

## An Unnerving Weekend

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One of the great joys of teaching for the University of Maryland Overseas Division was always the long and welcome weekend that came after an intense Monday-through-Thursday evening schedule in the classroom. While I was teaching in Germany in the early 1970's, my extended weekends often took me regularly to such wonderful locales as Paris, Brussels, Munich or Amsterdam, all within easy reach by train or automobile. However, during my many years teaching English at Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia, my opportunities were much more limited. I have described elsewhere my weekend respites to Massawa and Keren. One other weekend destination that I managed to travel to was the Sudan, with time spent in Khartoum, Khartoum North and Omdurman. My only prior (albeit limited) knowledge of that area came from watching the 1966 film entitled Khartoum starring Charlton Heston and Sir Laurence Olivier. When I finally took advantage of an opportunity to join a group for a weekend in Sudan, little did I know that I was about to experience one of the most unnerving weekends of my seven-year career on the Maryland European Division circuit.

The journey began innocently enough with an easy Friday flight westward out of Johannes IV Airport in Asmara in May of 1971. However, within moments of landing, I had my first scary encounter with the unfamiliar ways of operating in this former British colony. As soon as we landed, we were escorted to a large hangar where we were required to claim our baggage. I only had one small black bag, which I placed on the inspection table where it was unzipped, had its contents poked through briefly, and re-closed after which the inspector placed a small "x" mark on the bag with a piece of purple chalk. I was one of the last passengers to be cleared and I had watched the others go before me through a small doorway guarded by a young Sudanese soldier. All of the ones that I watched passed through without incident. However, when I brought my bag to the doorway where I could see my fellow passengers loading onto a small bus about twenty-five yards beyond, the soldier stepped into my exit path, took his rifle and brought it up and pointed it at my face, and pulled back the bolt. I panicked and dropped my bag, wondering what I had done to deserve his action. He then pointed the weapon at the camera hanging around my neck and gestured for me to go back to the inspection table. I grabbed my bag, went back and held my leather-encased Pentax camera up to the inspector, who then made a purple chalk "x" mark on it. As I returned to the exit, I held the camera up to show the soldier the mark, after which he let me pass. To me, his actions were excessive (and scary) beyond belief! No one else had been stopped. I set my bag down and the person loading the bus grabbed it by one handle and proceeded to tear that handle right off. The heavy bag was designed to be lifted by both handles, but for the rest of the trip I would now have to carry it under my arm. Two uniquely

upsetting incidents in a mere matter of minutes left me very apprehensive about the rest of my journey into this new and exotic country. Obviously, Charlton Heston had not prepared me very well for this trip.

I was prepared for the shimmering heat that rose from the tarmac at Khartoum Airport because of my many forays to tropical Massawa in Ethiopia. However, I noted also that all of the bus windows were open, and that proved to be the case on the five or so kilometer drive into the city proper, as the bus had no air conditioning. Further, the driver was positioned on the right-hand side of the bus, so when we pulled out into traffic, we were driven on the left side of the road in this former British colony. The accompanying guide's announcement, "Welcome to Khartoum," seemed rather anti-climactic to me as I felt that I had already been "welcomed" enough by the over-zealous young soldier at the hangar exit. Traffic became heavier as we reached the city proper, but we got to our hotel less than half an hour later. There we were allowed to check in, but only given twenty minutes to drop our bags and change shirts for lunch in the adjoining restaurant. The meal was light but filling, consisting of mashed fava beans topped with vegetables and eaten with an injera-like pancake. Tea was the drink served with the meal. After years of eating very spicy foods in and around Ethiopia, it was somewhat disappointing at how bland the food was in their neighboring country. I found that situation to be the case with most of the meals that I had while spending the weekend in Sudan. Perhaps that was another unfortunate holdover from their days as a former British colony.

Our group was then lead outside and back into the blistering heat on a short walking tour of Khartoum where we soon learned of another link between Sudan and its previous colonial masters, which was which way to look first when crossing streets in traffic. Checking to the right first was a bit dodgy for some of the group, but as long as we stuck together, most of us managed to get the hang of it. The walk along Nile Street gave us a nice view of the Blue Nile River. We were lead past the University of Khartoum which, as an educator, I personally enjoyed seeing. We also got to visit the Al Kabir Mosque, after removing our shoes, of course. The walking tour ended with a stroll past the highly guarded Presidential Palace where the guide strictly cautioned the group not to attempt taking photographs. After my airport encounter, I was not about to get myself roused again by some overly anxious soldier; however, I did notice a few of the group taking quick shots from the hip, especially those with a top-mounted viewfinder. Fortunately, no one was arrested and after answering a few questions, the guide volunteered to act as an escort to take those of the group who wished to walk back to the hotel. Several of us felt that we could find our own way back and ventured to brave the left-driving traffic for a nice stroll now that the sun was closer to the horizon. We sampled a bit of Sudanese street food along Nile Street before making our way back.

At the hotel, I was sharing a room with a former army buddy. As we opened the hotel room door to switch on the lights, we both heard the scurrying of tiny feet inside the room. To our dismay, we soon caught sight of a couple of geckos running up the wall and across the ceiling. So we would be sharing our room that night with some uninvited reptilian guests. All that I could figure was that these creatures either were seeking some cooler interior place away from Khartoum's desert heat or, they were there to feed on whatever other creepy crawlies were also hidden away in the room which we could not see. Just one more anxiety to add to what was already a very unnerving weekend.

We awoke early on Saturday morning to get ready for our only full day in the Sudan. For whatever reason, the geckos had apparently checked out of our room, perhaps having already had their silent breakfast. After a quick shower, we dressed and then joined the group in the dining room for our own breakfast, which once again consisted of fava beans in a stew with chopped tomatoes and onions along with some boiled eggs. At least this rather bland fare was packed with some good protein to fortify us for the long day ahead. We were then herded onto a small bus, featuring open windows so again with no air conditioning, that took us the short distance over the White Nile Bridge to where we were summarily deposited at the Souq Omdurman bazaar to start our day. As the bus pulled away, my immediate reaction was one of questioning curiosity, as whatever purchases we made would then have to be carried on person as we hiked in the heat to a few other touristy destinations. I found the answer to my unasked question when I spotted our guide quietly waiting alongside the central cashier stand to collect his percentage of the group's morning purchases. As primitive as Omdurman was, pounds and piastres still ruled in this desert oasis. I chose not to burden myself with anything more costly or larger than what small trinkets I could stuff into my pockets. The rest of the group was on its own, dragging their new souvenirs in sacks until our bus picked us up again later.

As the group was gathered up for our morning walk, a trio of young men came up to our guide. After some back-and-forth among the four of them, our guide approached our Kagnev group leader and indicated that the trio wished to act as protection for our obvious tourist group. They would ward off pickpockets and beggars for us and prevent any loss of wallets, passports and newly acquired souvenirs. Of course, there was a fee for this "service" which we discovered amounted to just over three dollars in US currency apiece. Our guide assured us that it would be a very small price to pay. I immediately got the sense that this was a regular "protection" racket and that the guide was going to get his cut of this new fee as well. I could almost imagine him saying, "Nice cameras and watches you Americans have there. It would be a real shame if anything happened to them." The whole incident added just one more unnerving edge to our Saturday in the Sudan. We settled on accepting the trio's offer and soon had these muscled gentlemen walking along with us for the next few hours. Perhaps the few

beggars that did dare to approach us only to be chased away were also part of this racket. Who even knows how such operations work when tourist groups come to visit? In any case, we now had this trio of young bruisers accompany us as we left the bazaar.

On our walk from the bazaar, we made our way to the Khalifa House Museum where we were able to see lots of weapons on display ranging from spears to automatic rifles that were left over from the nineteenth-century war with the British General Gordon (enacted by Charlton Heston in the 1966 film). Also there were suits of armor, battle robes, old coins and banknotes, photographs and numerous other artifacts related to Sudanese history. For me, the two-story building's mud-brick architecture was of interest in and of itself as a kind of historical record of that period eighty-some years earlier when the Mahdi was fighting to free his Islamic state from its harsh British colonial overlords. I noticed that our "protection" did not accompany us inside the museum. Undoubtedly, they had been there before and so just hung around outside until we once again gathered to move along. Even though the sun was beginning to make its harsh presence felt on our exposed skin, I found that seeing the beehive-shaped tomb of the Mahdi (played by Sir Laurence Olivier in the film mentioned above) on the adjacent grounds of the museum was also well worth the visit. There we were joined in silence by a large group of pilgrims paying homage to the former Sudanese leader. It helped to make the storied history of that seldom-visited part of the world come to life for me.

Fortunately for those still burdened down by having to lug their purchases from the bazaar, the bus did return to transport us across the Shambat Bridge for our visit to Khartoum North. (As a side note, that bridge was destroyed in November of 2023 during one of the recent wars that always seems to rage in this part of East Africa.) Our trio of swarthy gentlemen rode in the back of the bus with us, perhaps quietly counting the number of tourist passengers and privately calculating their fee. This part of our day's journey turned out to be more of a dog-and-pony show, with our guide touting all of the industrial growth happening in this suburb. Clearly, our bored trio did not have to do much to earn their protection fee for the next ninety minutes. We then headed back across the Shambat Bridge for our late lunch stop. It was at this point that our trio expected also to be paid for their services. In a way, I was almost glad finally to be well rid of them. By the time we finished lunch, another round of bland fava bean stew with tomatoes accompanied by a sweet tea to wash it down, it was late afternoon. Our bus driver was still with us, as he also expected his own gratuity before taking most of the group back to the hotel for a free afternoon and evening. I asked that I and a couple of friends be dropped off at the Tuti Island Bridge so that we could take in one more sight before the sun went down. We left our tip for the driver and guide in the hands of our Kagnew Station leader and watched the bus drive off towards the hotel.

We crossed that bridge over to Tuti Island and then made our way along Tuti Beach to the promontory where the White Nile and Blue Nile converged to form the full

Nile River that then headed north towards Cairo and the Mediterranean Sea. I do not know why the two rivers are named as such on the maps of Africa except that when I stood at the confluence of those two distinct rivers at the tip of Tuti Island, the White Nile flowing north from Lake Victoria in Uganda and the Blue Nile glowing west from Lake Tana in Ethiopia, and had my photo taken there, what I observed to my left was the former river churning over cataracts and creating a white and foamy appearance there while the placid latter river flowing in from my right was smooth and calm and clear. That settled the difference in my own mind for all intents and purposes. My two friends also wished to have their photographs taken there, so I returned the favor for both of them and then we sat down with the sun still warming our bodies and let time just float by while being completely oblivious to where we were and what we were seeing. It was almost magical. We stayed on that spot for almost an hour, selfishly enjoying the two rivers and contemplating the peacefulness that the rest of our group had missed before making our way back along Tuti Beach to the bridge that took us back into Khartoum proper. We found a small cafe and had our evening meal in relaxed abandon before making our way on foot back to our hotel.

It was there that we encountered one more unnerving incident when we found out that a couple of our group who had gone back on the bus had contracted food poisoning and that they may have to be left behind when we boarded the plane back to Asmara the next morning. This grim news brought the whole group together in its concern over that troubling possibility. On a Saturday night when we all should have been celebrating having survived our trip into the historic country of Sudan, we now faced a serious crisis. Leaving anyone behind was not a viable option. After all, several of our group were military personnel and they have a policy of making sure everyone returns to base. However, good fortune was with us in the form of one of our tour group being one of the Kagnew Station doctors and he had anticipated just such a problem and had brought along medications designed to combat any form of Mahdi's Revenge. He took our sick group members aside and administered what he thought would do the trick. It was then only a matter of waiting and hoping that the morning would bring healthy results. As luck would have it, a few hours before departure he checked in on them and they were all well enough to board our plane at Khartoum Airport.

So, from my hairy encounter with the armed security guard on Friday, to the group taking expressly forbidden photos at the highly guarded Presidential Palace, to our uninvited reptilian guests, to our realization of the price of doing tourist business in the Sudan, and almost ending with a few of our group being unable to board the plane on Sunday, this side trip as an English teacher with Maryland's European Division was one unnerving incident after another. If nothing else, it was quite a memorable weekend, if not one on which I could ever completely relax. Such was some times the case with instructors who experienced travel moments often well beyond those of our stateside colleagues. "Those were the days, my friend," as Mary Hopkin sang. Yes, indeed.