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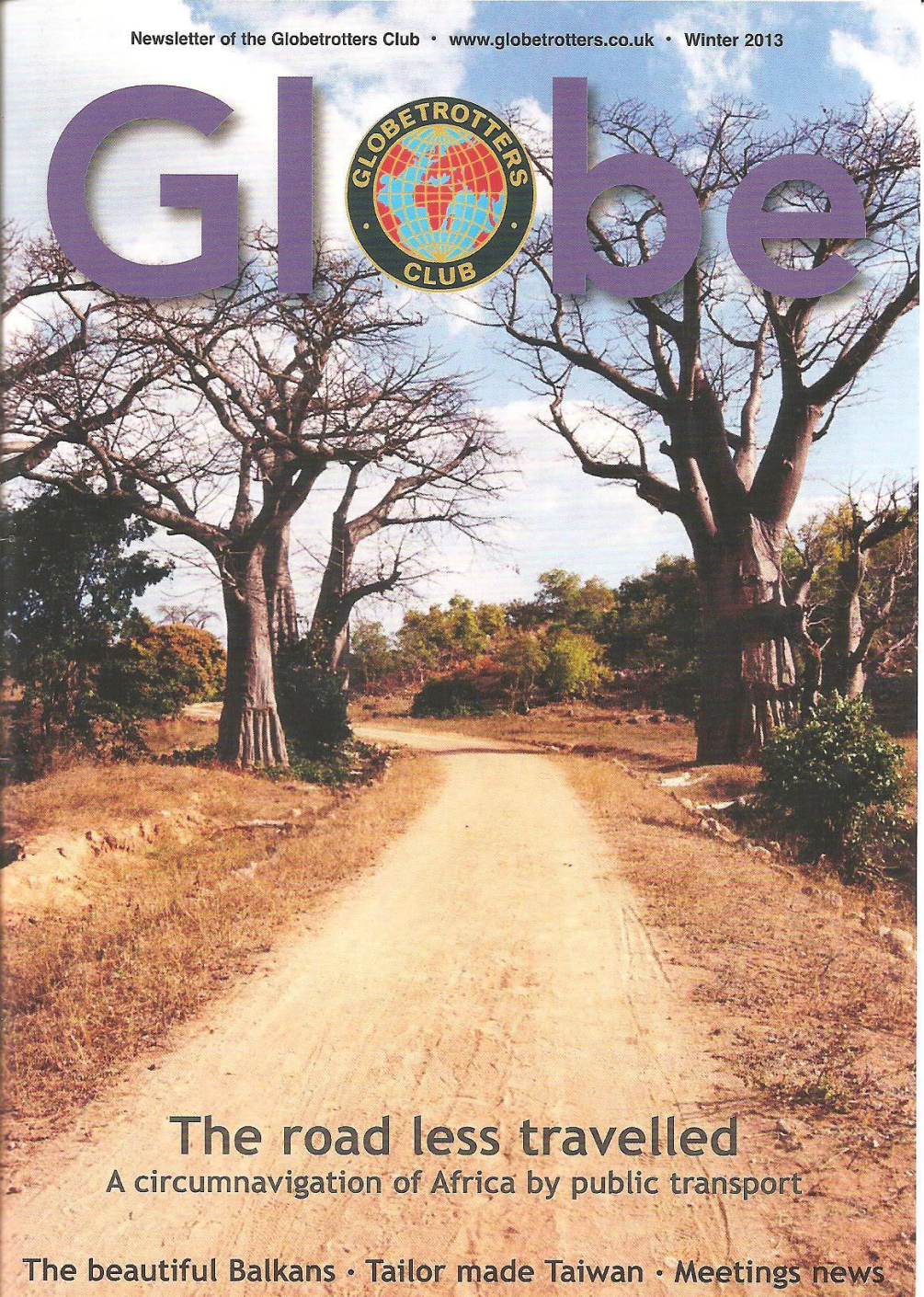
Globe

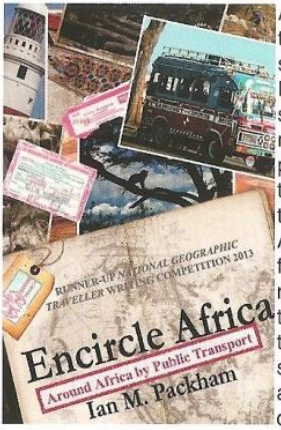


The road less travelled

A circumnavigation of Africa by public transport

The beautiful Balkans · Tailor made Taiwan · Meetings news

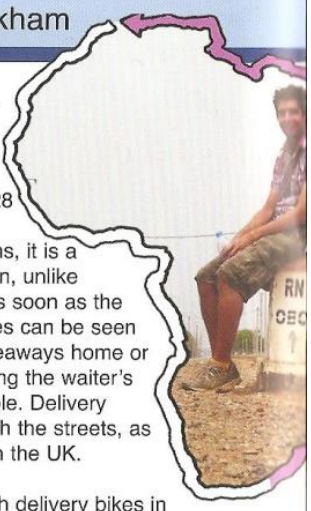
Eating up Africa By Ian Packham



An unplanned two month stay in Egypt's second city meant I had plenty of free time in which to investigate Alexandria's food, and recall my thoughts on the food I had sampled across Africa during my circumnavigation of the continent.

The guidebooks will tell you that the Egypto-Sudanese staples are fuul (think baked beans untainted by salt, sugar or other flavourings) and tha'amiya (better known to us as falafel). In fact, if you're a well-to-do Egyptian (to which I claimed honorary membership - a week at my hotel with balcony, partial Mediterranean view and en suite bathroom costing me 60 pounds sterling) the restaurant staples are more likely to be western fast-food or scrumptious Middle Eastern mini-feasts.

These feasts of grilled meats or kofta are served with rice, bread, hummus, fresh cucumber and tomato salad, and pickled vegetables. To add to Alexandria's usual controlled chaos, Ramadan began just as I arrived. Despite the month meaning 28 days of daylight fasting for Muslims, it is a time of celebration, unlike Lenten fasting. As soon as the sun drops, families can be seen dashing their takeaways home or eagerly anticipating the waiter's arrival at their table. Delivery bikes race through the streets, as lost as they are in the UK.

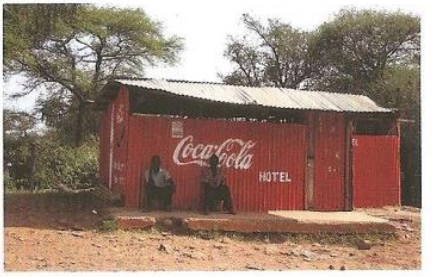


There are no such delivery bikes in Ethiopia, which acts as a buffer state between Arab and Anglo-Africa. Having its own alphabet and calendar, the country sees no problem in having cuisine served almost nowhere else either. Injera, a greyish sour pancake with a rubber crumpet-like texture, doesn't taste anywhere near as bad as it sounds. In fact, save from a mild sourness that comes from the tef flour it is made from, it barely tastes of anything at all. To counter the blandness, the large pancake roundels are covered in sauces flavoured with a variety of mild spices and they contain vegetables, meat or hard boiled eggs. Another Ethiopian 'national food', a term used to distance it from western styles of eating, is tere sega, though I wasn't brave enough to try these raw cubes of beef.

Much of southern and east Africa has tepid 'International-English' fare to call its own. The most regular examples I came across were chicken twice or thrice deep-fried and served with chips, or imitations in varying success of battered fish.

Drinks on the eastern side of the African continent can also appear limited, with international soft drinks made under licence from international brands taking most of the market share in towns and cities. Coca-Cola for instance, is one of the only international bodies that seemed to recognise the existence of Somaliland, the breakaway republic in northern Somalia, with a bottling plant in the de facto capital, Hargeisa.

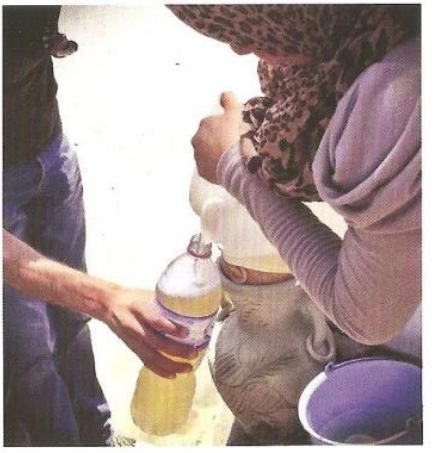
I thought I would be limited to carbonated drinks until I delved into gloomy and uninviting (sometimes fly-ridden) establishments that I at first found difficult to pick out, since they were largely unnamed. The rough wooden benches, a plastic tea urn, or a patio chair soon became my recognisable signs. Sometimes they came close to a recognisable café: a small side-table surrounded by a cluster of chairs, watched over by a half-interested 'waiter'. It was in these places that I found the community lived, enthusing over the problems of the day. Where international coffee chains were present, they were almost always devoid of a local customer base, expatriate workers making up the bulk of their custom.

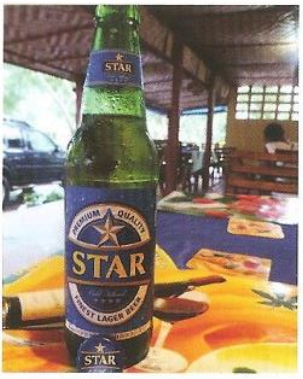


It was in the small local establishments that tea at the very least – black or with condensed milk, always packed with sugar – was available. More rarely was the chance to get a mug of coffee, made from freeze-dried granules, or even a loose-form of milkshake (a whipped milk drink rather than the thick U.S. variety). Fruit juice, strangely, was almost universally impossible to find outside of North Africa, where juice bars take the place of licenced premises.

For alcohol, if it's lawful (Sudan is pretty much dry climatically and alcoholically) the choices are between the locally-produced hooch - palm-wine and sugarcane spirits - Heineken, or local lager.

Photos: Far left is one of my tastiest, if scary looking, fish meals; Togo. Next is Ethiopian tere sega (raw beef cubes), followed by the ever present Coca Cola and finally some local hooch.





Photos: Left is Star Beer in Sierra Leone, centre is Tusker lager in Kenya, and on the right is the South African Malva pudding.

The lagers are the best option if you want to return home being able to both taste and see, while the local lagers have the additional benefit of not costing as much as a night in a hotel room. Bottles were rarely cold, though normally superbly drinkable if a little heavy on hops, meaning I had an awkward relationship with the many brands that span Africa. Stout, other than one particular Irish drink, is unheard of outside of the South African sphere of influence (Namibia, South Africa itself, and southern Mozambique). Perhaps this is because its calorie-dense darkness is a little heavy on the stomach in the heat, though non-alcoholic malt drinks are popular in West Africa.

South Africa's offering of battered fish is snoek, a type of barracuda, the flesh of which is lined with long needle-like bones. I found it to be as dry as Sudan; and tasteless too. Hungry rationed Britons even refused to eat the canned meat during the Second World War. But South Africa's saving grace is perhaps that it wasn't an empty land colonised solely by the British. As well as a plethora of tasty wildlife to munch through - such as kudu, zebra, and ostrich - are concoctions that shouldn't work, but do. Take bobotie: mince, eggs, apricot jam, and flaked coconut; baked together in the oven like a lasagne.

South Africa is also the undisputed dessert king of Africa: milktarts, soussomethings, and Malva puddings (a golden syrup/sticky toffee pudding crossover, depending on who you eat with), powered me all the way up Africa's eastern seaboard to Alexandria, to contemplate what exactly I had eaten.

To find out more about Ian's journey, why not check out his excellent blog: **www.encircleafrica.org** In this solo 25,000 mile by-any-means journey through 31 countries, Ian attempts the first solo and unassisted circumnavigation of Africa by public transport. He rides beaten-up bush taxis, flatbed trucks, dugout canoes, and a van delivering freshly-made meat pies in order to traverse the continent. Entirely reliant on local populations, Ian fights off thieves in Senegal, is mistaken for an undercover UN official during Liberia's presidential election, refused entry into Congo, and while in Sudan becomes perhaps the only person teargassed trying to visit a museum.

Ian's book launches on 30 November, and is available to buy online and comes highly recommended:**www.amazon.co.uk/Encircle-Africa-Around-Public-Transport**