

NOTES FROM AN AFRICA CIRCUMNAVIGATION CRUISE

PART TWO:

FROM DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA
TO GABES, TUNISIA

By Ted Cookson

I was fortunate to be able to take a once-in-a-lifetime 73-day Africa circumnavigation cruise with my fiancé Barbara and a number of friends between 11 March and 23 May 2008. Our cruise, on Holland America's elegant 48,000-ton, 793-passenger *Prinsendam*, began in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and ended in Lisbon, Portugal. The itinerary included Cape Town, South Africa and the Suez Canal. En route the *Prinsendam* called at a total of 28 ports in 20 countries. Of the ports, 16 were in ten different African states. This is part two of a three-part article adapted from the notes I took during the cruise. The first part included the ten ports from Casablanca to Cape Town. This part deals with the remainder of the African and Indian Ocean ports from Durban, South Africa all the way up to Gabes, Tunisia. Part three will cover the anti-piracy precautions that were taken by our cruise ship while off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden.

Because the *Prinsendam* called at Durban, South Africa one mid-April morning and then at not-so-distant Richards Bay,

South Africa the following day, Barbara and I pre-arranged to spend the intervening night ashore at a lodge in a private game sanctuary in South Africa's Kwa-Zulu Natal Province. We disembarked at Durban on 16 April and drove a rental car three hours from Durban to Phinda Mountain Lodge north of Richards Bay. During our evening/night and morning game drives at Phinda we saw lion, buffalo, elephant and rhino. Although we didn't spot any leopard, the most elusive of the so-called "Big Five" game animals, we did happen upon a cheetah and her two cubs. In addition, we saw plenty of other plains game at Phinda such as giraffe, hyena, impala and warthog. After returning our car at Richards Bay Airport, we returned by taxi to our ship in the industrial port. After spending so much time on the *Prinsendam*, it had truly come to feel like our home; so it felt good to be back on board again.

After three days at sea we called at Reunion, an expensive French island located east of Madagascar. There we hired a van for 200 euros to take our party of six on a six-hour circular



Giraffes at Phinda Reserve near Richards Bay



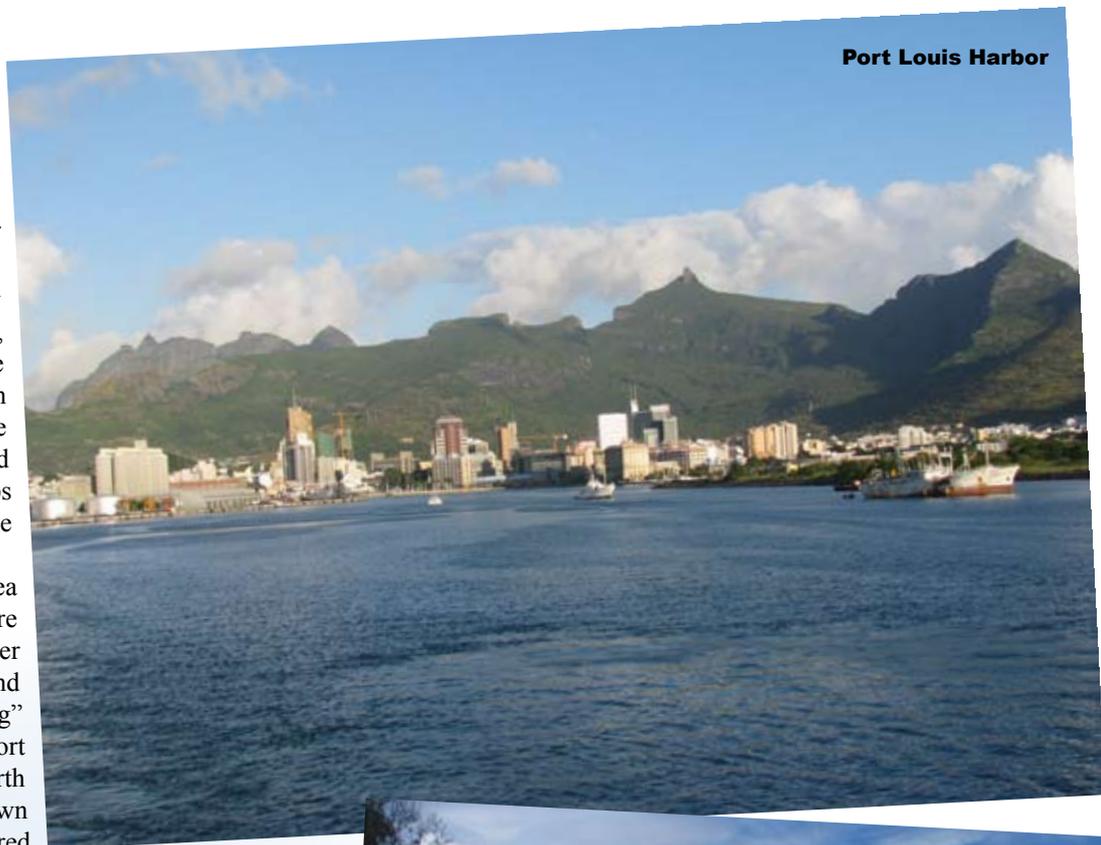
Volcanic crater on Reunion Island

drive around the beautiful verdant island. En route we visited the lunar-like crater of Piton de la Fournaise, one of the world's most active and yet most accessible volcanoes. Although the population of Reunion is over 800,000, about half of the inhabitants actually live in France. Nevertheless, interestingly, there are some 340,000 automobiles on Reunion! Needless to say, the road system is excellent and there is a motorway which wraps around a fair amount of the island's coastline.

After another two days at sea we arrived in Mauritius. There our party rented a seven-passenger Renault Espace to drive around that very "Caribbean-looking" island. From the capital of Port Louis we took the motorway north to the much-touristed resort town of Grand Baie, and we toured the luxurious Oberoi resort hotel on the island's northwest coast. Afterward we returned to Port Louis and then crossed the island on the motorway to Mahebourg on the much less-touristed southeast coast of Mauritius. Driving north from Mahebourg, we passed the monument marking the site where the Dutch first landed in 1598. Continuing north, we stopped at a seaside park for a brief picnic before touring the ruins of Fort Frederik Hendrik in Vieux Grand Port. This fort was occupied by the Dutch East India Company until the Dutch finally abandoned the island in 1710. Upon returning to Port Louis, we found that we still had half an hour in which to window shop downtown before turning in our rental car at the port.

After a further two days at sea we reached Mahe Island in the Seychelles. Early on the morning of our arrival the skies opened up and it rained cats and dogs as the *Prinsendam* docked in Victoria, the capital of the Republic of Seychelles. Discovered by Vasco da Gama in 1502, this 116-island republic was named after Jean Moreau de Sechelles who served as finance minister to King Louis XV of France. That morning we crammed into a small Hyundai Tucson rental car to tour Mahe. Because the roads are narrow and winding and British-style left-hand drive is the custom, we had to be very vigilant. While we didn't experience that much rain during our counter-clockwise circular island tour, the mostly-cloudy sky still managed to obscure much of the beauty of the Seychelles' unique granite boulder-strewn beaches. Along the way we stopped at the Indian Ocean Tea Company where local leaves are blended with tea imported from Sri Lanka to be sold locally as "Seychelles tea." After lunch Barbara and I walked around Victoria and then drove over the hill to Beau Vallon Bay which boasts Mahe Island's prettiest beach.

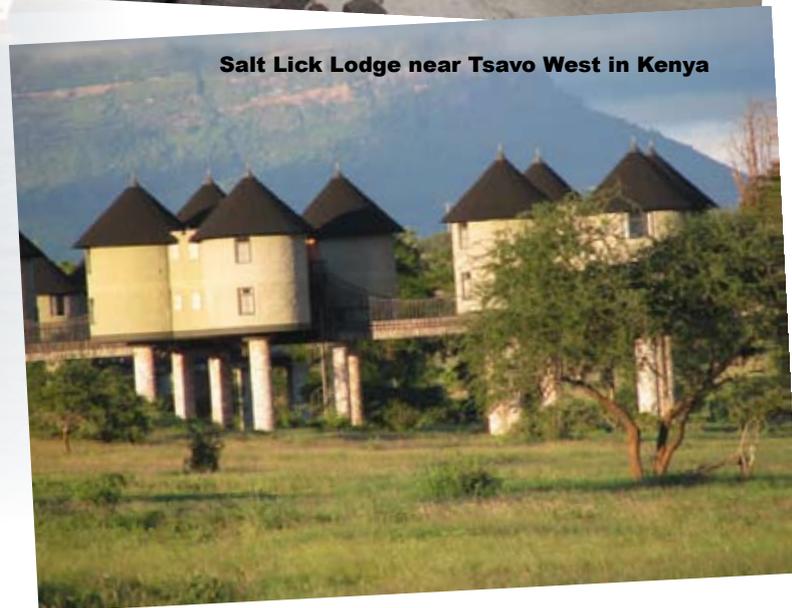
We enjoyed two relaxing days at sea between the Seychelles and Kenya. On the day immediately prior to our arrival in Mombasa, a single red-footed booby rested on the prow of our ship for several hours. I also noticed a number of flying



Port Louis Harbor



Beach in the Seychelles



Salt Lick Lodge near Tsavo West in Kenya

Jewelry market in Salalah



Tower in El Quseir Fort south of Safaga



fish that day! Barbara, some friends and I took advantage of our ship's three-day call at Mombasa to go on safari again. We spent our first night at Voi Safari Lodge in Tsavo East National Park and our second night at nearby Sarova Salt Lick Lodge, a "tree hotel" built on stilts in Taita Hills, a private reserve adjacent to Tsavo West National Park. Although we experienced much rain the first day, surprisingly, we managed to spot the most game then too. Not only did we watch in the afternoon while five adult cheetahs hunted an impala together, but that evening we saw eight lions and a leopard! It was an unbelievable day of game viewing. Tsavo, with some 21,000 square km (8,108 square miles), is the largest of Kenya's national parks. In fact, Tsavo's size is equal to that of Wales!

After four days at sea we called at Salalah in southern Oman, a region best known as a source of frankincense in antiquity. It is said that in ancient times frankincense, which is dried pitch that is burned to create a pleasing odor, was more valuable than gold as it had to be transported all the way from southern Arabia north to the Mediterranean by camel caravan and then on to Europe by ship. In my only previous visit in 1982 I had driven a rental car up into the hills behind Salalah to see frankincense trees growing along the highway there. However, the two most vivid memories I retained of Salalah from my previous visit were of the strong-smelling fish market and the beach. In 1982 I just happened to arrive at the fish market as a huge swordfish was brought in, so I gawked and photographed as it was carved up. That same night I walked on the moonlit beach behind Salalah's best hotel as thousands of crabs scurried eerily all around me. The crabs, which were busily digging burrows, created foot-high teepee-like mounds in the process. On this current visit I noticed that there are still teepee-like mounds on the beach! We hired a taxi for three hours to take us from the large industrial port about 15 minutes west of town where the *Prinsendam* was docked to Salalah's wonderful museum, the frankincense market, the jewelry market, the Crowne Plaza Hotel, and a department store. At the department store Barbara purchased inexpensive kaftans imported from the Subcontinent. It was appropriate that the dinner theme on board that night was "Arabian Nights."

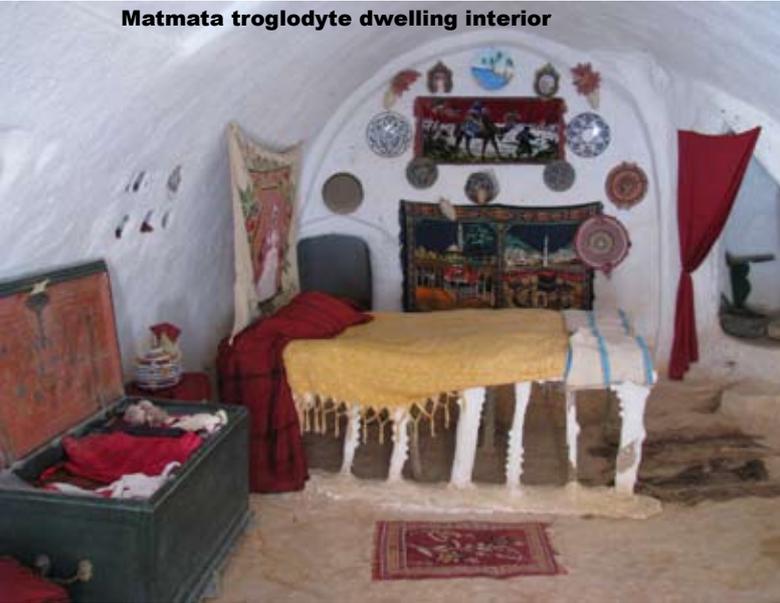
After four more days at sea we docked at Safaga on Egypt's southern Red Sea coast. There is little of interest in Safaga itself. Phosphates mined near the coast are exported from this harbor. Ferries also operate between Safaga and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. While many passengers embarked on a 13-hour coach tour to Luxor's Valley of the Kings and Karnak Temple, Barbara and I decided to remain on

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***Prinsendam* docked in Alexandria**



Matmata troglodyte dwelling interior



the coast; and we used a van which had been sent down from Luxor to take us around for the day. First we drove one hour south to Quseir to visit the late sixteenth-century Ottoman fort built of mud and stone which, after a recent USAID-financed restoration, now functions as a historical museum in the town centre. Interestingly, in August 1799 during Napoleon's occupation of Egypt, two British ships bombarded the French troops occupying the fort at Quseir for three days and nights. While the attack mostly destroyed the fort's seaward defenses, the British failed to dislodge the defenders. From Quseir we continued south another hour to the huge new resort and marina complex being developed by Kuwaiti interests at Port Ghalib. Three beautiful, but still largely empty hotels had just opened there in mid-January. Then from Port Ghalib we drove south 35 minutes to the coastal town of Marsa Alam before turning around and driving back north all the way to Safaga. We enjoyed our lovely excursion even though it wound up lasting 11 hours!

The continuation of our cruise from Safaga up the balmy Red Sea to the head of the Gulf of Suez was uneventful, and we were surprised to complete our transit of the Suez Canal in only 11 hours. The sailing time from Safaga to Alexandria via the Canal was 55 hours.

In order to avoid paying excess baggage fees when we flew home out of Lisbon at the end of our cruise, Barbara and I cleared two cartons and a duffel bag full of clothing and shoes through customs in Alexandria. In the afternoon we toured the Alexandria Library which now features a lovely new archeological and historical museum in its basement. We also visited the Four Seasons San Stefano Hotel and shopping mall and then walked in downtown Alexandria where we passed the recently-excavated Roman-era ruins adjacent to the amphitheater.

After a stop in historic Valletta, Malta, the *Prinsendam* called at Gabes in southern Tunisia, its final port in Africa. There we hired a local van to take us out to see the troglodyte dwellings at Matmata, about 48 km (30 miles) from the port. After touring two of Matmata's more than 700 cave dwellings, the same van returned us to Jara Market. After half an hour of poking around the souk, we returned to the ship. Matmata's claim to fame is that some scenes from the original Star Wars movie were filmed there.