

RUNNER-UP NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
TRAVELLER WRITING COMPETITION 2013

Encircle Africa

Around Africa by Public Transport

Ian M. Packham

A scientist, adventurer, writer, speaker, Africa nut, public transport buff, and accidental photographer Ian M Packham has written for a range of outlets including *Adventure Travel* magazine and Bradt's *Bus-Pass Britain Rides Again*. He was a runner-up in *National Geographic Traveller (UK)*'s travel writing competition in 2013.

A quest for challenge has taken Ian to the summit of Mount Kenya, and, by way of a PhD in Biomedical Sciences, the length of Hadrian's Wall. He completed his circumnavigation of Africa by public transport – the first solo and unassisted journey of its kind – at the end of September 2012.

Encircle Africa: Around Africa by Public Transport is his first book.

Visit www.encircleafrica.org for regular updates.

First published in 2013 by The Cloister House Press

Copyright © Ian M Packham 2013

All rights reserved

The right of Ian M Packham to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781909465145

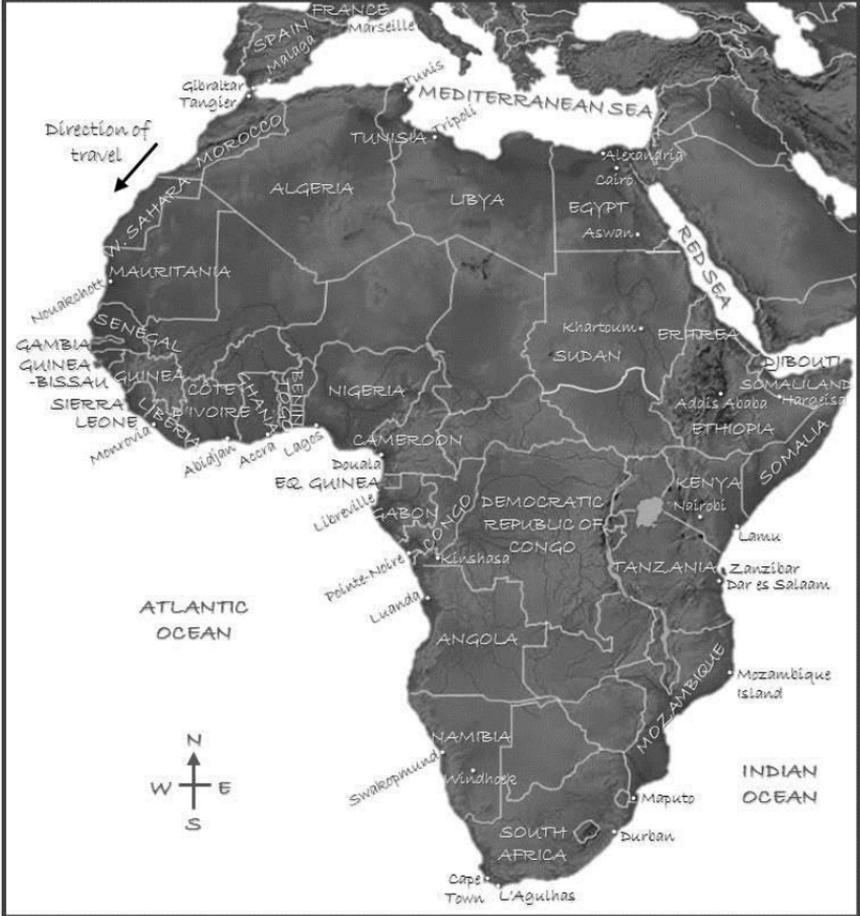
Author's Note

I travel because it challenges my preconceptions of the world, and about what I can and cannot do. Using public transport forces me into immersing with local cultures.

Since returning from encircling Africa I have gone on a different type of journey that has challenged me just as much. *Encircle Africa: Around Africa by Public Transport* is the result of both. It's the result of a private and personal endeavour, with no editor or proofreader who isn't a family member called Sam. Like the journey, converting my notes and memories into a workable narrative was down to me alone, and not as easy as experiencing them first hand. The result is less an African adventure story than one of honest *reportage*: how I experienced Africa – that catch-all term for 54 nations, 2000 languages, and one billion people – daily, over 396 days.

I hope you enjoy the result as much as I have struggled with writing it, and also hope just some of the joy, vibrancy, fun and kindness of a hideously misrepresented continent comes through as a powerful contrast to the rare moments I was in over my head.

Ian M Packham
London, nine months on



Gibraltar

The summer Mediterranean lies before me in all its magnetic blueness. Somewhere out there, beyond the blue throbbing line of the horizon lies Africa

Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*

‘I normally tell people to have a good holiday,’ he says, passing me a bundle of clean banknotes. ‘But in your case, have the time of your life.’

As I stand alone at Europa Point facing the oldest continent on earth I’m not sure how I should feel about the journey I’m about to begin, though I know I’m the most nervous I’ve ever been. Africa has a reputation for darkness; one I hope to dispel. Describing my plan to circumnavigate Africa at the currency counter of a Post Office in suburban Birmingham is suddenly very different to actually standing at the very edge of Europe with Africa such a short distance away.

The continent looms back at me through the candy floss cloud that hides the upper reaches of Jebel Musa, thought to be the southern ancient pillar of Hercules. It was from here the hero tore Europe and Africa apart. At Europa Point, Gibraltar’s southernmost, only 14 kilometres of strait separates me from a journey of 13 months and 40,000 km following Africa’s coast.

Captured from Castile in 1704 and ceded to Britain in perpetuity by treaty nine years later, Gibraltar is a British territory immediately distinct from Britain. Its 300 years of cultural fusion has produced a peculiar Anglo-Andalusian atmosphere that pervades peninsula living, best represented by

locals dropping sterling onto the collection plates of Roman Catholic churches.

I find its heart along Main Street, midway between the border with Spain to the north, and the Rock. As I make my way through Landport gate, a series of tunnels and fortifications as unlike a simple gateway as I could find anywhere, heading away from Spain and towards the towering limestone outcrop, the final dose of bright summer sun is beaten back by a heavy rainstorm raging in from Africa. Within the echoing tunnels West African immigrants crouch on their ankles wordlessly hoping for loose change, looking as out of their depth as I feel.

I reach the base of the Rock as the sky clears. A cable car journey means I'm all too quickly rising beside its steep flanks and meeting with its famed Barbary macaques – Europe's only free-living non-human primates. Invisible from the city below, the macaques cling to a small area of nature reserve on the upper Rock, leaping onto anyone who dares to stand still. I keep moving, unlike the macaques, who never wander far from the constantly replenished piles of neatly chopped fruits and vegetables on the roadside.

The paths eventually lead me back to the Rock's crowded lower reaches, via natural caves, hand dug siege tunnels and an ancient Moorish castle. I am spurred on further only by the pungent scent of late summer blooms picked out by the earlier heavy African rain. Building after building relates Britain's military presence on the peninsula and Gibraltar's shifting cultural identity, marking the ease with which the perception of cultural and national frontiers as solid boundaries changes. The Rock remains ever present as I pass officers' cottages and the Trafalgar cemetery to one of the largest places of Islamic worship in Europe. The calm of the late afternoon is suddenly broken by the sound of British fighter jets tearing around Gibraltar Bay in tandem.

At the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim mosque the waters of the Mediterranean at the strait are still. Africa unravels ahead of

me. Even with the cloud blotting out much of its coastline, masking Ceuta to the east, and the Punta Cires promontory with Tangier to the west, it seems to stretch on indefinitely. A journey of 40,000 km suddenly seems a long one.

My plan for the journey pretty much comes down to ‘turn right at Tangier and keep going until you reach Tangier’: heading west around the continent, I only have to keep salt water on my right hand side to get back to where I begin. I cannot get any closer to Africa without setting foot there.

The first thing I have to do to get closer to Africa is walk away from it. The road signs north of Main Street on Gibraltar’s sole north-south artery show a series of roads spanning out from the territory. *SPAIN SPAIN SPAIN* stands out from them like a warning. It seems right to begin a 13 month overland circumnavigation by reaching Africa without recourse to air travel, and so my inevitable rendezvous with public transport begins at a bus station a short distance away in La Línea, beyond Gibraltar’s border with Spain.

The ease with which I cross the border – the polished Spanish policeman giving my passport only the most cursory of glances before waving me on – belies the troubled relationship between the neighbours that ensured this frontier was not fully open until I was two years old. I board a bus travelling to Algeciras, across Gibraltar Bay, for one of the fast ferries to Tangier, and Africa.

To continue reading click [here](#).