

10/18/2003

Hello to all,

The giant beast lurched to the right and then plowed a great wake as it turned back to the left, desperately correcting its course. Realizing it was overcorrecting to the left, it leaned back to the right, gravity sucking at the ponderous weight of its extremities, pulling it down into the warm, deep, silt. It dropped, stopped, shook a few final times, and then lay still.

All was silence but for the sounds of the birds and the beasts in the deep African forest surrounding the once powerful, now fallen, behemoth.

“Are you OK?” I asked Steph.

“Yes, I’m all right,” she replied. She was already up on her feet.

I didn’t have that option. My right ankle was pinned between the right pannier box and the ground. With my left leg, I kicked the seat to rock the bike off of my ankle and pulled out my right leg. I could move the right ankle joint, and I wasn’t feeling the sharp, stabbing pain that signals a broken bone, so I figured I could stand on it. It was sore, but livable, and besides, my body was pumping adrenaline into my system, along with the other body chemicals that constitute the physiological condition of shock, and that perform so well at masking pain and fueling our primordial “fight or flight” response to events such as this.

With razor sharp reflexes honed by crashing my dirt bikes hundreds of times, I had used the kill switch to stop the motor as soon as we hit the ground. I reached down again to the handlebars to lever the bike up off the ground. By the time I had my hands around the grip, two Zulu workers and one of the village residents, in full traditional Zulu costume, had ran up to the pile of motorcycle I had deposited in the middle of the road. Without comment, they had deftly hopped over the deep furrows I’d plowed in the nearly ankle deep silt that constituted the roadbed in front of the parking lot.

The four of us had the bike up on the first heave. I hopped on, fired up the bike, got Steph mounted and we motored on down the road, our minds and bodies still racing from the hormones, enzymes and proteins unleashed by our bodies to enable our survival in these situations.

We jumped back on the highway, and about a mile down the road, I noticed the right tank pannier bag was swinging in the wind. Swearing softly, I pulled off on the shoulder. As we walked around the bike to examine the damage more closely, we had a more measured response to our zero speed, classic porpoise weave drop of the bike. We’d picked up a small dent and some minor scratches, torn a strap off the tank pannier bag and bent our right pannier box lid slightly. Both of us were OK, and the bike was definitely ride-able. Not bad for our first time together going down on a bike, and a great way to round out our first day of riding here in Africa.

The next morning, as I pulled 50 pounds of stuff we didn’t need off of the bike and repackaged what remained to lower the center of gravity, I reflected on dropping the bike with my wife on the back. The last time I could remember going down on a bike with a passenger was dropping Scott Dyer’s Kawasaki Z1 900 in front of Urbandale high school with my brother, Jeff, on the back. That was back in the late ‘70s, so I’d had a pretty good run riding two up.

I know we’d never been down on the RF900 together, I don’t think I ever dropped the DRZ400 that Steph and I rode around Mexico when she was on it with me (although I know with great certainty that I dropped it when I was riding solo), and I know I didn’t drop the GS650 that we’d ridden around New Zealand. But I guess this maiden drop on the GS1150 was inevitable, and in some way good, to get it out of the way in such a relatively harmless way early on in the trip.

I suppose the street oriented tires we have on the bike and the deep silt played a role, but the main culprit was all the excess baggage we had piled on it. Once I pulled that off, both the motorcycle and the humans were much happier.

Just before we dumped the bike we'd visited a Zulu village where we'd been taught how the traditional Zulu lived, and still live in the communities that have chosen to retain traditional ways. While there are some that are closed and not open to visitors, we had been fortunate to spend several hours at one that is open to the public. The Zulu people we met all live in the village, which is used to demonstrate the traditional Zulu way of life to those from other cultures and places.

It was an interesting peek into another way of life, one that requires no car payments, no phone bills, and no big trips to the shopping mall. While not immune to the influences of modern life, those that have chosen the traditional ways are not dependant on them either. As others have observed, the subsistence farmers are not the ones dependent on foreign aid for survival and are not the ones starving in the periodic famines that rack the African continent.

Since our visit with the Zulus, we've spent a couple of days visiting a wildlife reserve, riding through Swaziland and are now back in South Africa. Tomorrow we head to Botswana, then on to Zambia and Namibia.

We spent the afternoon today in Pilgrims Rest, an old mining town in the mountains of North Eastern South Africa. We met some local sport bike riders along the road today, and they told us about their favorite destination in Pilgrims Rest, John's Pub. Once we hit town, we sought it out and found a wonderful little place, full of character, with a huge seating area in the back lined with chairs and televisions.

While a little mystified by the TVs out back and the one perched on top of a beer case in the dining room, we faced down the challenge of ordering from the menu in the dark, as the power was out in the entire town. As soon as the power popped back on, we quickly discerned the need for all the TVs and the explanation for the mystery of why half the adult population of the region would be gathered in this relatively small establishment. The South African Springboks, the national rugby team, was playing a match against England in the Rugby World Cup this afternoon. This was arguably the biggest South African rugby match since the Springboks won the world title over the New Zealand All Blacks in the 1995 championship game, and no local rugby fan with the faintest of pulse was about to miss it.

Sadly, the home team lost, but we used the time during the game to get to know some locals around us, as well as a group of fellow travelers from Holland, one of our favorite European countries. The Dutch group had flown in, rented a van, and was finding their own way around the region, armed with nothing but ATM cards, travel books and good maps. Clearly, they were our kind of travelers.

It had been raining pretty steadily on our way up into the mountains, with the temperature dropping to 38 degrees (F) as we pulled into our lunch stop. We decided to walk around the quaint old town for a bit and then headed for our hotel, which was located about six miles out of town. As we climbed higher into the mountains, the fog closed in, the rain came down harder and the wind began to blow in earnest.

I had the heated grips on at full strength, my heated seat and jacket up to half strength and was still feeling the cold, so I was glad to finally see the sign for the hotel materialize out of the rain, fog and fast closing darkness. By the time we came up to the entrance gate, the wind was a full force gale, with blowing sheets of rain and the temperature dropping like a sandbag from a balloon.

Once we checked in and found our cottage, I checked the thermometer on the bike. I looked and looked again. It showed 0 degrees Celsius, 32 degrees Fahrenheit. When we got into the room we discovered that the only heat was provided by the wood burning fireplace, which I quickly utilized in a desperate attempt to throw some heat into the breezes that fluttered our curtains.

I write this now seated in front of the blazing fire, the wind shrieking against the cottage, a glass of excellent South African red wine in hand, and my ever patient, ever adventurous wife by my side. I am eternally grateful for both of those gifts.

Tonight we enjoy the warmth of the wine and the fire. Tomorrow we ride further into the mysteries and rewards of Africa.

Be well,
Doug

P.S. Some photos from our recent days follow.



Zulu wedding dance. ISO 400 1/250 F6.7 16-35mm @33mm external E-TTL flash



Household goods from a typical Zulu household. There were a few huts open to the public, the rest were homes of the people in the village and were not open to the public. The private huts all contained household goods similar to these. ISO 800 1/60 F4 16-35mm @16mm external E-TTL bounce flash



Zulu warriors in battle. ISO 400 1/500 F4.0 35-350mm @50mm



Zulu performers review video of themselves with Helge Pedersen, the organizer of our tour.
ISO 400 1/180 F6.7 16-35mm @35mm external E-TTL flash



Zulu woman in traditional costume. ISO 400 1/500 F5.6 35-350mm @90mm



Zulu women discuss motorcycling with Steph on the way back to the parking lot. The women were fascinated with Steph riding on the bike with me.
ISO 400 1/180 F6.7 16-35mm @18mm external E-TTL flash



Our room at Shayamoya Lodge, a wonderful destination. We were all heartbroken that we only spent one night here. ISO 400 1/60 F4 16-35mm @16mm handheld external E-TTL bounce flash



Our outdoor shower in our room. Heavenly! ISO 800 1/30 F2.8 16-35mm @16mm handheld



Sunset at Shayamoya. ISO 800 1/350 F9.5 28-135mm @135mm



African Tiger fish, caught on a fly rod in the lake in the valley below our cabin.
ISO 400 1/60 F5.6 28-135mm @135mm built in flash



African Spotted Eagle Owl with the bat he caught for dinner. Note the large bug on its right thigh.
ISO 3200 1/60 F2.8 16-35mm @35mm External E-TTL Flash



The next morning we went on a tour of the wild animal reserve next to the lodge. Because we are here in the Spring for the Southern Hemisphere, there are lots of newborns. This baby giraffe was only a few weeks old.

ISO 800 1/750 F4.5 35-350mm @210mm



Zebras grazing near the lake. ISO 800 1/1000 F5.6 35-350mm @320mm



Giraffe checking out the tourists. ISO 800 1/750 F6.7 35-350mm @350mm



Rhino grazing. ISO 800 1/500 F5.6 35-350mm @320mm



ISO 800 1/1500 F5.6 35-350mm @350mm



ISO 800 1/1500 F5.6 35-350mm @350mm



Mother and baby Rhino. They traveled parallel to us for over a mile, with the baby trotting ahead of the mother. The baby was less than a month old.
ISO 800 1/1000 F5.6 35-350mm @350mm



ISO 800 1/1500 F5.6 35-350mm @350mm



The day after this message was written, we visited Echo Cave, where I shot this Hair Bat.
ISO 400 1/60 F2.8 16-35mm @35mm External E-TTL Flash