

# Malaria On My Mind

It was to be a runner's dream come true - striding across the acacia-studded African savanna with the early morning dew still glistening on the elephant grass as herds of wildebeest and zebra and antelope grazed under a big red sun slowly rising in the east. No doubt the week's long run would require fording crocodile-infested streams, all the while keeping a wary eye peeled for trouble that might be lurking nearby.

The village was little more than a cluster of round, mud-walled, thatched-hut compounds in a clearing in the jungle. Above them rose the Escarpment - perfect for hill training.

He recalled gazing out at the huge pale yellow moon hanging just off the tip of the airplane's wing as the lights of Yaoundé appeared faintly in the distance. He had wondered what it would be like, Africa. Now he wondered what it would be like for the world to stop its incessant spinning.

And the chills. He was covered with every blanket in the village and still he shivered as if in the dead of winter.

Old Africa hands will tell you that once Africa gets in your blood, she never lets go. He was sure of this much - Africa had a hold on him all right, in every sensitive place he had ever known and then some, and was slinging his world this way and that, stabbing daggers into his eyes whenever light inadvertently penetrated the darkened room as a fevered sweat soaked the bed.

After the palm wine, he had asked the village chief about running on the paths through the valley. This had provoked worried exchanges in Fulani or Wolof or some other local tongue and then the chief's advisor had told him, somewhat uneasily, that one really should not be out running in the bush.

*C'est très dangereux, M'sieur. Lions.*

Lions?

*Oui, M'sieur. Sauvages. Et des vipères.*

Savage lions? He envisioned not just being torn from limb to limb and leisurely devoured at the mid-point of his daily run, but his every bodily part being batted about in some big cat game of keep-away.

And his heart rate monitor. Might some king of the jungle see fit to give it to the lioness of his choice to wear around her neck as a symbol of his devotion? All well and good except for the incessant beeping, which would surely provoke a frenzied obliteration of his remains.

Then there were the vipers - cobras and adders and mambas, both green and black. The venom of any one of those was enough to kill a healthy adult so quickly that if you got nailed by one of those guys, you didn't even have time for your life to pass before your eyes.

And finally the little matter of the streams in the area. They were home to snails that harbored tiny parasites that caused bilharzia - River Blindness.

How do you know if bilharzia is in the area? You see all the blind people being led about by small boys. Sometimes they were in groups with the boy holding a stick grasped by the first of a line of blind men, each with his hand on the shoulder of the man in front. They spend their days wandering about in such a line, begging.

Running was simply not done in this part of Africa - it was just too dangerous. It was only done to announce important matters, like the death of the chief. As he tried his utmost to keep his head stabilized within the same latitude as the rest of his body, he wondered if anyone would care to go out for a run and announce his own death if he kicked off anytime soon, as seemed imminent.

And so he had resigned himself to an African sojourn *sans* running. But now it took all he had just to hold on to the bed.□

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Albuquerque Road Runners Club