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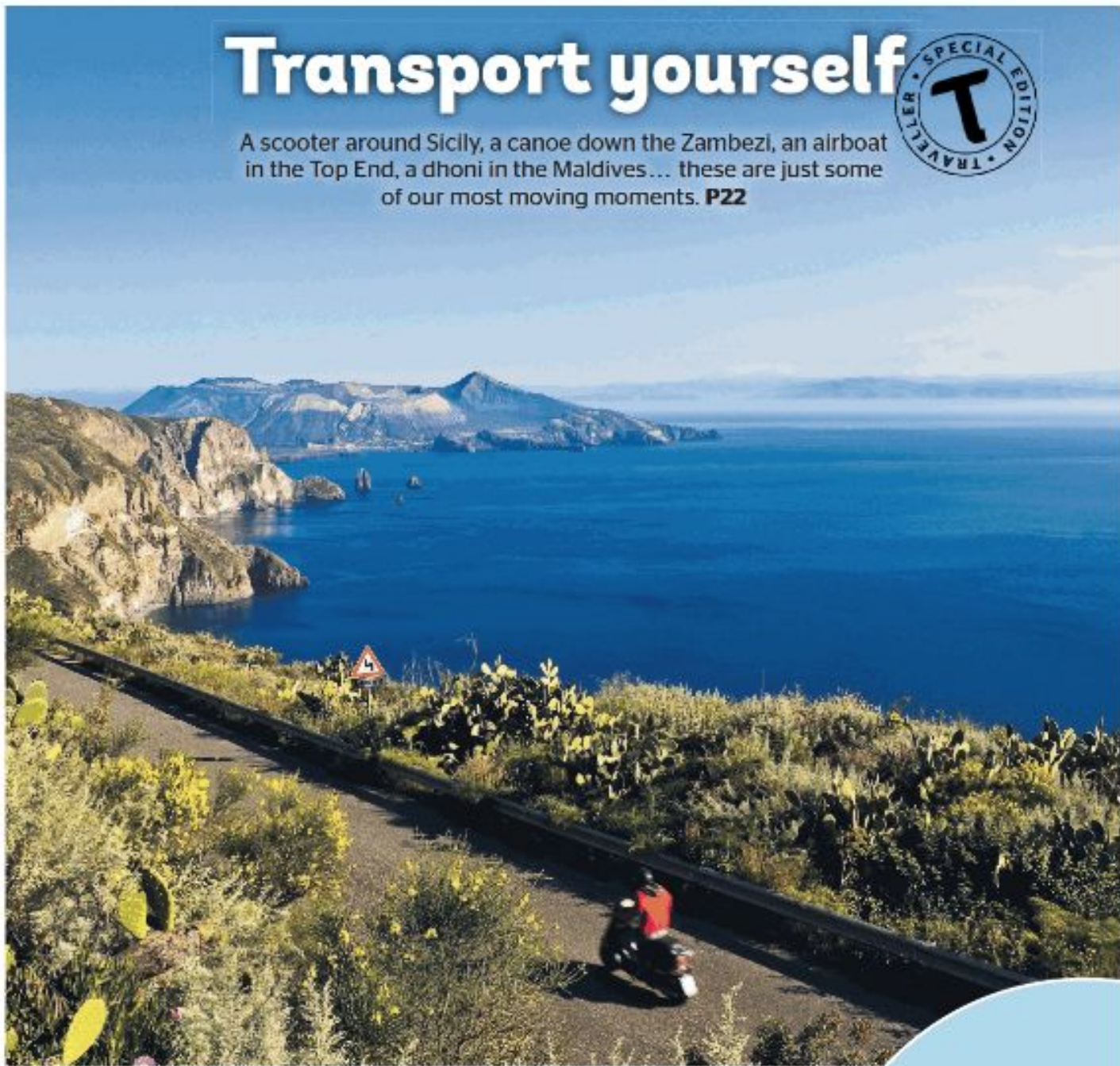
Great journeys

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in the Top End, a dhoni in the Maldives... these are just some
of our most moving moments. P22



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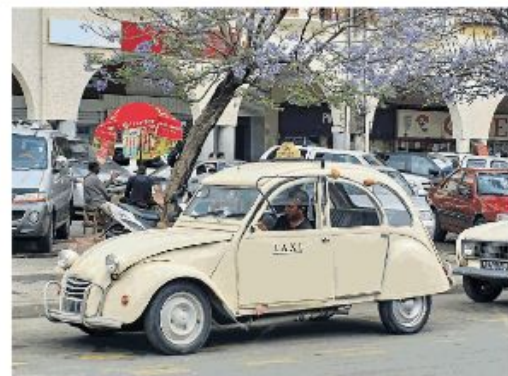
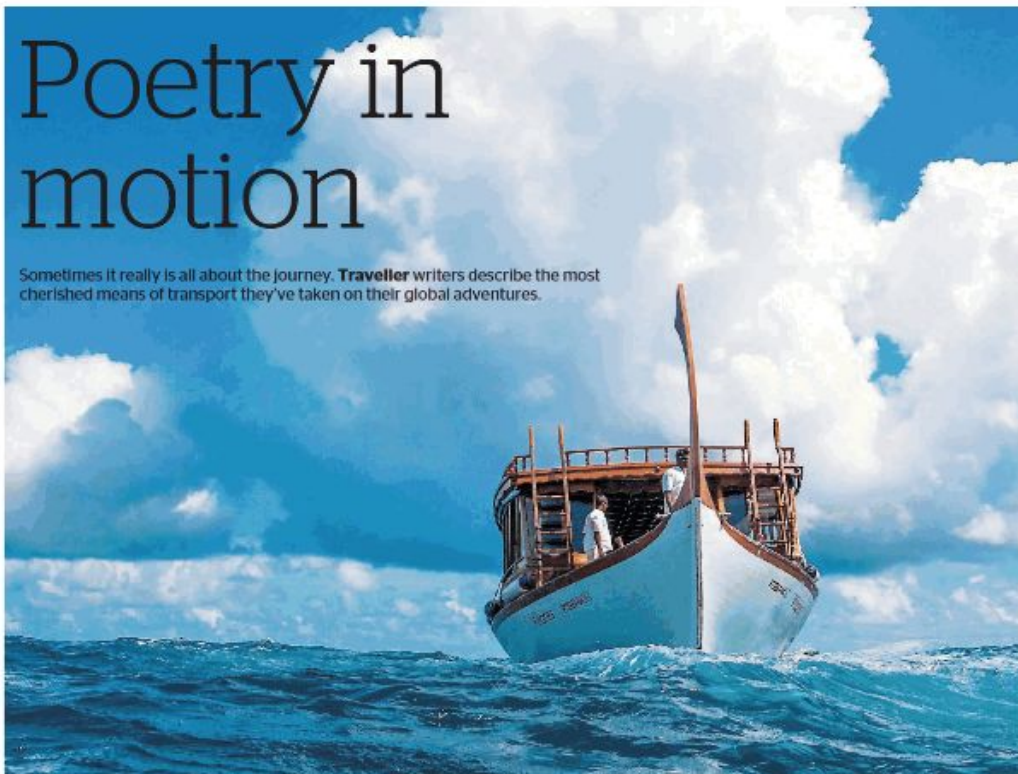
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Cover story JOURNEY

THE TRANSPORT EDITION

Poetry in motion

Sometimes it really is all about the journey. **Traveller** writers describe the most cherished means of transport they've taken on their global adventures.



While most transport these would be little travel, apart from those excellent journeys of the mind, known as "transports of delight". Occasionally, our travel stars align into transcendent experiences, a serendipitous fusion of circumstances defined by something quite humble – the form of transport.

The vehicle itself isn't something we generally think too hard about. If we're lucky, a magic moment might materialise. Sometimes, however, people choose a particular mode to connect with a significant time or event.

Travellers often retrace iconic journeys using specific forms of transport – such as driving Route 66, which John Steinbeck dubbed "the Mother Road" in his 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* to retrace the east-west expansion of the US.

Similarly, train aficionados may seek to relive rail's Golden Age by boarding one of the most storied trains, the 1885 Venice-Simpson-Orient-Express. Egyptians might revive the annual Nile River progress of the ancient pharaohs in a traditional sailing boat, or dahabiya.

Tourists will also consider (probably only momentarily) entering the gruffling Mongolian

Derby on semi-wild Mongolian ponies, tracing Genghis Khan's 1000-kilometre ancient postal route.

Specific forms of transport offer different perspectives. For example, on the Royal Canadian 1920s Heritage train route, there are the actual train travellers and there are the transporters staking out the route with their tripods and cameras. And finally, there are the backpackers simply seeking to hitch a ride.

The light breeze I used to inhale on my epic journeys. It could have been light, streetcar ride, pony trek, husky-drawn sled, ferry, mountain bike, tuk-tuk, gondola, toboggan or perhaps one of the diverse and fun-fung conveyances that **Traveller** writers offer as their choices.

SEEING SICILY BY SCOOTER
By Ben Groundwater

There's a whoosh of warm breeze, a faith of road, the howl of a straining engine, and then nothing, once again. Fresh air. Open road. I've just been overtaken. Again.



That whoosh wasn't a sports car or an urban tractor 4WD, it was a Fiat Uno, its accelerator pressed to the floor as its pilot tore a course around me. And now he's disappeared behind another bend in this windy, beautiful road and I'm alone.



I've been overtaken a lot in the past few days; Sicilians are in a hurry. What they're in a hurry for I'm not sure, given no one seems to do much around here but lie on the beach, eat gelato, wander the boardwalks and take selfies. Maybe they're just in a hurry to get back to that. It's been four days since I began this journey, a circular route beginning and ending in the touristy town of Taormina. In the past four days I've cruised down coastlines and navigated cliffs, I've wound through farmlands and skirted hills, and I've done it all on a scooter, on a two-wheeled steed, the ultimate transport to see Sicily, and the world.

A scooter is freedom; a scooter is living. Aboard this little machine you don't just see Sicily, you feel it. You taste it. You smell it. At various times you also dodge it, you honk your horn at it, you widen your

eyes in fear at it, you glory in it, you laugh at it and you drink it all in. There's never a dull moment on a scooter in Sicily.

Ever since I pointed my front wheel south, as I look in the twin vistas of the Mediterranean sparkling to my left and Mount Etna smoking to my right, life has been good, it's been right. I've tasted salt in the air as I've hugged the beach at Giardini Naxos, I've caught the scent of olive groves as I've cruised through the island's interior. I've felt the sheer, unadulterated joy and freedom that the wind on your face and the sun on your arms and two wheels sticking to hot tar bring.

I've also had to deal with Sicilians. I've had to process the fact that no one indicates here, no one sticks to the speed limit, people overtake on blind corners and roar past you without a care. It lends an incongruous feeling of hurry to a placid life.

But you get used to that. In fact, you join it. You embrace Sicilian style on the most Italian of vehicles. You gun the engine, you ignore the indicators and you just go.

And then all that's left is those open country roads, those winding hilltop roads, those shaded boardwalks in those sunny, beachy locales. The warm air. The hum of an

engine. The feeling of being free. Scooter hire in Taormina is available through California Rentals; average 160cc scooters start from €40 a day and a valid motorcycle licence is necessary. See california-rentals.com

A VINTAGE TAXI IN MADAGASCAR
By Uta Junker

To my mind, Citroën 2CVs belong in black-and-white French films. You know the sort of thing, some moody piece starring Jean-Paul Belmondo or Alain Delon strolling along sidewalk while 2CVs peep past. The idea of these compact cars cruising actual streets seems a little absurd, particularly since the last one rolled off the line almost 30 years ago.

Which is why I was surprised to find hordes of them clogging the streets of Madagascar's capital, Antananarivo, where they are the car of choice for the city's taxi drivers. At least, most of them.

Some taxi drivers plump for another French workhorse, the Renault 5. So popular are these two



makes that a walk through the streets of Antananarivo can feel like a visit to a vintage car rally.

Visitors who come to this island for its superb wildlife viewing and eye-catching scenery are often surprised to find these French classics clogging the streets of a city more than 8000 kilometres from Paris. Just like Cuba's famous fleets of vintage Cadillacs, Madagascar's stylish taxis reflect the island's poverty. But the Citroën 2CV and the Renault 5 are known for their durability and for their affordable spare parts, two considerations that trump all other aspects, including comfort.

There is no denying it: watching these butter- and cream-colored classic cars cruise the streets is often a lot more fun than actually riding in them. If you do flag one down, expect bumpy seats and, on an uphill climb, a complaining whine from the engine that sounds like the war cry of a seriously pissed-off giant mosquito.

And in Antananarivo, hills are hard to avoid. The city is spread over three levels, each of which has its own character. The city's upper levels – all quiet tree-lined streets, colonial buildings and chic little bistros offering plates of fine grub for less than \$10 – stand in contrast to

the lively chaos of the Lower Town, where makeshift markets are fragrant with the scent of vanilla beans and frying zebu sausages.

In a country where the average annual income is just \$1540, the locals have learned to make the most of what they have, and that is doubly true of the country's taxi drivers.

Many vehicles aren't running through an average range of DIY improvements, with home-made fuel hoses being one of the most popular interventions.

Be aware that the seats may not be the only things that have holes in them. Be aware that the seats may not be the only things that have holes in them; as I stepped into the back of one taxi, I only narrowly avoided puncturing my feet through a cavity in the floor.

Most impressive is the way that Malagasy drivers have learned how to eke the most out of every cent. Once you have agreed on a fare, don't be surprised if your cab driver tops up his petrol tank from a small jar of fuel. With fuel weighing on being a luxury item, drivers carefully measure out every drop.

Madagascar's taxis are cheap; you are unlikely to spend more the \$4 on a cab ride. See madagascar-tourism.com/en

Be aware that the seats may not be the only things that have holes in them.

Cover story JOURNEY

THE TRANSPORT EDITION



From page 24

It's a way to be alive, which lies at the heart of all travel. Africa's longest east-flowing river cradles some of the continent's most pristine wilderness. It's the river of explorers - including my great-grandfather, Dr James Stewart, who paddled part of it in a canoe. This is my motivation.

There are those serendipitous moments when the canoe responds to the mysterious C-strokes and Z-strokes and sweep strokes, when it obediently threads the needle between territorial hippo pods.

This is when you are part of the river, at one with the powerful ephesing of paddle and hiss of craft on water. This is when you get close to the great herbivores and predators that descend to the Zambezi's shallow pools to feed on the riverbank's sweet grasses, sausage trees, baobabs and the winter thorn pods.

Your passage down stream, with Zambia's 1000-metre, pink-and-blue misty rim encircling to your left, comes accompanied by the bird calls of riverbank-sounding Ceryle two-toed, African skimmers, Pel's fishing owl and Nyassa lovebirds.

The river itself has a sound - an insistent sighing as it travels down to its Mozambican delta mouth. It's this broad, swift-flowing water - about six kilometres an hour - that creates the canoe command. 'To stay in deep water with the current requires skill but avoids deep-water-distilling hippo.

Or aphs and bump into the shadows making the base of gullies - 'Mopos flatland - 'paddles flat, hit back'. Or 'hippo strikes' when a 3000-kilogram vegetation-distilling vat 'bamboos' off the bank, after which, according to our guide, 'you roll in a ball and float down the river and it rescues it'.

The canoe fits the Zambezi like bark on a tree. It leaves no trace, save ripples.

What lies beneath (Clockwise from main) Baker Street is one of the oldest stations of London's Underground. Tube station entrance at Piccadilly Circus; elephants in Lower Zambezi National Park, Zambia; Baker Street bench. Photos: Shutterstock

highlights the adventure, honours history and perfectly fits the experience. I have just cycled past of the Casino. I should have walked. Experienced operators include Natureways Safaris or Zambesi Safari & Travel Company for a choice of basic or luxury multi-day canoeing and canoeing safaris. See natureways.com, zambesi.com

THE LONDON UNDERGROUND

By Tim Richards

Many cities have underground railway and works, but none of them has the quietly, appealing personality of the world's first: the London Underground.



As it's been built in fits and spurts since the 19th century, the Tube possesses none of the bland uniformity of more recently built systems. Instead, it's an eclectic collection of routes, from lines just below ground level, to those running through tube-

shaped tunnels deep beneath the city streets.

The most atmospheric stations are those that opened along the first line in 1863, from Paddington to Farringdon. Standing on one of the oldest platforms at Baker Street Station, with its curving brick roof, it's easy to fantasise stepping aboard one of its long, vanished steam trains alongside Sherlock Holmes.

What binds these disparate lines together is the Tube map, designed in 1931 by Harry Beck. Realising there was no need to plumb stations at their correct distances from each other, he produced a map resembling an electrical circuit diagram. It was an immediate hit, and an instant design classic.

That map also reflects a key element of London's appeal - its quirky place names that suggest intriguing backstories. Seven Sisters, Swiss Cottage, Elephant & Castle. Stations such as Monument, Barbican, Temple and Charing Cross hint at historic relics, while central stops such as Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square promise the bright lights of the West End.

As for the trains, they're as diverse as the network they run on.



The Tube is like one big magic trick.

The Elizabeth Line, which opens this year, will be served by a fleet of new 200-metre-long trains with air conditioning and interconnected carriages.

For my money though, the classic Tube ride is aboard one of the trains which were designed in the 1970s and still serve the Piccadilly Line. With their distinctive semicircular roofs, they seem like long metallic centipedes perfectly adapted to their tubular habitat. Inside, their cushioned blue seats with chunky red armrests run along the walls rather than facing each other in aisles, helping to maintain the Tube tradition that passengers should avoid eye contact and never speak.

There's something special about riding in one of these carriages, perhaps leaning on the small upholstered ledge at one end, examining it with near-silent Londoners as you rattle through a strange dark world beneath one of the most exciting cities on Earth. Stepping out into a central station with its tiled walls and posters plugging West End musicals, there's a sense of anticipation as passengers file upwards via pedestrian tunnels and long escalators.

Voilà! We're suddenly in a different part of London, and it's all happening. The Tube is like one big magic trick. And it, like so many Australian travellers, your first experience of London is the long Piccadilly Line ride from Heathrow, you get to snigger at the frequent announcement: 'This is a service to Cockfosters.'

Don't feel bad, we've all done it. An entertaining history of the Tube is Underground, Underground (profilebooks.com). Tim Richards' fantasy novel, Mind the Gap, also features the Tube (harpurcollins.com.au). For maps and fares, see TfL.gov.uk

Continued on page 26

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Cover story **JOURNEY**

THE TRANSPORT EDITION



From page 26
AN AIRBOAT IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY WETLANDS
By Brian Johnston
My first experience of an airboat – which I've long associated only with Florida – is out on the Mary River flood plains of the Northern Territory in the company of guide Dean Hoath. We mosey through paperbarks trunk-deep in water and out onto open wetlands. Confetti floes of eucalypt and ferns are white against the hot blue sky. Cormorants perch on rocks, wings spread. Two grey bridgins with distinctive red head patches dance on the riverbank like novice ballerinas.

Even Hoath, who's been here many times, is still impressed at the exhilarating sense of space. "Just think, this is only one corner of an unimaginably vast land. You have to imagine this scenery and abundance of wildlife spread over 90,000 square kilometres. It really is unknown Australia."

The Mary River system is one of Australia's most important ecosystems, yet scarcely known. We've headed out from luxury lodge Bamarru Plains, whose airboats are the shuddering, rattling workhorses of the water, their shallow drafts allowing us to inch into its most beautiful corners, carpeted with profusions of purple water lilies. This is what I love about airboats: they blow you into places otherwise inaccessible, making you feel more explorer than tourist.

As the sun sets, Dean pulls wine from an Esky and we pass on pink water to eat campas on the sky larks out and purple and changing colours chase across the face of the floodwaters. Then we lunge back towards the lodge in the airboat, paperbarks shimmering in the sunset.

What a blast! (From above) An airboat on the wetlands of the Northern Territory, the purple water lilies of the wetlands. Photos: Tourism NT, Brian Johnston

moonlight, I'm silent with exhilaration. Why have I never been this part of the Northern Territory before? Who knew it was so beautiful? Only 200,000 visitors (both Australian and international) come to this vast region each year, and then mostly only to Kakadu. There are few other places you can have entire ecosystems almost to yourself.

These wetlands ought to be more celebrated. They shelter more than 300 bird species, including magnificent sea eagles, egrets, jabirus, herons and jacanas (or Jesus birds) that lurch on spindly legs across waterlily pads.

We frequently spot their skinky snouts pushing between the water lilies before they sink beneath our approaching airboat. We finally see one on the riverbank on the last day, enormous in plated armour on a riverbank, bigger than the airboat, as we buzz on by. *Lords Safaris* operate personalised small group tours in Arnhem Land which can include a stay at *Bamarru Plains* on the *Mary River*, foodplains, and daily excursions by airboat. See lords-safaris.com, bamarruplains.com, northernterritory.com.au



Pelicans float like stately Spanish galleons. Bird numbers are astonishing. I favoured perching trees are weighed down with cockatoos. Whistling ducks and magpie geese congregate in huge flocks. When they launch themselves upwards as our boat approaches, the collective sound of their wings is louder than the whirr of the airboat's giant fan.

Beneath the water there are silent killers. Pygmy mallee jumps to escape predatory barramundi. The barramundi are fair game for crocodiles. Freshwater crocs lurk everywhere.

THE SAFARI JEEP IN AFRICA
By Nina Karnikowski

The elephant is staring at me. So close I could reach out and touch its leathery skin; so close I can see its individual eyelashes.

I wonder if that might be the last thing I'll ever see if it decides to use its formidable strength to shove me. Jeep out of its way and have done with it. But no. Post-gasp it decides to lumber on, leaving us trembling in our seats with a heady mixture of fear and excitement.

It's moments like this one, deep in Kenya's Masai Mara, that I love most about travelling in open-sided safari Jeeps. With no windows and often no rear roof to speak of, they put you right at the heart of the action, giving you the ultimate sensory experience.

You can smell, hear and feel it all. The wind on your skin as you bump along the dusty bush trails; the moist scent of earth and wild grasses as they whip by; the calls of the beasts as they interact, barely noticing you at all.

The theory is that animals can't distinguish between the humans in these vehicles. They see us as a kind of moving bush. I've had guides tell me. Over my seven trips to Africa,

Over my seven trips to Africa, there have been times when lions have prowled right over to our Jeep.



There have been times when lions have prowled right over to our Jeep and fallen asleep in its shadow, seemingly oblivious to the handful of appalling humans peering out from inside. If we look one step out at that moment though, we'd likely be torn to bits.

It's that element of imminent danger that makes this such an exhilarating way to travel. During one Zambian safari, our truck pulled up beneath an acacia in which a leopard was sleeping, its mottled legs dangling over the boughs. When someone stood up to grab their camera, the leopard stirred and began hissing into the truck, yellow eyes blazing. It roared us, sure. But we also felt more alive than we had in a long time.

There's a delicious sense of freedom in this kind of nature immersion brings, too. On a sunset drive through Kenya's Samburu reserves, my friends and I sat on our seats, horses poking out the top of the Jeep and hands reaching out to ride the breeze, singing Toto's *Africa* as we gazed along.

In the quieter moments, when the vehicle stops for you to observe the animals, it's a form of transport that awakes you. Out there in the bush, far from the bustle of the world, your mind unspools. By day's end, you can feel as if you've sorted your whole life out in your head.

Some of the most memorable safari moments, though, are created just outside the vehicle. Piling out at some spectacular spot at sunset, your guide will flip a small table down from the front of the Jeep, instantly transforming it into a tiny bush bar. There you'll drink G&Ts and chat about the extraordinary creature you've seen that day, as the sky explodes with colour.

The best part comes once the bar has been packed away. When you're bumping back to camp through the inky night, wrapped up in blankets, nothing but warm you and the cooing of stars overhead, *Backs Africa* has been organising safaris for Australians for almost 50 years. See backsafrica.com

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