surrounded on all sides by water, game drives and walks were out of the question, and we selected from among a number of boats that Hans had. The seascape was positively unearthly: tops of thousands of trees poked up out of the water, and because it was in the mid-90s,
the evaporation caused a haze that obscured the horizon; certainly no alien world could appear more
exotic than this, and I will find a way to appropriate it for one of my books. We went along the coast
of the Matusadona National Park and saw thousands of animals drinking and walking along the shoreline, then went back and climbed all those damned stairs again. I had just gotten to sleep when
Wellington, the camp cat, decided he would enjoy mousing my toes, a processs that continued all night; since my own cats, Nick and Nora, find endless fascination in keeping me awake, I felt right at
home.

September 15: We took two rides in a pontoon: a morning ride into the Sanyati Gorge itself, an afternoon ride to Matusadona, where we got within ten yards of five bull elephants who spent almost
an hour bathing and frolicking in the water. Wellington felt deserted and bit harder than usual during
the night.

September 16: We flew up to Mana Pools in the Zambezi Valley, where we were driven to Chikwenya Camp and found out that two couples who were arriving by canoe had run up against a hard current and would be two days late, which meant that we got our accomodation after all. This was a bush camp to end all bush camps: elephants felt free to wander through it at all times of the day
and night, and while we have frequently had small lizards in our tents (actually a beneficial circumstance, since they eat insects), this was the first time we ever shared our quarters with a snake.
(I don't know if he ate insects, but he certainy ate lizards.) Our hosts were Jeff and Veronica Stutchbury. Jeff is quite famous in these parts, having been the very first game warden at the South
Luangwa Valley National Park in Zambia, and has had numerous articles and photographs published in wildlife journals. Their three sons also make a living from wildlife, one as a photographer, one as a
painter, and one as a documentary filmmaker. Jeff was probably the most knowledgable guide we've ever been out with; he was unquestionably the most eccentric. He found beauty in every living thing,
knew the natural history of everything we saw, and had the attention span of a 9-week-old puppy. Some game runs never got more than 500 yards from camp, as Jeff would find an exotic tree and explain its workings for hours; others would take us far afield and run for four or five hours, driving
Veronica and her kitchen staff crazy. Jeff and his associate, David, never went anywhere without their rifles, which, they explained, were never used against game but were reserved for poachers. (Mana Pools is the park where most of the Rhino Wars have occurred: so far they've killed over 150 Zambian pochers in two years. Unfortunately, they're breaking about even: one poacher per lost rhino. Since they've only got about 2,000 black rhinos left in the whole country, and there are ten
million hungry Zambians across the Zambezi River, the mathematics of the situation don't look promising.)

September 17: We took a boat down the Zambezi to the one sight Carol has always wanted to see: a colony of nesting carmine bee-eaters. Even I, a non-birder, couldn't help but be impressed by

10,000 colorful birds flocking and nesting in thousands of holes along the high banks of the river.
Then, when it was time to return for breakfast, Jeff decided to take a little walk. Around an island. A
5-mile-in-circumference island. We ran into buffalo and kudu and elephant, and got home just before
noon. I thought Veronica was going to kill him, although he does this every three or four days and she
really ought to be used to it by now. (In the States, he'd be the kind of guy who walked down the driveway to fetch the paper, disappeared for three weeks, and couldn't understand why everyone was so upset when he finally showed up.) One of the guests was an elderly lady from Texas, who had come to Zimbabwe to judge a cattle show, and decided to see a little of the country before leaving. If she was interested in anything beside cattle and barbeque sauce, she kept it a secret. She
continually walked away from camp on her own (and this camp was surrounded by more wild animals than any within memory), she wore sweaters and panty-hose in 98-degree weather, and she complained non-stop. Finally her long-suffering companion simply locked her in her cabin for the afternoon, and a golden silence descended upon the rest of Chikwenya.

September 18: We were a little late arriving at the landing strip -- elephants blocked our way for half
an hour -- but the plane waited for us, dropped us off at Lake Kariba, and from there we caught a flight back to Harare, where this time Meikles Hotel honored our voucher. It had been excactly three
weeks since we were there, and the change was electrifying: all the jacarandas were in bloom, and the whole city was a riot of spring color. (Yes, spring: this is south of the Equator.) I celebrated
getting away from our snake and our outdoor plumbing by taking two showers, donning a coat and tie, and having Lobster Thermidor at the Bagatelle.

September 19: This morning we picked up a car and driver for the remainder of our stay in Zimbabwe. The car was a semi-new Mitsubishi; the driver was Lazarus, a somber type who could find something depressing about winning the Irish Sweepstakes. We drove from Harare to the Inyanga Mountains in the east of the country, and as we began ascending them the fog closed in around us to the point where we could barely see ten yards ahead. We finally reached the Montclair Hotel at about noon, checked in, and decided to spend the rest of the day loafing and reading rather
than driving on narrow, winding mountain roads with almost no visibility. The Montclair is an elegant
English-style hotel, with a dart room, a billiard room, a gambling casino, a riding stable, tennis courts,
a swimming pool, two fine restaurants (I recommend the Topside), and the strangest-looking staff you'd ever want to see. Each of them -- and there were a hell of a lot of them -- was bald and bearded; when we asked about it, Lazarus explained that they were members of a Pentecostal sect that thought shaving their heads but not their faces brought them a bit closer to heaven.

September 20: We were still socked in with fog when I awoke, but I didn't feel like spending another
day doing nothing -- even a high-quality nothing such as the hotel offered -- so I told Lazarus to meet
me at 10:30 and we'd try to drive around a bit; Carol took one look out the window and told me that
she was staying inside. When we got two miles away from the Montclair the air became crystal clear,
and we realized that the mountains weren't covered by fog after all: what had happened was that a cloud had come to rest exactly atop the Montclair. We drove back, got Carol, and spent the rest of the day sightseeing in the mountains. We saw Cecil Rhodes' mountain home, and the Rhodes Museum, and World's View, and a reconstruction of an ancient village, and one of the world's more dangerous golf courses (hit the ball in the water and you get eaten by crocs; hit it in the trees and you
get eaten by leopards; overshoot the green and you fall 11,000 feet to your death). We ate lunch

at
the Troutbeck Inn, then drove to some waterfalls where we had to climb part of a mountain and walk out on a very precarious ledge to see them (Lazarus pointed the way, then locked himself in the car
and waited for us, convinced we would fall off the precipice), and finally returned to the hotel, which
was still surrounded by its very own cloud.

September 21: We left the Montclair and its cloud behind, and drove down the eastern side of the country to Mutare, easily the prettiest African city we've seen. Once there we turned off and went to
La Rochelle, the magnificent estate of Lord and Lady Courtauld, who had willed it to Zimbabwe. It contains fourteen acres of the most beautiful gardens I've ever seen, with numerous little streams and
wooden bridges connecting the various sections. >From there we drove to a tiny colonial hotel, the White Horse Inn, for lunch, then stopped by the Vumba Gardens, some 98 hectares worth of meticulously-kept flowers and greenery. Then we headed south for Masvingo and the Great Zimbabwe ruins, picking up a flat tire along the way; we drove the final 100 kilometers with no spare,
and got a second flat just as we were pulling into the Great Zimbabwe Hotel. While Carol and I slept
the sleep of the innocent, Lazarus earned his salary by hunting up some friends, finding an all-night
gas station (unheard-of in all other African countries), and getting the car in shape before breakfast.

September 22: Carol and I walked a mile from the hotel to Great Zimbabwe, the oldest and most impressive ruins in all of sub-Saharan Africa, and the structure that gave Southern Rhodesia its new
name. This was a gold-trading society that existed about a millenium ago, and built a fortress with
walls some 40 feet high. I spent about two hours photographing it and taking notes, as it will figure
prominently in one of the books I'll be writing next year. Then, when I thought we were through, Lazarus showed up and told us that there was an equally impressive ruin we hadn't seen yet. Where, I asked. Up there, he said, pointing to a nearby mountain. So we spent another hour climbing up to the second ruin, and once I caught my breath I had to admit he was right: it's every bit as impressive
as the one most people photograph (the so- called Great Enclosure), perhaps even moreso, considering that every one of its million or so stones had to be carried up the mountain. We drove back to Harare in the afternoon, checked into Meikles again (they weren't so sure about taking my voucher this time, but eventually they relented), and we spent our final night in Zimbabwe pigging out
on a huge tray of food we ordered from room service.

September 23: We drove to the airport in early afternoon and caught a plane to Lilongwe, the new capital of Malawi (formerly Nyasaland.) Upon arriving, we found the representative from Soche Tours, which had subcontracted the Malawi portion of our safari. "You'd better hurry," she said. "Your flight to Blantyre is about to leave." "We're not flying there," I said, showing her our itinerary
and voucher. "You're supplying us with a car and driver, so we can see some of the countryside." "We are?" she said, as the Blantyre plane began coasting down the runway. "Nobody told me." Eventually the lady's boyfriend volunteered to drive us the three and one-half hours to Blantyre. It
was dark before we left Lilongwe; so much for sightseeing. As we were driving, we noticed that there were absolutely no lights on the right side of the road, and asked Joey, our driver, about it. The
answer was chilling in its simplicity: the road was the border between Malawi and Mozambique, and if you so much as lit a match on the right side of the road, you were likely to get your head blown off
by a rebel before you could bring it up to your cigarette. So for two hours we hugged the left-

hand
side of the road and hoped nobody felt like shooting a car. You can't imagine the relief we felt when
we turned east and finally saw lights on both sides of the road. Joey left us off at the Mount Soche
Hotel. Our room was on the fourth of its five floors -- which turned out to be the only floor the idiosyncratic elevator didn't stop at. Not the most auspicious beginning.

September 24: Soche Tours got its act together long enough to introduce us to Mike Makwakwa, a young man who would be our driver for the rest of the safari. We decided to start with a little tour
around Blantyre. As we drove through the city, we noted that a number of buildings were decorated with red stars. Mike explained that each star marked the home or business of an Indian, and that they
had been slated for destruction or renovation. We also found out that all the Indians, who form the
merchant class in almost every sub-Saharan country, had been forcibly relocated in just three Malawiian cities: Blantyre, Lilongwe, and Zomba. Most of the buildings with red stars were in far better condition that those without, and I couldn't help remembering what happened the last time a government decided to mark buildings owned by an ethnic minority with stars. The only difference was the color: yellow then, red now. I would not want to be an Indian living in Malawi in the coming
months and years. Malawi, by the way, is ruled by a dictator who bears the title of President For Life
Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Banda left the country as a child, spent more than a half century in England
and the U.S.A., and was called back in 1958 when independence seemed imminent, as he was the only Malawiian with a college degree and they needed a figurehead president. They drafted a model constitution, and assumed that once they got the hang of self- government, Banda would step down in a couple of years, if he hadn't died of old age. All that was a quarter of a century ago. Banda killed
and jailed his enemies, had himself proclaimed President For Life, made sure no foreign entity could
start a business in Malawi unless he, Banda, owned 51% of the stock, and developed what are considered to be the most efficient death squads south of the Sahara. He is 91 years old, speaks no
language but English (and has an interpretor for his three-hour orations), and has become a hideous
caricature of The Man Who Came To Dinner. In other words, he ain't leaving. That having been said, I must also point out that tourists are treated with enormous courtesy and deference (to the very uncomfortable point of being called "Master" by most of the waiters and porters), since we represent
a source of hard currency, and every effort is made to shield us from what is really going on there. (I
had been warned not to mention I was a writer. The government does not differentiate between fiction writers and journalists, and in Banda's opinion the only good journalist is a journalist who is
rotting in a Malawi prison.) The press is as thoroughly controlled as any I've ever seen. Each day's
newspaper is the same: the front page has two long articles praising Banda, the next five pages consist of 20 quarter-page ads by major businesses proclaiming "Long Live Kamuzu!", and if you're lucky, you can find a paragraph or two about Iraq and South Africa somewhere on page 7. This is followed by another dozen pages of ads thanking God for President Banda. The country is physically the most beautiful of all the African nations we've visited, and the people are the sweetest and friendliest. Most of them literally worship Banda -- but that stands to reason: 80% of them are under
25 years of age, which means they've been subjected to his propoganda every day of their lives. After touring the city, we drove through the tea country (most of it owned by Banda) to Mount Mulanje, the tallest mountain in Malawi, and drove almost to the top, stopping along the way to look
at a couple of waterfalls. In the afternoon we stopped by the city's zoo (which seemed to

specialize in
American turtles), and the Museum of Malawi, which had some interesting relics from the nation's recent and distant history. The museum's guide believes devoutly in witchcraft, but that little idiosyncracy aside, gave us a thorough and fascinating private tour. We returned to the Mount Soche
Hotel for dinner in their upscale penthouse restaurant, then returned to our room. The bathroom was
unique: most toilets in the world operate by levers; this one required you to push a button with about
400 foot-pounds of force. (Carol's comment: "Flushing that damned toilet is the most exercise I've had all week.")

September 25: We drove to the city of Zomba, the former colonial capital (Lilongwe is a brand-new city, with huge, impressive buildings erected with foreign aid that was thrown at Banda for opposing
communism -- an easy thing to do, since there isn't a communist in the entire country), then drove up
a long, winding road to the top of the Zomba Plateau, from which one could see practically the entire
country. Then it was off to the Shire River (pronounced "Shirry") and a pontoon ride through the Liwonde National Park. Finally we drove to Club Makakola, a beach resort on Lake Malawi where we would be spending the next two nights...and where we were informed that our voucher from Soche Tours was for the nearby (and much lower-rated) Nkopola Lodge. I saw a bunch of keys on the wall, and asked if they had any empty rondovals. Lots, they said. Do you want our money, I asked. Sure, they said. Then get those bastards at Soche Tours on the phone and let me yell at them
for 30 seconds, I said. They did so, and 30 seconds later Soche Tours transferred our money from Nkopola to Club Makakola. (Everyone in the African travel industry is friendly and polite, but efficiency is not their long and strong suit -- especially in seldom-visited Malawi.)

September 26: Club Makakola was very much like a Caribbean beach resort, but with different (and more) bird life. In the morning, Carol and I rented a catamaran and its crew, and spent the next three
hours on Lake Malawi. We visited the aptly-named Bird Island, stopped by some fishing villages, and cruised by the American embassy's super-luxury beach house, then spent the rest of the day loafing on the beach.

September 27: We drove through the highlands, stopping here and there to take pictures and talk to the locals, passed through Lilongwe at noon, and headed north to our final destination, the Lifupa Lodge at Kusungu National Park. Just before reaching it we passed by a fairy-tale palace, a glistening white building which could easily accomodate a worldcon; it turned out to be Banda's newest home, which overlooked a few hundred mud huts occupied by his loyal subjects. Kasungu was sad. The park, which as recently as two years ago possessed a truly magnificent selection of game, has been almost totally poached out. The elephant population, estimated at 1,800 in 1982, is less than 100; there are no rhinos left; and while the Zambian poachers were busy collecting ivory and rhino horns, the hungry hordes of Malawiians who surround the park poached most of the other animals for meat. The death knell was sounding while we were there: a crew of six international tsetse
fly abatement experts were busy eradicating the last flies from the park -- at which time nothing on
earth will stop the local subsistence farmers and cattle herders from encroaching on the park's boundaries. I'd be surprised if it still exists ten years from now.

September 28: We took two game runs, hiring a local ranger and a four-wheel-drive vehicle (and making a note to bill Soche Tours for it, since we had already paid for it months earlier, a fact that no
one except Carol and I seemed aware of). In six hours with a guide who knew the park inside out, we saw one large herd of buffalo, a few roan antelope, small herds of impala and zebra, and a lone elephant -- less than we might expect to see five minutes into a game drive in Hwange, Chobe, Mana Pools, or Moremi. Our rondoval was quite large, and absolutely immaculate -- until we inspected the

shower, which was so filthy that we elected to remain dirty until we reached London.

September 29: We spent the morning watching hippos and birds from the porch of our rondoval (which faced a small lake), then got into the car and drove to Lilongwe, where we had lunch at the Capital Hotel -- the only world-class accomodation in the country -- and went to the airport, where
we were (politely) frisked and our luggage was (politely) searched. The airport bookstore had a huge
display of Santiago and Ivory. I was about to mention that I was the author, and ask the proprietor if
he wanted any copies autographed; then I remembered where I was, and thought better of it. Still, for all its problems (or, more likely, because of them), Malawi proved to be more fertile ground for
story ideas than Zimbabwe and Botswana, and bits and pieces of it will be turning up in my books and stories for some years to come. Which is not to imply that we didn't both breathe hearty sighs of
relief as the plane took off.

September 30: We landed at Heathrow, took a bus to Gatwick, and checked into the Gatwick Hilton, where we spend the rest of the day alternately showering and sleeping.

October 1: We landed in Cincinnati in mid-afternoon, and I immediately bought a newspaper and turned to the sports section. The Reds had just clinched the National League West, and the Bengals were unbeaten in their first three games. (The Reds promptly dropped 3 games in the next 48 hours, and the Bengals lost their first game of the year that night. As I write this, I am waiting for the
management of both teams to phone me and offer to pay my way back to Africa so they can start winning again. I can hardly wait to take them up on it.)